

New Fiction from Bailee Wilson: “The Sun Burns Out in Vietnam”



Vietnam, 1969

The world appeared like a ripple in a puddle- a Jell-O jiggle spreading across dark green jungle water. The scene came together but would not hold still.

Caleb did not know where he was. His vision swirled, and his chest hurt, and his lungs seemed full of water. His hand searched for his chest. Found it. Wet. Found it. Empty. A finger sank into it. Wiggled a moment. *Mud*, he thought. *Mud at the bottom of the puddle.*

There was a wall behind him. He braced himself to move, clenching his teeth tightly, and then slid himself against it,

propping himself up. He let out a growl, and a twinge of nausea passed through his stomach. He nearly threw up, but he held in the bile, thinking of a man he'd seen throw up at a state fair once- thinking about how embarrassing that must have been. A grown man vomiting. He could do better. He squinted into the horizon. The nausea faded, and solid shapes began to take form.

He was in a village. A rural village. A smoking village. The huts around him were on fire; their woven roofs blazing orange and deep red, like the flesh of the Gac fruit he'd seen a young boy devour at a rural market in the eastern part of the country. Across from him, a hand lay, palm up, fingers sprawled, totally still. Slender brown wrist and jagged nails. The hand was connected to an arm. The arm was connected to nothing. Its severed edge, too, resembled the wet red meat of the Gac fruit. Caleb couldn't remember whose it was. He wished he hadn't seen it.

The air was smoke and fresh-turned dirt, tinged with feces, urine, and metal. Whether the metal smell was blood or guns, he could not say.

Caleb coughed, and a spray of red shot from his chest. *So I've been shot*, he realized. *I've been shot, and I've been left for dead.*

A groan split the space in front of him. He rolled his head toward the sound. "Hello?" he gurgled. He coughed again. Stronger: "Hello?"

There was a young Vietnamese man sprawled at his feet. The man lifted his head.

Opened and shut his mouth three times, bubbling like a fish. "Do you speak English?" Caleb asked him.

The man stared at him with fish eyes.

Caleb rolled his eyes. "Of course not." *Damn Gook*. He pointed at the hole in his chest. "Are you hurt?" he asked. He pointed at the man. Pointed back at his own chest.

The man rolled his body to the side, revealing a wet, red cavern in which bits of flesh hung free from bone, swinging like sheets on a clothesline. He sank back to the earth with a grunt.

Caleb nodded. "We're both goners, you know?" The man blinked. Sputtered, "Xin Loi." "Gibberish." *Jesus*.

Caleb rubbed his fingers together. He wanted a cigarette. He grimaced. "I'd kill for a drag," he told the man. He'd killed for less before, but what did it matter now.

The man bared his teeth in a rugged smile. "Xin Loi," he said again. Caleb tilted his head towards the sky.

The wall he was leaning against was part of a crude hut. When he shifted his weight, it crackled. A twig wiggled loosely above his head. He snapped this twig off and put it to his lips. He softly sucked in, gritted his teeth, and blew out. He offered this twig to the Vietnamese man, who pretended to take his own hit and then passed it back.

"Nothing like a Pall Mall," he sighed. He took another drag.

On his exhale, he pointed at himself and slowly pronounced, "Caleb Millard." The man pressed his hands to his sternum and said, "Do Hien Minh."

Caleb pretended to tap ash from his twig. "Where are you from, Do?" Do stared at him.

Caleb shifted his weight, winced at the movement, and then settled his shoulders lower against the wall. "I'm from Iowa." A bird played lip harp in a distant tree. "America." He eyed a big sow nosing through the turmoil beneath a burning hut. "Got a lot of pigs there, too."

Drag from the twig. "My family kept a cow, but no pigs." Do bobbed his head as if he understood.

"I had a dog for a bit," he told Do, "but she died. Never had a pig." Do patted the dirt at the base of Caleb's boot.

"How old are you, Do? Can't be more than twenty." Caleb raised an eyebrow. "My brother is twenty. He went to college, so he didn't get drafted." Caleb felt a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. "I didn't go to college, so I got drafted. Now I have a damn hole in my chest."

Caleb met Do's eyes again. "We're both gonna die dumb, you know that? Dumb and uneducated. And young." Caleb shook off a gnat. "And covered in bugs."

"You ever ate a bug, Do?" Do's face was covered in sweat. "I bet you people eat bugs all the time."

Caleb rubbed his chest. "I can't breathe so well. I never could breathe in this country. You must be dumb to stay in a country where you can't breathe. What's the point?"

Caleb squirmed against his inhale. "It's like breathing under-damn-water. Are you a fish, Do?"

Do moved his hands together, intertwining his shaking thumbs and fluttering his fingers like butterfly wings. He flew his hands towards Caleb and grinned.

Caleb muttered, "This is serious." Do settled his hands under his chin.

"You got a girl, Do?" Caleb asked. "I swear, if a bastard like you has got a girl, then God can take me now."

Do's pinky finger twitched under his chin.

Caleb pursed his lips and made a kissing noise. With one hand, he drew the outline of a woman with generous curves in the

air. Pointed at Do. "A girl?"

A soft smile spread across Do's face. "Cô gái xinh đẹp," he said.

"I bet you've got an ugly little thing," Caleb mused. "Beanstalk tall and scrawny, with crooked teeth. Or no teeth." He licked his lips. "There was a girl named Nancy back in the States who I always wanted to go with." Caleb shook his head. "I never even wrote her a letter."

Caleb scratched at his chest. "But man, was she beautiful. All-American, with blonde hair and the pinkest lips I ever saw. Always wore a red dress to Sunday service. And man, she loved to sing. Especially sad songs. Sounded just like Doris Day."

Do repeated, "Doris Day." "That's right, Do."

Do began humming.

Caleb recognized the tune. "Que sera, sera," he half-sang. "Whatever will be, will be." He dropped his eyes to the dirt. "That's real nice, Do."

"Do you reckon that letters ever make it out of the jungle?" Caleb wished a cloud would cover the sun. It was too damn hot. "I don't see how anything makes it out of the jungle."

It was quiet for a moment, aside from the two men's dueted breathing and the rumble of a burning hut collapsing. "When you die, your body will sit here and rot. That's a given. But what happens to my body?" Caleb sucked on the twig. "Will they come looking for me? Will they find me? My parents may never know what happened to me. They'll hold out hope, I know. But I'll be gone. Rotting, with no name. No meaning." Caleb looked at the severed arm. He threw the twig away. "It's sick."

Do followed his gaze to the arm. Then Do looked back at him. "Caleb," Do said. "Not me," Caleb said. "I didn't do that."

Do patted the dirt again.

"It's so hot." Caleb squinted. He tried to shake the sweat from his head. "Do you think that's the sun we're feeling, or the light at the end of the tunnel?"

Do shielded his eyes from the sky.

"That's the spirit, Do. Don't look at it. Don't look at it either way."

Caleb wanted a cup of cold water, or a root beer. The air was thick with humidity- practically liquid- but his thirst remained unquenched. He wished that he had drowned. At least then he wouldn't be thirsty.

He sat back and watched smoke pour out of a hut. There was searing pain in his throat. "To die in a place like this... Well, it isn't Christian. Do the souls of those whose bodies are eaten by stray dogs still make it to heaven?"

Do coughed up a sticky string of blood. It sank into the dirt at the base of Caleb's boot. "Damn it," Caleb said. "Damn it all."

"What's the point of this anyways? Why am I talking to you?" Caleb was dizzy. He thought again of the state fair. The vomit. "What's the point of me prattling on and you not knowing what I'm saying? Do you know what I'm saying?" Caleb kicked at Do's hand. "Can you feel what I'm saying?"

Do's face was pale. "Doris Day," he said.

"That's right," Caleb let out a low whistle. "Que fuckin' sera, sera." Do rolled in the dirt.

"I killed a man who looked like you, just east of Bo Tuc." Do's hands curled into claws.

"And another just north of here."

Do's mouth opened into a near-perfect circle. "And another, north of that."

"When my dog got ill, my father shot her in the side," Caleb's chin began to tremble. "She rolled that same way, rolled until my father shot her a second time. Shot her in the head." Caleb held a finger gun to his temple. Pulled the trigger.

Do jerked sharply, arching his back into the shape of a mountain, and then fell flat against the earth. He became still on impact, save for his fingers, which twitched and twitched like the wings of a gnat. His eyes locked on Caleb.

"Thing is, I think I'm sorry for what I did. But this is war. I don't know how to feel sorry. They tell me not to feel sorry. I'm not sure that 'sorry' cuts it anyways."

"Do I pray for you?" he whispered. "Does it make a difference?" Caleb swallowed. "What can one do?"

Do's earthquaking hand extended back towards Caleb's shoe, traversing the dirt like a snake stalking prey. The hand met the boot and encircled it. Squeezed once. Then his eyes glazed over.

Eyelids half shut, mouth agape. A gnat landed on his thin lip. He was gone.

Caleb felt tears well up in his eyes. He resigned, "What can one do?"

He struggled for breath. He touched his chest again and found that the wet had expanded. His vision was a tunnel. He saw Do at his feet. Saw only Do. The gnat on his lip. The look of sleep on his face.

Caleb trembled. He knew what would happen next. He'd be a casualty of war with no story. No one- not his commanding officers, his parents, his brother, Nancy, no one- would know what had happened to him. The fire from the huts would spread,

his flesh would fall to ash, and he'd be gone. There'd be no story, no burial, no resolution. Nothing. Forever, nothing. Alone in the jungle for the rest of time. For what? Nothing, nothing, nothing. What can one do?

Alone, but not alone. Do's hand on his boot was a message. "It's alright," the hand said, "we're in this together. We're going to die, but we're not alone. It might be for nothing, but we're not alone."

He saw it now. *Xin Loi. I'm sorry. At least we're together.*

That gave Caleb as much peace as he could hope to get. That evening, the sun went down as it always did, but for Caleb, it burnt out. The jungle dirt lapped up his blood the same as it did anyone else's. After all, all blood tastes the same. All blood nourishes the same. Caleb was still in the jungle night, with Do's hand on his foot and a gnat crawling on his lip.

Interview with Tom Keating, Author of 'Yesterday's Soldier'

Andria Williams for The Wrath-Bearing Tree:

I was honored to read Tom Keating's memoir, '[Yesterday's Soldier](#),' an excellently written and sensitive account of his time as a non-combatant servicemember during the Vietnam War. Tom had been a novice in the Roman Catholic priesthood, but when the priests at his seminary deemed him a not-ideal candidate for that calling, he enlisted in the army, which caused him a massive change in his state of mind. His

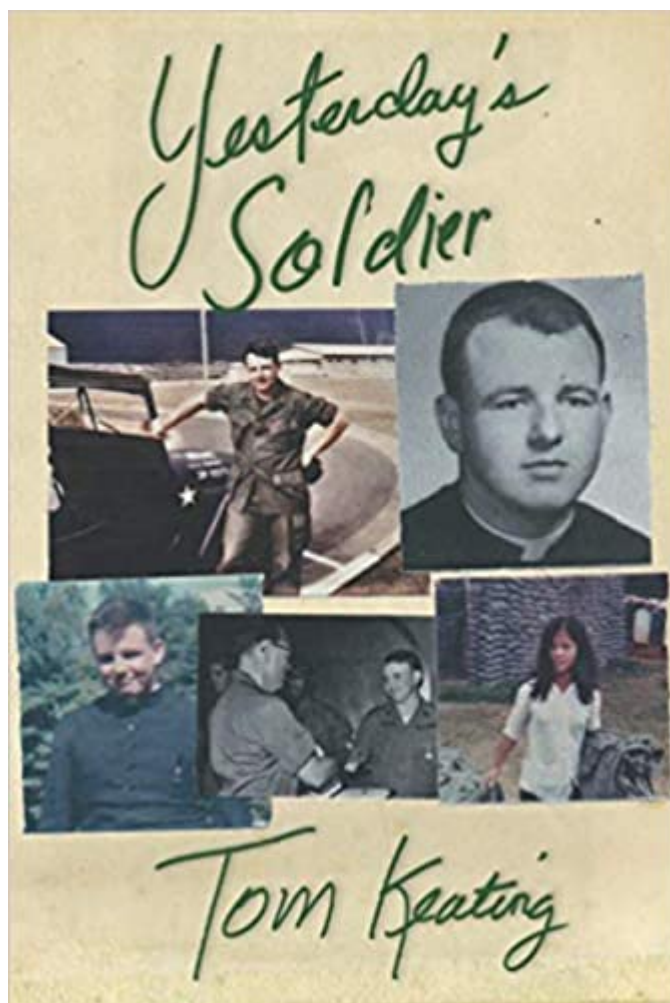
responses to some of my questions are below, and the link to the full interview is embedded. Please come watch – Tom is a great speaker, and his thoughts on how various cultures of religion and obedience play into military service are interesting.

Good news: Tom is now happily married and lives in Massachusetts.

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WBT: Can you explain your path from seminary school into the military?

Tom Keating: I am the first son of my family of Irish Roman Catholics. Back then, to be a priest was admirable. I attended an all boys' catholic high school taught by priests, the Congregation of Holy Cross. They were young priests, and they were great role models. The idea of being like them grew as I went through the four years. In my senior year, I sought their advice and declared my intention to be one of them. The next five and one half of my life I was one of them.



My admission of my CO struggle at Bridgewater State college during the class on educational philosophy. The assignment was, we all had to share a moment of radical action we performed. The class was full of veterans. It was tough to share my story with them. Their positive reaction to my story gave me the idea to write a book, but it took years to complete.

WBT: *You mention that there were 27 novitiates in your first-year group, but only 5 remaining when you left. What do you think made them leave?*

Tom Keating: I was a young seminarian full of theaggiornamento of the church, full of the idea to be Christ's apostle for the flock, so to speak. That flock included the young men who wanted to avoid the draft. I saw my role as

ministering to them. Hell, I even co-signed a loan for my friend, a coed who needed money. Of course I had none myself. That action and my activities did in fact affect my future as a priest. The men who were in charge of the seminary were afraid of the liberal trend in the church that I embraced. I originally wrote in the EPILOGUE of the book "And Father's world? The world he lived in, one of order, Latin masses, strict obedience to a hierarchy, Gregorian Chants, celibacy, black cassocks and clerical collars, a world he treasured and tried to protect? He was right to be afraid. That world had been turned into-dogshit." A reference to the dog poop on the previously spotless corridors of the seminary ([Cat, my editor,](#) thought I should change that, so I did make it milder.)

My Dad and I watched the demonstrations in Chicago during the convention. I was home then from the seminary. We shared our shock and disgust at the police in the riot. He was from the World War 2 generation, respect for authority, etc. It cemented our relationship.

There were violent incidents where I *didn't* have that aversion, mostly in-country. A monument to Army training/brainwashing. In the book, I described a vehicle accident that happened when I was on my way to the elephant factory. That violence was accepted by me and the jeep driver. The dead bodies on the wire after a sapper attack elicited no aversion, just acknowledgement of our firepower. I was bothered by that but could not show it.

Seminary life in 1963-64 was harsh. Monastic rule meant sparse meals, rule of silence except when in class, early morning prayers before breakfast, work on the property after class. No social life, parental visits once a month, poverty chastity and obedience. The social dynamic of 27 mostly teenage boys in that pressure cooker of conformity and strict rules was tough. The novitiate year, where we spent working and praying on a farm in Vermont was very strenuous. It was a pressure cooker, like military basic training, only it lasted one whole year.

Our farm was located outside the town of Bennington VT, and we could hear the music playing on car radios that drove by. The world was driving by us, and we were anchored in a centuries-old system. Desertion from the novitiate was swift. We finished the year there with 10 newly sworn in religious.

War and peace today? Of course right now the Ukrainians are being assaulted by Russia. Peace is harder to find. I don't have any great thoughts on war and peace except to say countries are fighting for lithium and rare earths now, and resources like water and iron and salt and sugar. It is insane. I try to have peace around me, so I work with my church and the local veterans' community to help them. I can't do much for nations and their wars, but I can give peace to my friends and social circle.

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Watch the full interview with Tom Keating here:

New Nonfiction: “Underground” by Mark Hummel



Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas, near the town of Perito Moreno in Santa Cruz Province, Argentina. Picture taken by Marianocecowski (2005).

In my childhood, television was a great unifier, for there existed a limited choice of three television networks, discounting PBS. But even if we were watching the same programming, television had begun to shape and change all of our lives—and our democracy—for the Vietnam War was broadcast into our homes every night as was the coverage of Nixon's downfall and resignation. Politics reached beyond the nightly news and entered drama and comedy. Programming like *All in the Family* provided a shrill echo of conservative politicians in its portrayal of bigoted Archie Bunker as he faced an America that looked, in his eyes, nothing like the one he had known before. *M*A*S*H*, a laughter-heavy depiction of an army surgical unit set on the frontlines of the Korean War began airing in 1972 and offered a not-so-subtle editorial about the

folly, politics, and dehumanizing effects of the real war still raging in Vietnam.

Hogan's Heroes, an altogether different slapstick television-vision of war with no pretense of condemnation, ended the year before *M*A*S*H* began. That it is a regular presence on Nick-at-Nite and in YouTube videos offers a sure sign I'm getting old. The comedy held a vision of a time when enemies were still identifiable, choosing as its setting a prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany. Written and released within an America that emerged as the savior of Europe, it broadcast clear allegiances. My own childhood fascination with *Hogan's Heroes* had little to do with bumbling Colonel Klink and "I see NOTHING" Sergeant Schultz and the other Nazis made to look like incompetent fools. My interest was with the hidden tunnels and the secret underground chambers dug by Allied prisoners. I was fixated on Colonel Robert E. Hogan, the obvious star, in his leather bomber jacket and perfect hair (and on all those busty blond turncoat spies he seduced). The show started in 1965 and lasted two years longer than US involvement in the actual war it spoofed.

The era of its airing goes back. Back before we knew Bob Crane, who portrayed Hogan, was a sexual misfit, back long before someone murdered him, way back before they made a movie about him. You know about all that, right? Those underground stories, that Bob Crane was obsessed with pornography, watching it and making it, recording his sexual conquests over women for posterity, even laying soundtracks over his videos? Crane was murdered, bludgeoned with his own tripod in his Arizona condo in 1978. After his death, the details of his surreptitious life began trickling out, as did the videos in which he documented his sexual conquests dating to the days of *Hogan's Heroes*. Many of his secrets only became widely public in 2002 with news stories accompanied the release of a biopic titled *Auto Focus*.

Today we might shrug at a television star proving to be a

misogynist and sexual deviant, but such behind-the-scenes information was kept strictly behind-the-scenes in those days. No hot-mics or soundbites. No cable channels or 24-hour news cycles. News, like entertainment, entered our lives on a decidedly different trajectory in those days. There was no such thing as streaming services or binge-watching. You showed up at your television at 7 PM on Sunday because that's when *The Wonderful World of Disney* aired. As a child I could never have imagined a Disney streaming platform or that they would own sports and television networks, no more than I could imagine funny, handsome, smiling Bob Crane was a sexual deviant. There were no television or internet radio venues for future presidents to discuss their wealth, ex-wives, or sexual interests. That sort of talk was kept strictly in the underground. And discussions of global pandemics weren't yet the plotlines of movies, the metaphors of Zombie apocalypses on our television screens, and certainly not our lived reality. We hadn't yet fractured into political divisions you identified by where you received your news. We didn't air our beliefs or our dirty laundry to a network over social media. In those days, if you wanted to avoid the lives of those beyond your neighborhood or ignore world events, you didn't need to construct an underground bunker, for the network gatekeepers already provided cover. I suppose entrance to the right Manhattan cocktail parties, Senate offices, or newsrooms would have gotten you every manner of uncensored stories, but public spectacle on a grand scale seldom appeared under the bright lights.

I've been thinking about going "underground" for years now. Maybe it's a sign of aging and reveals a nostalgic longing for a childhood where I dug a lot of underground forts and passed exorbitant hours playing in my parent's crawlspace. Or perhaps it's a reaction to the daily surrealism of life during a global pandemic, when the desire to "stick one's head in the

sand” becomes something approaching literal and has resulted in a lot of Netflix. Or maybe my underground thoughts have been brought on, much to my bewilderment, because America has survived a president who was so locked inside his own nostalgic yearning for the era of his youth that he built a political agenda out of it.

My own nostalgic longings are, like most things, complicated. I turned twelve in 1974. At twelve I reached an age when playing with model tanks in a dirt crawlspace was beginning to seem uncool. Which is also to say that I had reached an age where I had begun to care what might pass for “cool,” if there is such a thing in junior high. I was also awakening to a wider, above-ground world, which largely entered my consciousness through television. I read a lot, but I wasn’t the sort of twelve-year-old who perused *The New York Times*, and I stuck to headlines in the paper I delivered, *The Cheyenne Tribune*.

The above-ground world mostly entered through snippets from my father’s ritual of watching the ten o’clock news, though like most kids at twelve, I’d have a hard time finding synthesis in the relationship between my experiences and what was broadcast into our family room. I grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a place remote enough and small enough that it offered, and suffered, insularity. Reality, and the outside world, crept in mostly through our televisions and newspapers. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see that in the isolation afforded by living in Wyoming—and in those pre-globalization, pre-internet days you could be quite isolated—the social tensions of pro-Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War arrived years later than elsewhere in the nation. What might take an hour to arrive from the coasts now might take a year or more then. Yet Cheyenne, apparently, was not isolated from realities like economic woes, and the 1973 – 1975 recession arrived right on schedule. In my narrow experience, local economics were manifested in the 3rd floor of our school being condemned, so

the building could not accommodate the entire student body. As a result, my first year of junior high was defined by our school operating on a split schedule where half the school attended between 7:00 AM and 12:00 PM and the other half from 12:00 PM to 5:00 PM. I was on the afternoon shift, which meant athletic practices took place at the high school (also condemned) in the morning and riding the bus home from school in the dark on winter days to deliver newspapers by flashlight.

In 1974 a new school building opened. The atmosphere of fresh paint and new carpet and a functioning cafeteria were marred by locker searches that frequently turned up weapons and a near daily early dismissal due to bomb threats. Delayed incidents linked to war protests and backlash against national civil rights organizing were fueled by a community within an almost entirely homogenized state that found unexpected diversity in its schools through the presence of the children of airmen and airwomen with skin tones decidedly not white. Unfocused, misplaced anger and confusion had fueled the broader tensions also resulted in riotous skirmishes in our city's schools and something akin to perceived class wars sparked between the children of educated professionals and those of blue-collar workers. There were frequent fights, often at scale. Mostly there was more threatening than fighting, and typically I hightailed it for home, now in walking distance from the new school. I no longer had to wait for a bus, which is where most of the trouble happened, when insults were hurled and fights erupted.

The world that entered my twelve-year-old world through the television screen was every bit as contentious and bleak. 1974 was the year Richard Nixon resigned. A year later, Saigon would fall and the last American troops would retreat from an unethical war. My dad regularly took his turn waiting in around-the-block lines to put gas in the family Buick.

The 45th U.S. president turned twelve in 1958. I suspect that he may have never pumped gas in his lifetime. The year was marked domestically by escalating tensions from court mandated school integration and racist responses. The Supreme Court ruled in *Cooper v. Aaron* that fear of social unrest or violence, whether real or constructed by those wishing to oppose integration, did not excuse state governments from complying with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Popular culture in 1958 mostly cast misogyny and racism as harmless and conformity as patriotic. The following year our future president would be sent away to boarding school. Based only on his self-confessed adult habits, my guess is that he watched a good deal of television as a child. What I am certain of is that, like every twelve-year old, he believed the world revolved around him. The difference? He never stopped behaving like he was twelve.

Forgetting the narcissism, the hyperbolic tweets, and the actions that led to his two impeachments, the closest thing to a coherent political vision the 45th president (or perhaps that of his advisors) articulated is a vestige from the middle of the last century, a simple-minded view of lapsed American greatness best conveyed in his "American Carnage" inauguration speech:

This vision of America is derived from a uniformed backwards glance that neglects a great deal of economic and technological transformation and that is inextricably intertwined with misogyny, racism, and convenient, actionless patriotism. With unidentified and unexamined nostalgia guiding political action, we entered a geopolitical fantasyland where down is up and anyone who disagrees is cast aside as un-American or lying. The promise that a nation could unilaterally disentangle the complexities of a global economy that American capitalists seeking cheap labor largely constructed is laughably naïve. It is a promise that emerges from a nostalgic view held by someone born into wealth,

specifically wealth originally derived from charging poor people rent. Who wouldn't like more American made products or better paying jobs that don't require an education or patriotism where you only have to wear a lapel pin, stand for the national anthem, and send someone else off to war? Easy right? Like reality TV easy. If instead we recognize the inherent complexity of living in an age where everything is global—marketplaces, resource allocation, human migration patterns, climate change, viral transfer—the intellectual demands are exhausting. Safer to listen to the guy at the end of the bar and nod along complacently. Safer to go looking for subterranean refuge.

I expend directionless energy wondering if our culture can be repaired. Is it possible to reeducate multiple generations with the critical thinking skills required to distinguish truth from lies? To distinguish nostalgia from history? Can we again learn what it means to participate in a civil society?

It would be so much easier to dig a big hole and hide.

I should likely go searching for non-political explanations for my current underground obsession. After all, I'm clearly guilty of my own nostalgia, whether my politics originate in it or not. Could my desire to withdraw be as simple as not sleeping well? It's true that I have been awakened by "upside-down" dreams prompted by Netflix addictive viewing of *Stranger Things* and *The Leftovers*. Or is there a through-line present here as well? Is a desire for a return to an older vision of America real or imagined?

I didn't watch a great deal of television as a child, growing up in a time and place where my friends and I had the freedom and safe environment to play without supervision and the space to explore. There were family television rituals that united me to other kids of the same era of course: *The Brady Bunch* on

Friday nights, *Emergency* on Saturdays, *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* with requisite popcorn on Sundays. Outside of that, there wasn't a lot of connective tissue to kids from elsewhere. Wyoming was a place so foreign and typecast by most that when my family traveled on summer vacations, kids I met in motel swimming pools would ask if we rode horses to school. Their vision of the West I lived in was more formed by *Gunsmoke* than textbooks or Yellowstone vacations. Of course, I knew no more of their homeplaces than they did of mine.

When winter forced my brother and I inside from the prairie, much of it was passed in our crawlspace. Perhaps inspired by *Hogan's Heroes*, we spent a lot of time excavating under our house in the weak light of a sixty-watt bulb. My best friend and I used the tailings of our excavations as a play space for our painstakingly constructed, authentic reproduction plastic model World War II tanks. The Americans and Brits on one side of the crawlspace dug in with complex forts constructed under the dirt with scraps from dad's table saw, while the Germans positioned the big guns and long-range tanks on the ridge we'd piled against the foundation wall. That pretend World War II of our imaginations was a war we could manage, a clearly delineated war that bore little resemblance to the Cold War we lived daily and never understood or the Vietnam War played out on our TV screens and in our draft board chambers, a tidy war studied in our history books when the enemy wore distinguishing colors and marched under a swastika, not the nebulous, endless "war on terrorism" of our current age.

I was a cold war kid all the way. Not just by historical era but by virtue place. Cheyenne, Wyoming is the home of Warren Air Force Base and the headquarters for the Strategic Air Command, that wing of the US Air Force charged with control over the nation's nuclear warheads. Many of my classmates' fathers were officers who managed the bureaucracy of nuclear

missile movement and maintenance. Growing up, we were told that Cheyenne was Soviet target #2, just behind NORAD in Colorado Springs where an incoming nuclear onslaught would be tracked. NORAD inhabits a bunker scraped out of a mountain (eerily named Cheyenne Mountain) and refashioned from concrete and steel.

We lived among daily reminders of nuclear presence in the long, white semi-trailers passing on the interstate pulled by blue USAF semi-tractors. As a teenager I crossed beyond the posted "No Trespassing by Order of the United States Government" signs and chained gates to explore an abandoned Atlas missile base in the inky blackness of a Wyoming prairie night. We were made to understand that the nuclear missiles and their command had been placed in our midst precisely because we lived in the middle of nowhere—as if one could have a serious conversation about minimalization of causalities in a nuclear firestorm so vast it would literally alter planetary climate. Perhaps the mental instability of our leaders in that age simply took a less overt form than we have come to expect today.

How did one find victory or freedom in a nuclear holocaust or in a political war of competing ideologies? No wonder we needed the predictability of Colonel Hogan. When our teachers directed us in nuclear raid drills, wrangling us from classrooms to interior hallways where we were instructed to sit against walls with our heads resting on our knees, we longed for Hogan's tunnels and our crawlspace. We weren't foolish enough to think the earth offered sufficient protection from a nuclear blast but it seemed a far sight superior to our teachers asking us to assume the position.

With *Hogan's Heroes* I grew up on images of Lt. Louis LeBeau popping his head out of the ground beneath the guard dog's house or lifting an entire shrubbery beyond the prison camp fence. My brother and I had big plans for just such a tunnel. We figured we'd leave from an entrance hidden in the

crawlspace, tunnel under the front foundation, and come up in an immense Golden Elder. It was the only damn thing that seemed to grow in the dry, wind-ravaged arctic zone called Wyoming. The tunnel was going to be a thing of beauty. Deep, clean, and precise. We envisioned it clearly. We'd sneak out of the house at will—down through the basement, through the furnace room, through the small hatch door into the crawlspace (that too-small door dad cursed whenever he bent his 6'4" frame to retrieve a storage box each time mom wanted to change seasonal decorations). Through the crawlspace and through the bare stud wall to the other side where dad had piled all of the dirt from his excavations when he'd had the bright idea to dig out all of one side—a chamber twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide—digging it down three feet and leaving a dirt shelf along the entire perimeter where he could stack the boxes of ornaments and Easter baskets and out of fashion clothes. We'd slip between the bare studs, duck through to the other side, our own beloved dark chamber where we had to kneel or literally crawl over the excavated dirt, down into our secret fort through the tunnel, through the bush, and into freedom.

Never mind that there was a door to the back yard next to the furnace room, unattended, unlit, a direct path to the world beyond. Never mind that we had no idea where we'd go if we did sneak out. Never mind that, had we succeeded, we would have, inevitably, passed the time asking, "What do you want to do?" and responding, "I don't know; what do you want to do?" that mantra a rerun of pre-adolescent summer afternoons. I'm talking about that in-between age, those years when we were too "cool" to play guns ("You're dead." "No, I'm not, you missed me.") or cops and robbers on our bicycles. The age before we found beer and Mad Dog 20/20 and weed and girls. Never mind that our parents were entirely trusting and we lived in a safe place where we could venture into the prairie for whole days of play, stay out until after dark all summer playing kick-the-can or flashlight tag with every kid in the neighborhood. Never mind the back door. The tunnel would have

been so much cooler.

We got as far as digging the “secret” fort that we proudly showed our father from the distance of “his side” of the crawlspace, shining our flashlights into its depths. Unfortunately, these excavations were permanently interrupted by my brother discovering girls.

Left to my own devices, the tunnel idea was more forgotten than abandoned and, for a time at least, the new mound of dirt created by our previous industry grew of greater interest to avid model tank builders than the rather grave hole, particularly once my next-door neighbor and I discovered the simulated bombing realism accomplished by rock throwing, the effects of matches on plastic models, and the excitement generated by tin foil basins buried beneath the dirt filled with lighter fluid. Eventually the hole gave way to more construction on an American tank compound and filled to a point where it marked the “no man’s land” between Allies and Germans, a soil fought over for years but oddly never crossed by either army, likely in part due to the fact that the G.I.s eventually discovered nurses (more evidence of Allied superiority over Germans, who never once threw a party). Colonel Hogan would have admired our imaginative industriousness.

Like the fort and the tunnel, the tanks, dozens of them, all carefully hand-painted and laden with tank tread, gas cans, shovels, sandbags, additional armor plating, and long aerial antennas melted from the thin plastic strips that held the model parts, were abandoned. How we had labored over these weapons of war, ironic given that we were circled by weapons with firepower beyond imagination and our fathers attended service club luncheons alongside the warriors of Strategic Air Command. We built tanks, we could have reasoned, not missiles, as if one means of killing had moral superiority over another, or as if we were oblivious to the ways the world had transformed in the years between the war we carried out under

our house and the one our fathers watched on the nightly news. I should have had the consciousness to understand the dangers of such a blasé vision of war as acted out in our play, for my father had landed on Normandy and fought through Central Europe. That is the risk of looking backward as entertainment rather than a living history. We'd constructed models with precise engineering, forgoing their function, a mistake common to engineers the world over.

Having gathered dust for two or three years—and the crawlspace offered nothing but gritty dust that embedded into the plastic in a manner superior to what any airbrush artist could accomplish—we had created artifacts rather than toys or weapons. I remember the day my next-door neighbor, now sixteen, rang the doorbell where he waited with a big cardboard box. "Hey, man," he said. "I thought I should probably get my tanks." On the way out he asked, "Want to party tonight?" We'd stopped our underground play. My brother had submitted his draft card. There now existed a thing called HBO, and it ran dirty movies.

There are any number of euphemisms for the word "underground." It often refers to things that are "clandestine" or even "subversive," the usage bringing to mind spies or secretive groups. We use the term loosely to reference those who go into hiding, referring not just to the actions of fugitives on the lam but also to psychological remove from the broader society such as we encounter in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and the narrator's descent into ennui. Often the word underground is included in the monikers of those committing the act of "speaking truth to power" as in an underground press. And frequently we apply the word to "things nearly present in plain sight but not acknowledged." The early punk band The Velvet Underground took their name from a documentary-style book of the same title by Michael Leigh that depicted wife-swapping and kinky sex beyond the white-picket

fences of suburbia.

I cannot speak of euphemisms for “underground” when writing about a World War II television comedy without speaking to its starkest inverse, for of course the French Resistance movement to German occupation was dubbed “the French Underground.” Courageous but otherwise ordinary French citizens combatted the Nazis with intricate intelligence networks, underground newspapers, guerrilla warfare tactics, and escape routes that aided Allied soldiers and airmen trapped behind enemy lines. Americans cut from a similar cloth included members of the Underground Railroad, that network of abolitionists operating in secrecy to secure the freedom of the enslaved.

The lesson both groups taught us: When fascists rise to power, as when capitalists enslave humans to generate labor, those driven underground become the clandestine activists tasked with restoring social justice.

The men and women of the French Underground took actions to try and save lives, to preserve freedom for a future generation. My father was among the Americans who landed in France to ensure their actions and sacrifices were not empty. He, like the men he served alongside, guaranteed I could spend a childhood with the liberty to waste my time watching *Hogan's Heroes* and digging in the dirt.

What freedom we had! The prairie was our second home. One summer my brother risked ruining our father's lawnmower when he embarked on an enterprise of prairie development. The baseball diamond came first. Next, he mowed a football field, clambering through gopher holes and spitting rocks like a machine gun. (Note: the prairie, despite all clichés and claims stating otherwise, is decidedly not flat.) His most ambitious effort: a nine-hole golf course. The greens (rougher than the roughest rough on the municipal course) featured

hand-sewn flags and buried tin cans. Like in the crawlspace, we dotted the prairie with underground forts. We played on and under the prairie while boys a few years older than us—Strats, we called them, we civilian kids in an Air Force town—passed long shifts just miles away under that same network of grass roots babysitting lethal nuclear payloads. We played while young men died in Vietnam. Some of them died infiltrating the vast network of underground tunnels the Viet Cong used to launch deadly attacks and to ferry lethal supplies.

Exercising our freedom, we spent a summer jumping bikes out of the abandoned basement excavation of someone's dream home. They'd never gotten beyond digging the huge square hole. Soon it was crisscrossed with hardened bicycle trails at every possible angle. We'd charge down one side, dropping steeply off the edge, pedal hard up the opposite side and on up where they had moved the tailings from the excavations, the fill mounded to make the steep sides of the once-wanted basement taller, more dangerous. There we would shoot off the tops of these manufactured jumps and take to the air.

I won't say that hole abandoned by some over-extended builder was our inspiration, for maybe it was *Hogan Heroes* that gave us the idea, but digging forts was as regular a part of our summers as spear grass wars. It was mostly my brother and his friends who built the forts, and mostly, the younger kid-brothers were stuck on the outside wanting in. They started small, one room chambers with a single entrance, small enough that a single sheet of plywood was sufficient for a roof. Get the plywood in good and deep, pile it with soil, and within a year the prairie would reclaim the gap. Soon they learned they could dig deep enough to leave the prairie above intact, reinforcing the span overhead every few feet with scavenged 2 x 4s rather like the preserved gold mines every Western kid visited during weekend trips to the surrounding mountains.

Our older brothers were the real engineers. The best forts became ours by inheritance. Our own creations were puny and

unimaginative. It was our brothers who had built the fort we were awed by, a fort we only gained rare entrance to by special invitation. Our imaginations made it grander in our minds, just as the activities we imagined they carried off in our absence grew roots in our reverent daydreams. We assumed they held secret rituals, maybe were members of secret societies. Certainly, they must have taken girls down there, and girls were still a mystery to me darker than a fort under the prairie with candles extinguished.

But one fort surely must have lived up to our mental excavations. They'd dug three rooms, linked by curving narrow tunnels. It had a distant, protected entrance and a secret escape hatch. (We'd all spent enough time catching gophers and snakes to understand why, at minimum, you had to have a second, secret entrance.) The entrance was covered by a plywood scrap, the kind of weathered board you were required to check under anytime you were in the prairie as a likely source of snakes. It opened onto a long, sloping tunnel that forced those entering to crawl on their elbows. The largest room could accommodate four adolescent boys, and they'd dug a long bench into one wall, rather like dad's dirt storage shelf in the crawlspace. The walls had carved niches to hold candle stubs. Illuminated in the flickering shadows, prairie grasses and sage dropped roots penetrating the ceiling in fibrous tangles. The air was heavy with the rich scent of clay, and the walls were cool to the touch and revealed the smooth spade marks of construction. The excavation tailings were piled to obscure the entrance and emergency exit and were soon overtaken by the weedy growth of a hungry prairie. To stand at the neighborhood fringes and look into the distance you could never know what lay beneath the grass. Surely, some adults must have wondered where those heads of kids disappeared. Or did they? This felt like a different time when kids were free to roam outside the company of adults, a time when I might worry every day that a Soviet nuclear missile was likely to conk me on the head but I never once worried about being

abducted.

Within a year of being old enough to have succeeded minimally with my own fort digging, my brother and his friends shifted interests and passed boredom torturing snakes. Their engineering abilities turned to manufacturing execution devices—snake guillotines and battery-powered snake electric chairs, snake death by fireworks ingestion, that sort of thing. We dug in their absence, quickly learning that the real fun, rather like our model-building, was in the construction. Once completed, no matter how ingeniously engineered, a fort quickly became little more than a hole in the ground.

At some point that summer something else shifted too. I don't know if my brother and his friends were all assigned *The Outsiders* for English class or if the crowding and tensions that had yielded protests and marches and incidents of Molotov cocktails at their high school sparked them, but the neighborhood suddenly divided, and those boys living south of Harvard Avenue formed one kind of gang and those north another. They spent half a summer in two packs, one group of rabid mongrels pursuing the other in random courses across the prairie, over the abandoned golf course and up Boot Jack Hill and down across the rooftops of forts both groups had apparently forgotten. There were frequent fights. Maybe it was some other kind of turf war to which I was naïve and they represented a preamble to the tribalism that infiltrated my junior high and that continues in politics today.

The division that happened in my small neighborhood broke roughly along the same economic lines that we experienced in the larger outbreaks of violence that happened at school, or to be more accurate, the perceived differences in economics. The world was chaotic and school mimicked the chaos. I wonder what gaps in our education remain because school was so often dismissed because someone had called in an anonymous bomb threat or a disgruntled classmate pulled the fire alarm. The bomb threats, like the rumors that reached the teacher's

lounge, resulted in frequent locker searches. Those consistently produced knives and homemade weapons. We knew something serious had shifted when, near the end of the 1974 school year, a locker search produced gun.

*

On the days I'm not reaching for a shovel, I find myself thinking about Mr. White, the neighbor every child feared during my Rutgers Road upbringing. Mr. White—and no, I am not making that name up—lived at the end of our block where a dirt road intersected our paved street. Everyone in the neighborhood referred to road as “the alley” when really it was the demarcation line between our odd little neighborhood—six blocks named after universities bordering the interstate—and the Wyoming prairie. The alley led directly to the new junior high and offered a quick escape route home. School represented real danger, featuring a population harboring a communal misplaced anger that shadowed that of its parents. The only dangers the alley posed was an open trench being dug for a sewer line, a mean dog that broke its chain with regularity, and unsolicited rebukes from Mr. White.

Mr. White was the neighborhood misanthrope. He made it his business to enforce his strict code of how the world was supposed to behave. The warnings he issued through his front screen door to “Stay off my grass!” were shouted with the venom of taunts at a 21st Century political rally. The signs he posted announcing the unwelcoming terrain of his lawn were written with an incendiary tone, like Twitter tweets lobbed from the safety of cyberspace. The wire he strung taut between green metal fence posts where his front yard met the alley was a visible reminder, a message more than utilitarian barrier.

In sixteen years as his neighbor, I never recall seeing a visiting car fill his driveway. I only knew there was a Mrs. White because she, on rare occasion, answered the doorbell when I collected monthly payments for my newspaper route, a

required action that inspired foreboding. From the porch, I glimpsed their living room, which felt like observing a diorama—furniture attired in plastic slipcovers and a console television dating to a previous decade. When Mr. White answered the doorbell in a tank-style t-shirt, he grumbled complaints, remarking when the newspaper had been late or that the fat Sunday edition arrived with too much noise, despite his being one of two houses on my route where, rather than throw the paper to the door—with a precision of which I was proud—I laid the paper on his porch.

Clearly, I either place too much blame on or give too much credit to Mr. White when I recall his yellow house and his uninterrupted lawn and then try to make sense of our bifurcated democracy. My elderly mother assures me that Mr. White—Herb, she reminds me—was a perfectly nice man, one who hosted milk-can suppers and did body work on neighbor's cars, although she does add, "But I can see why children would have thought he was mean." I'm sure she is right and there were other sides to him. But then I must also recall that all of my friends were decidedly afraid of my mother, and not without reason. As with Mr. White, had they come to know her in her fuller complexity, they may have had a more nuanced opinion.

Perhaps, like too many of my fellow Americans, I've become guilty of seeing all events through a warped lens. Who might Mr. White have proven to be had I shown the maturity and courage to shake his hand and engage him in a conversation? Mr. White is long dead. I can't go back in time and try to find the man beyond the transactional exchanges we had when I was a boy.

The neighborhood boys, whether north or south of Harvard Avenue, were united against Mr. White. Perhaps if we could have focused on a common enemy, we could have avoided the tribal divisions that emerged. Or perhaps not. It's entirely

possible that the divisions that occurred in our neighborhood, like those that brought such turmoil to our school, was rooted mostly in boredom. In the endless downtime between the neighborhood campaigns, the northern boys would sprawl, listless, across our front yard or spar with one another like dueling dogs. If I hung around them for any time at all, some scrawny high school acquaintance of my brother would test me by picking a fight, which was a mistake because I fought ferociously and without logic, having spent a lifetime fending off the abuses of an older brother. I secretly looked forward to such fights because my brother seemed to like me better after I put one of his friends on his back. But I never joined in their prairie campaigns. My best friend and I had our own battles awaiting us in the crawlspace, a domain that had become totally our own.

As soon as driver's licenses settled into our brother's back pockets, the gang wars, at least on the home front, ceased, though the trouble seemed to worsen for the boys living south of Harvard and several became real criminals and then convicts. Our brothers' interests shifted. The prairie forts were ours if we wanted them. We entered them on a kind of unspoken dare, like crawling through the drainage tunnel that connected our neighborhood and a borrow ditch near the elementary school on the other side of the interstate. The forts seemed more dangerous, more primitive now that lack of use had fostered thicker spider webs spanning the tunnel entrance and little cave-ins where there were finger holes of penetrating light.

I remember going to the big fort when I was fourteen. It was night and the only light we carried was a cigarette lighter. My tank-building best friend and I had found a nearly full pack of Marlboros on the street. Sucking on someone else's cigarette, sitting, cramped, in the dark of an underground fort dug into the prairie, the talk of girls and parties and high school, I remember thinking I had passed into

something. It seemed only a matter of days later when Mr. Johnston bulldozed the fort. The bulldozing felt like a violation, but we'd never liked Mr. Johnston in the first place, didn't trust his son even if he was part of my brother's group, and didn't have any interest in rebuilding. An era had passed. I felt late to the party. In fact, the party had ended. Growing up into the above-ground world felt exciting and scary at the same time, yet even in the midst of change, I was aware that I would not be allowed to go back in time or return to ignorance.

Of course, the fields we played in as children are now lost too, the prairie soil no longer violated by kid's forts but dotted everywhere by the penetrations of actual basements. The prairie has succumbed, like every other part of America it seems, to suburbia, and this little part of Wyoming now-paved over, strip-malled, homogenized-looks exactly like ten thousand neighborhoods in California or Florida. Except for a lack of trees, which stubbornly refuse to grow, the curved streets that make up the place now are lost in place and time. Along the way someone purchased the slowly refilling foundation hole where we jumped our bikes and built their home, though I couldn't identify which house used to harbor this playground, just as selecting the house that stands atop what was once a fort would be little more than an educated guess.

In the years since we have watched the end of the Cold War be replaced with terrorist attacks and nuclear power plant disasters. We have seen the weapons hidden in the Wyoming prairie grow in payload if decrease in number. We still don't know what to do with the waste of the missiles we have decommissioned. We have seen Bob Crane murdered, and now we have watched as celebrities do the killing. Increasingly we elect celebrities and billionaires rather than statesmen and stateswomen, mistaking television figures for leaders and

reducing democracy to a popularity contest.

The crawlspace in my parents' home is still there, of course (sans tunnel), for so long as the house exists, the crawlspace exists. My parents lived in the house until they were eighty-seven and eighty-six before moving to an apartment where they had help available. It was only in the final couple of years living in their home that dad finally stopped managing to contort his tall frame sufficiently to retrieve the artificial Christmas tree and its boxes of ornaments.

I have owned two homes of my own with dirt crawlspaces, and while I used them for storage, my primary ventures into them were for mechanical repair or to retrieve the recycling bin every two weeks, for I had built a chute from the kitchen for that purpose. My children showed no interest in the crawlspaces, finding them dirty and scary.

The home where we raised our children had no crawlspace. It featured a finished walk-out basement. We bought the home, in large part, for the natural light that warmed the basement nearly as well as the main floor. Yet I regularly fantasized about building a secret chamber. I imagined breaching a foundation wall through the garage and under the deck. I wasted good time thinking how I'd dispose of the dirt. I thought about the engineering required to make such a chamber stable. I imagined disguising it, hiding it behind a sliding panel, a secretive entrance to a chamber dug deep into the earth, awaiting my return.

Perhaps that longing arrived out of fear, a desire to escape adult responsibilities rather than a wanted return to the play places of my childhood. Looking backwards is nearly always self-delusional and messy. Memories typically appear purer than the actual times recalled, as if we must filter out the less-pleasant parts of our past, the sadness and embarrassment, in order to move forward into the future. I suppose it is human nature to be nostalgic for the past. We

all want to believe times were simpler “then.” Yet I would argue that humans have a unique capacity for viewing the past through forgiving lenses or, at the very least, with the full benefits of hindsight that allows us to create documentary style versions of times gone by, events now neatly in context, relationships one to another entirely clear rather than suffering the murkiness of real time. We are all capable of self-deceit. Perhaps that is how we survive, as individuals and as a species. Perhaps it is a biological imperative, something akin to how women’s bodies are able to mitigate the memory of childbirth pain. The alternative, to see only the hard times or the ugliness of the past, is a journey into despair.

But the real dilemma is, as with all things, how do we find balance? In this instance, how do we benefit from a more forgiving recall of the past without failing to learn from it? Can we carry fondness for the past without sanitizing it? We must heed George Santayana’s famous warning, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” What is that space between definition of nostalgia—sentimental longing—and its origin—acute homesickness? Balance requires distinction as well, that between sentimental longing held by the individual and denial of history carried by a collective. When entire segments of a population accept “alternative facts,” whether about an individual’s past or a shared history, the road for corruption is already paved. The distance between self-deceit and narcissism is not long.

Ruminating on *Hogan’s Heroes*, it is evident that nostalgia is certainly present in television writers’ rooms. It seems we have been caught inside a full-throated nostalgic return to the 1970s and ‘80s as material for artistic rendering for some time. There would seem equal measure of writers of my generation looking back to our shared formative years and the generation of our children examining times they did not live

within, likely in an attempt to understand us. The former suggests writers of my generation are as guilty of referencing our past as those political leaders I have accused of longing for an idyllic vision from a previous era. But the latter suggests wisdom in a younger generation to act with intentionality about trying to understand something of how we have, collectively, come to arrive in our current age.

Among the better-known media projects set in the years formative to my generation's worldview are: *Stranger Things*, where a group of adolescents encounter secret government projects and supernatural forces, set with an opening in 1983, and *The Americans*, where two Russian spies brought to infiltrate the US as a married couple try to steal enough American secrets to sustain a failing Soviet system, the series opening in the early years of the Regan Administration.

Of course, looking into the rearview mirror is also a phenomenon derived from familiarity—the desire to turn away from contemporary events. Or at least a step sideways, like the long run of zombie television fare, which offers a rather obvious mask for the evil we feel present around us and what seems to many as a continuous creep towards end times. For we are living in an age with new sources of fear and new enemies. One cannot predict the nature or the placement of terrorist attacks. Moving, clandestine, ideological warriors are nearly impossible to identify and defeat. In the years since 2001, Americans inhabit a nearly invisible yet omnipresent fear of jihadist attack that has been a regular feature of life elsewhere in the world for decades. And in the United States, we seem to breed our own brand of terrorists with as much regularity as any jihad. We now reference horrific events by shorthand: Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland. To scan interactive maps identifying mass casualty event escalation from one year to the next is like watching a medical contagion take hold in a population. In the span of twenty-two years, we witnessed the obliteration of the Murrah Federal building in

Oklahoma City and savage machine gun fire into a concert crowd in Las Vegas. Those two attacks alone account for 226 innocent deaths. No wonder we are forever fearful when death arrives for our neighbors at church, in nightclubs, at work, and in school. If we associate the cold war with those most paranoid among us constructing underground bomb shelters, would we seem so insane as to wish underground retreat today?

For of course those fears that had some of our fathers and grandfathers stockpiling canned goods and batteries within concrete bunkers remain. The presence of nuclear weapons has only grown more tenuous. We have every reason to fear unstable governments. Just as we have every reason to fear a degrading nuclear arsenal in a place like modern Russia, let alone those lethal devices lost in the dissolution of the former Soviet Union that face internal corruption and jihadist assault. Our headlines are filled with the fear stoked by the emergence of nuclear capabilities in North Korea and Iran. Shouldn't such a world prompt all of us to want to dig a little deeper? After all, the only country to have ever unleashed nuclear weapons on a civilian population were, in television terms, the "good guys." Is it sensible to believe there won't be other entities present on the planet willing to follow our example whether we label them enemies or allies?

Our current political climate would once again suggest that nostalgia does not breed intelligent insight to learn from our past. When we routinely elect those who spurn education and intellectualism, when we promote those who shun books, reject science, and disregard history (recalling that we now have elected those who openly embrace Q-anon to Congress), we fail to heed Santana's warning. And when we choose to follow those who employ bullying as a method of wielding power, we abandon our values and withdraw from a vaunted history of social justice. The stakes could not be higher.

In my Wyoming circa 1974, the warring factions varied. Often it was the self-identified "cowboys" vs. the self-identified

stoners. Sometimes, if we were capable of time travel, we might leap forward and find the divisions at a schoolyard fight would parallel the left and right so regularly at one another's throats today. And sometimes, the divisions were remarkably clear between those of us willing to defend Black and Brown friends with our fists and those who attacked them because their "otherness" apparently incited fear.

The near future is being fashioned by divided politics forming two camps incapable of agreeing on rules for a game of Capture the Flag. One camp is rooted in a vision of a 1950s America that afforded unregulated pursuit of material gain without consequence and that envisioned a culture that was entirely patriarchal and homogenous. Its vision as emblazoned on red campaign hats suggests America is no longer great and that there was some past, perfect moment when it was. This simplistic vision of America never really existed beyond television fabrications. We do not live upon a *Happy Days* set any more than we ever have inhabited the world of *Leave It to Beaver*.

While the 1950s may have given birth to Disneyland, NASA, and the Interstate highway system, it is also the period in which America enabled Joseph McCarthy, joined the Korean War, and authorized a CIA-orchestrated coup to return the Shah of Iran to power. It was a decade notable for, and in desperate need of, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the school desegregation of Little Rock. As suburbs grew and post-war home-ownership rates were sustained, one cannot reasonably believe that rates of spousal abuse, alcoholism, adultery, and other cancers that preyed on families were less common, rather they were more sequestered behind closed curtains and silence. I'm not arguing many social features haven't changed, even changed rapidly and radically in the decades since the 1950s, but I do steadfastly believe that we cannot truly long for something that never existed any more than we can watch reruns of *Hogan's Heroes* and accept it as an

accurate, or even an alternative portrayal of World War II. Rather than longing for an uninformed nostalgic view of the past, why not work for the ideals represented in the Declaration of Independence?

Even if we can no longer identify facts when we depend upon social networks for our windows on the actual world, we can still possess enough critical thinking ability to discern what is reality. Or can we? Perhaps it is a worthy reminder that we elected someone to the presidency who entered American consciousness as a reality television "star." Would we ever have acknowledged him at all were this not the case?

Perhaps more to the point, are we at risk of no longer distinguishing between the fiction of dramatic television, no matter its historical setting, and "scripted-reality" television? It is not only the young who long for the idyllic lives and flawless bodies of social media "influencers." When I become so feeble-minded that I can no longer distinguish Colonel Hogan from Bob Crane, I will not just be someone to dismiss as sad and irrelevant, I am likely either a danger or in danger.

Yet in the last years of the 1960s, the time of Vietnam and street battles for civil rights, when tie-die challenged IBM blue suits and red ties, is there a wonder we wanted the comfort and predictability of *Hogan's Heroes*? It was understandable, if dangerous, to fabricate a vision where those who had enacted the Holocaust were reduced to buffoons. Would we rather have a sitcom that shows the butchering regime Hitler created as dupes and simpletons playing out recycled plots or the reality of discovering Bob Crane's body after he was bludgeoned to death in his Scottsdale apartment among his sex tapes?

Maybe I have an unfiltered view of the past as well, yet I have faith that most television viewers in the 1960s could differentiate comedy from real history. I no longer hold such

faith. We now inhabit a media space where we are “fed” news. Those news feeds are no longer objectively journalistic, rather they provide a specific viewpoint determined to fit our preconceptions as analyzed by algorithms so complex that only a tiny minority of the populace understand them.

Will you blame me if I long for the predictability of my childhood crawlspace?

Of course, going underground, as the characters of *Stanger Things* can tell us, is inherently topsy-turvy and possesses its own dangers. When the show takes its characters literally within the earth, they enter the “Upside Down,” a bizarre, glowing, creepy, vine-filled underworld that harbors a literal monster that preys upon humans for its meals. As the audience for the show, viewers are challenged with the question: which is scarier, the upside-down world monster or the government that hides knowledge of its existence? Or, like any well-plotted drama might ask, perhaps the real questions are: has the government, in its secrets, *created* the monster? and has it had a hand in creating the superhuman adolescent girl who might save us from it (the monster and the government)?

The entire plotline of *The Americans* creates a different kind of topsy-turvy, upside-down response in which we are likely to find ourselves rooting for Soviet spies and sometimes even aligning with their cause. It’s a rather odd response to television depicting our old Cold War enemies infiltrating our culture and battling our government, stranger still in a time when we acknowledge that their real-world motherland has repeatedly subverted our democratic process.

There are reminders and warnings for us in both shows. When we live inside of history and technology that moves so fast that we cannot keep pace, when we participate—or don’t—in politics that feel at once insidious and inept, when we encounter

global events that require such sophisticated knowledge that we are made to feel overwhelmed and anxious, is it any wonder we may wish to go looking for holes to hide within? In an age when we have all been united by a virus's unwillingness to differentiate between us by gender or race, nationality or ethnicity, political affiliation or wealth status, why shouldn't we long to have identifiable monsters for our enemies and superheroes as our defenders? It gets quite confusing when we begin to cheer for murderers on television while encountering them more frequently in real life and when we wear masks as barriers to infection rather than to hide our identity.

Of course, my own nostalgia for a simpler time, a "wistful affection" dug into the cool womb of the earth, is folly, like all escapist thinking. I cannot pretend to be immune from recalling fondly a childhood where I was left to play with friends or within my own imagination from the time I left the house in the morning until my mom pulled the rawhide cord on the bell attached to the back of our house at sundown. Nor am I not guilty of self-deceit or for wanting a return to a time when politics seemed simpler, communication less fraught with risk, facts were more readily identifiable and more frequently trafficked. The forts I construct today are the indoor variety, which are built alongside my grandchildren using an ingenious framework kit that allows construction of nearly any shape or size, but many of the blankets that cover the frame are handmade by those who passed before me, and the wonder and joy I see in my grandsons' eyes as they hold a flashlight to their faces when inside their creations is familiar and comforting.

But I have dug no holes, constructed no bomb shelters. I live firmly above ground. Mostly now I am reminded my current residence has a crawlspace only by the regular flush of the sump pump that indicates the snow is melting out of the mountains as spring nears or when retrieving the storage bins

filled with toys for the grandchildren when they make an annual visit. Like their parents, when I invite my grandchildren to maneuver the wooden ladder and descend into the crawlspace with me to get their toys, they decline, the two-year-old declaring the space “scary.” That is, I suppose, a normal reaction to the underground.

When I see old pictures of Bob Crane today, in nearly every image taken for *Hogan’s Heroes*, whether screen shots or stills used for marketing, he seems to possess a sly smile, one best described as a smirk. In a 2002 article about the release of *Auto Focus*, *The New York Times* astutely recognized that “decadence and self-destruction make for the best kind of celebrity” and provided Crane mythical longevity his career would never have allowed him. Maybe I’m thrown off by the jauntily placed hat or the trademark Colonel Hogan bomber jacket, but I still find myself looking at that smile and within those laughing eyes and wondering what other underground secrets they hide.

New Fiction from Mike McLaughlin: “What Could They Take from Him?”

After four months of not getting shot, not stepping on a mine, not taking a fragment to the neck or through the eye, Pat Dolan didn’t think about his remaining time in country. At the firebase, men talked about it constantly, as if would improve their odds. He never bothered. He had arrived on a day in July, 1971. On another in July, 1972, he would leave. Until then, every moment he survived was the only one that mattered.

Then, miraculously, the Army dusted off his change of MOS request and kicked him down to Saigon. As shake-ups went, it was a good one. It got better on realizing he had a remarkably fair boss. For a chief warrant officer on his second war, Pulaski was a hard-ass editor only when necessary. Otherwise, he assigned work to his men, then stepped aside and let them do it.

Four weeks slipped away as Dolan learned his role as the Army's newest journalist. Learning the maps. Learning the cities and provinces. Learning the names, places and policies that defined the war – and, hardest of all, the language.

His crash course in Vietnamese was paying off, though, thanks to one ARVN lieutenant born in San Francisco. Likewise for three civilian journalists who'd covered Southeast Asia for decades. In a massive notebook he added words, phrases and phonetics, along with musical notes to help say them properly in a language where tones were everything.

After a month of intrepid news reporting, his latest piece was three hundred gripping words about an American vitamin pill now in use by ARVN troops. Easy to write, palatable for the taxpayers, boring as hell.

There would be harder work, of course, in harder places – eventually. Already weary at the thought, Dolan crossed the newsroom and dropped his article in the box by Pulaski's door.

"I'm leaving," he announced.

"Tôi đang rời đi."

No one looked up. Half the men in the room, military and civilian, were on deadlines. Hammering away on typewriters, talking on phones, gathering around radios and televisions. To them he was invisible.

At the door he stopped.

“‘Stairs,’” he declared.

“‘Cu thang.’”

“‘I am going down the stairs.’”

“Tôi đang đi . . .”

He frowned.

“Tôi đang đi . . .”

The rest of it slipped away.

“Shit,” he concluded, then started down.

“Phân.”

* * *

On Tu Do street he stopped to buy Newsweek and The Saigon Register. At work he had access to all the news he wanted, but rarely followed it unless his assignments required it. The irony was rich.

The sun was low now, the air cooler. Looking for a place to sit, he chose a tea shop with a raised terrace. He went through a set of green French doors and up seven steps into a vibrant yellow room filled with shelves and tables. Every surface was covered with jars of tea.

An older woman in a blue silk gown appeared, then gestured around the room and invited him to choose. Awed, Dolan could not.

“Is surprise, yes?” she laughed. “Very good! I will make bring to you – yes?”

“Cum ơn dì,” Dolan replied, trying not to stammer. “Bạn – Bạn thật với tôi.”

Thank you, aunt. You – You are kind to me.

Her smile broadened.

“Cảm ơn cháu tra! Không có chi!”

Thank you, nephew! You are welcome!

Dolan nodded, feeling foolish yet pleased.

From behind him another woman arrived, younger than the hostess and dressed more formally. With her pink blouse and tan skirt, she could have just come from a bank or a law office. One of thousands of professional women, done for the day.

Dolan bowed.

“Xin chào, dì.”

Hello, aunt.

To his surprise, the woman was delighted.

“Xin chào, cháu trai!”

Hello, nephew!

Encouraged, he continued.

“Quê là một – ”

He hesitated, then tried again.

“Quê là một ngày đẹp trời.”

It is a lovely day.

“Vâng, đúng vậy!” she replied.

Yes, it is!

As the women laughed, Dolan bowed again and went through the door to the terrace. Their voices followed him, cheerful indeed, as if from meeting again after a long time.

The terrace had a slapdash charm. The stonework was cracked, and the wrought iron fence was bent here and there, with rust showing through the peeling white paint. Above it all was a wooden canopy, thick with vines, providing shade so deep Dolan first thought he was entering a cave.

At a table overlooking the street, he had barely sat down when the hostess arrived with a wooden tray. On it were a cup, saucer and teapot made of jade green porcelain. In bowls of cut crystal were milk and sugar. A folded green napkin and silver spoon completed the display.

“I choose for you!” she declared. “So – you try! You enjoy, yes?”

Then she poured for him, filling the cup with a liquid the brightest orange he had ever seen.



“Please! You try now! You like, yes?”

Carefully he raised the cup to his lips. Hot but not scalding,

the tea was excellent, tasting of oranges and nutmeg.

"Is *trà cam*," she said proudly. "You have back home?"

"*Tôi – sẽ gặp?*" he replied. *I – will see?*

"Is yes! You enjoy! You want more, you ask!"

She left to sit with her visitor inside the open door. Together they laughed again, as if for an excellent jest, then began to speak earnestly. The walls inside the shop reflected their voices. The women sounded as if they were just behind him.

He set his cup down and studied the Saigon paper. The huge Chử Hán characters dominated the page, while the accompanying Roman alphabet text struggled to be seen.

"English in Vietnamese," someone once told him, as if sharing wisdom hard earned.

Groaning, Dolan opened his notebook and set to work.

"Tại Paris hôm thứ Hai, ngoại trưởng Mỹ Henry Kissinger đã đưa ra một tuyên bố đã đưa – "

In Paris on Monday, America's foreign minister Henry Kissinger stated –

That much he understood. No longer secret now, the peace talks were continuing at a snail's pace. The stunning was becoming the ordinary.

Almost.

On the street the activity continued unabated. The talking, the yelling, the laughing. The vendors and shop owners smoking and haggling. The adults on their bicycles weaving between cars and trucks and grinning teens on Vespas.

Then he heard singing. Looking down, he saw a young nun in

bright blue approaching, followed by a dozen girls. No older than ten, each wore a white blouse, blue skirt and scarf. On their feet, to Dolan's amazement, were penny loafers. Standard-issue footwear for Catholic girls worldwide.

They were singing about a dancing puppy, or so he thought. As they marched past they looked up at him and waved. A grin spreading across his face, he waved back.

"Xin chào!" he called out. *"Cảm ơn bạn!"*

Hello! Thank you!

Their singing became greetings.

"Chào ngài! Chào ngài!"

Hello, mister! Hello, mister!

Dolan didn't need the book for this.

"Chúa phù hộ bạn!" he added. *"Chúa phù hộ bạn!"*

God bless you! God bless you!

Merrily the nun and the girls blessed him back.

He turned to see if the women were watching, too, but as he did they quickly looked away.

Unsettled, Dolan watched the chorus until they vanished.

Behind him the conversation resumed.

In French.

"He must not hear," the younger woman said.

"No," the hostess agreed. "Perhaps he is smarter than he appears."

"True. His accent is appalling, but that may be his purpose.

To deceive.”

“Foolish boy. He has everything.”

“As do they all.”

“So typical. *Expecting* everything. Believing they are *worthy* of it all.”

Dolan caught every word. His high school French had been good. At sixteen he met a college girl from Montreal who made him better. Getting him up to speed as she tore off his clothes.

After a moment, the younger woman continued.

“The heart of the village was gone.”

“But not all?”

“No,” she said flatly. “But then they dropped their demonic fuel. Their fire like liquid.”

“Yes. Such an evil thing.”

“It crushes me to think of it.”

“And this was before the wedding of your niece?”

“Oh, thank the heavens, no. By then she and her husband had moved to Hoi An. They were expecting their first child.”

“A girl?”

“A boy. Recently we celebrated his birthday. Now he is three. A most happy boy, with the eyes of his mother. We are blessed.”

“Every child is a blessing.”

Then they were quiet again.

Slowly, Dolan opened the Newsweek.

President Nixon last week signed into law the Twenty-Sixth –

The words were difficult to follow. He shook his head then tried again.

"The cadre had fled by then," she went on. "There were a dozen of them. No more."

"And you knew them?"

"Some, but not all. Two were little more than boys. The youngest was fourteen. They had often been with us. So sad. They missed their mothers terribly."

"Yes," said the older woman quietly. "It wounds the heart."

"Another man was familiar. He would stay the night with our neighbor. Perhaps the others were comrades of those who visited in the past."

"Perhaps."

"Most were in black, as is the custom. Two were in green. The eldest of them was most senior, although this was not apparent at first. His accent suggested he had lived in China. Perhaps he was born there. He seemed a decent man. He was in authority, yet he was possessed of – of a gentleness, one might say. He was scholarly, yet deferential, as if he were a teacher, pleased with his students."

"And, that day, they simply appeared among you?"

"Yes. I think they came from the west but who can say. It was if they sprang from the air. They demanded entrance to our homes. They said the Americans were coming, and it was their duty to protect us – and ours to help them."

"Yes," the hostess sighed.

"*Protect*. How absurd. I remember my mother laughed. Laughed! Others begged the men to flee. Saying they could do nothing

for us now. That their presence would only enrage the imperialists. Instead, they shouted curses at us. They shook their fingers at us and called us weak. Faithless. Then they were in our homes, placing themselves at our windows and doors, looking to the west."

The woman paused, reflecting as she stirred her tea, the spoon clinking against the rim.

Dolan winced at the sound.

This week marks a year since the completion of Egypt's Aswan High Dam, an epic –

"Then they began firing toward the fields. Most of the Americans were keeping themselves low, but not all. One of them fell. I remember another hurried to help him, then that one fell, too."

Dolan shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"And then they were began shooting at us. I could hear their bullets striking our homes, passing through walls, shattering glass. Then the cadre fled, and as they ran they pledged to return."

She stopped again, then took out a cigarette and lit it.

Controversy continues over the death of Jim Morrison in –

"'Return,'" she snarled. "These who declared themselves men. *Liberators*. Some we had known for years. Now they were abandoning us. Running away down the path to the east."

Dolan kept going. He hated The Doors.

"By then the Americans were using heavier weapons. Machine guns greater than those the soldiers carried. More bullets were striking our homes. Our animal pens. Our pigs, our oxen. They screamed as they fell."

Dolan swallowed hard, seeing it all.

"But you did not," said the elder.

"No. Often I wonder why this was so. I knew of such things, of course."

"Yes."

"Now they were happening to *us*."

"Yes."

"Then we ran, too. We simply lifted our children, and then we ran. In that moment I felt I was floating. Bounding in huge leaps, as if flying. I had never known anything like it."

In New York, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant announced –

"Then we heard their planes. They were low. I remember that. Approaching with a roar that shook the earth."

The silence deepened.

Dolan watched the pastel-clad people on the street. The ice cone vendor and the eager children waiting their turns. The optimistic grandfather shuffling along, leaning on his cane, balancing a television on his shoulder.

He flipped the magazine over. On the back was a gorgeous couple, leaning against a Mustang convertible, gazing into a Malibu sunset.

"Our shrine was so lovely. It was old when my grandmother was a child. Her own grandfather had fashioned it with folding panels. He painted them a shade of gold that glowed. On clear days it was as though the sun had entered our home. Between them were two shelves. On the first were the copper bowls for flowers, and between them were the candle holders."

She paused again.

"And on the second?" prodded the other gently.

"Many boxes. Some were the size of a sewing basket. Others were small enough to fit in one's palm. My grandmother had built them from mahogany. She was most skilled."

"The women in our family have always had such talents."

"I remember how bright they were," the younger woman sighed. "With a brush she would apply a lacquer to make each surface a mirror. Together in the candlelight, they shone with wondrous harmony."

"And what did you keep in them?"

"Our treasures."

"Yes."

"Our memories."

"Yes."

"In one were petals of a flower. My mother picked them when she was a girl. She cherished them so. In another was a lock of my father's hair, kept from the day of his birth."

In the cooling shade, Dolan wiped sweat from his forehead.

"The lid of another was glass, with a photograph beneath. A portrait of my grand aunt and uncle for their wedding day. They had travelled to a studio in Phuy Tan to sit for it."

"To sit, as one would for a painting?"

"Oh, yes. It was much the same. Cameras were quite different then. One had to sit quietly, patiently. One could not move or the image would be unclear. My grand-aunt told me they sat still as statues."

The woman laughed dryly.

"She smiled throughout, yet her husband appeared very serious. She would tease him about this, as he was truly lighthearted. Often it was *she* who was formal in manner. That each bore the look of the other greatly amused our family."

Dolan felt lightheaded.

"So many memories. So much life."

The printed words were nothing.

"It grieves me so, to know that it is gone."

The sun had set.

Mechanically, Dolan took a piastre from his wallet and dropped it on the table, then two more.

"They took everything," she said, her voice nearly a whisper.

Dolan froze, feeling their gaze on his back.

"Look at him," said the hostess coldly. "This man. This boy."

The money was more than enough.

"So healthy," the other said bitterly.

It was too much.

"So prosperous. I wonder – what does *he* have to lose? What could they take from *him*?"

Dolan stood up.

He meant to feign ignorance.

To fold his papers then return the tray to the hostess.

To thank her.

Còn ơn dì.

To wish them both good night.

Chúc ngủ ngon.

He climbed over the railing instead.

And then he jumped to the street.

And then he walked away.

It was the only way out.

**New Poetry from Scott
Janssen: “Bottle Tree”**



VIETNAM DID I / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On my first visit I asked
A stock question about
Whether you'd been in the military.

Marines, nineteen sixty-six, you said,
A hint of menace in your eyes.
I never talk about it.

On my way out the door
I asked your wife about a
Tree in the front yard,

Its branches capped with
Blue and green and pink

Bottles made of glass.

It's a bottle tree, she said.
Pointing at a cobalt blue bottle
Glinting with sunlight,

She told me it had
Special power to lure in
Ghosts and lurking spirits.

They get trapped in there, she said.
Then sunlight burns them up
So they can't haunt us anymore.

Eight months later
You could no longer walk.
I rolled your wheelchair

Onto the warbled porch
Where we sat and talked
About how rough life is.

I never told you about
Vietnam, did I? You whispered.
I shook my head.

As you spoke,
Your eyes averted,
I looked at that cobalt blue bottle

And imagined it slowly filling
With blood and shrieks
And grief and the sound of

Rotor blades and the smell
Of burning flesh and the
Taste of splattered gore

And the sensation of
Adrenaline pulsing and

Memories of home and

Buddies who were killed
And of fear and rage and
betrayal and weeping

That lodge in your throat
Before you swallow
It all down

Into your belly.
Don't ever tell anyone
About this, you said,

Your hands trembling,
Jaw shivering.
I asked if there was

Anything else.
You started to say something
But stopped yourself.

No, you said.

New Fiction Review: Matthew Komatsu On Matt Gallagher's 'Empire City'

As *Avengers* was wrapping up last year, I mentioned how excited I was to see the finale to a friend, who responded with a barely suppressed sneer. Granted, it's the same friend whose Blu-Ray copy of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* I've had for nearly six years, never watched, and now that I think about

it, *might* have been in the console of the car my wife and I just sold.

“Superheroes? Really?”

The question dogged me for the past year. 2019 marked the end of the seventeen-year *Avengers* franchise, the release of *The Joker* to immediate Academy Award buzz, HBO’s critically acclaimed re-imagination of Alan Moore’s graphic novel *The Watchmen*, Netflix’s superb adaptation of *The Umbrella Academy*, and Amazon’s remarkable superheroes-gone-bad-and-wild series *The Boys*. And it is into this tableau of a fanboy and fangirl paradise in which all our favorite comics and graphic novels are finally seeing the cinematic treatments that seemed impossible at the turn of the century, Matt Gallagher’s second novel, *Empire City*, has sauntered.

EMPIRE CITY

Matt Gallagher

a novel

EMPIRE CITY

by Matt Gallagher

[Empire City](#) is an alternate history of present times, one that through rich world-building and attention to all the right details, asks us to imagine a world in which the US won (sort of – an insurgency is still ongoing) the Vietnam War through the heroic efforts of something familiar to anyone paying attention to our very real, very present Forever War: a military force of volunteers who, in a unique twist, are comprised of internationals serving in the hopes of US citizenship. The victory in Vietnam has been elevated and lionized so much that a “Council of Victors” would appear to control the national military narrative in its entirety. In this world, the present is, too, an unending global war against terrorism. With a wrinkle however. Our protagonists – three veterans and one civilian – have superhuman abilities.

The abilities appeared after they survived a friendly fire “Cythrax” bombing during a direct action mission gone bad. The protagonists who are veterans call themselves “the Volunteers” in a nod to our world’s all-volunteer military, and are drawn into a conflict brewing in “Empire City” and perhaps across the country, as the social order of over-the-top military veneration is challenged by a growing movement of disaffected veterans organizing around someone who might not be entirely unlike the Volunteers.

Gallagher’s three main narrative protagonists have relatively hum-drum abilities as far as superheroes go. Sebastian Rios, a bureaucrat and one-time war journalist who was a hostage at the hit site compound when the Cythrax bomb was dropped, can disappear. Mia Tucker, a pedigreed Wall Streeter who piloted a helicopter on the raid, can fly. And the immigrant soldier, Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, can move at super-speeds. Which made me wonder why Gallagher would choose such recognizable abilities at all.

The answer of course goes back to my friend’s question earlier this year: it’s not about the abilities. OK, I’ll revise that statement: it’s not *just* about the abilities. The superhero

phenomenon have always been about investigating what makes us human through a speculative lens. Even in the golden age of comics, when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and all the old hats realized that giving human characters super abilities, and presenting their stories in graphic format, was a fun idea, they were doing things in their serialized stories to give them gravitas. We all know Superman can fly, that he's a Man of Steel with x-ray and heat vision. So it's not a surprise when he uses those abilities to crush the bad guy. It's the story behind that counts: how does one live one's life given these abilities? What does ultimately tell us about humanity? Marvel's mutant X-men were thinly veiled discussions on the human invention of race; DC's Batman questioned the role of privilege and social order. Time now, superhero tales grant creative permission to carry out discussions that need to happen within society writ large, by attracting us with a wow factor (Check out character A! They can do B!) and sucking a consumer into a story in which that wow factor fades behind a substantive investigation into very real, very everyday, human dynamics. *Watchmen* – racism in America; *The Boys* – the fundamental question of whether a human would choose to apply their superhuman ability towards good or evil; *Umbrella Academy* – the unique dysfunction of the modern American family: we want to be drawn in as viewers and readers, but we also want something deeper to sink our teeth into.

Empire City succeeds in a similar fashion. Veterans, already totemized in the real world, are taken by Gallagher one logical step further and given abilities that set them apart from the rest of humanity. But that's just the appetizer. What's really happening in the book, as our heroes find themselves thrust into the beginnings of conspiracy set off by the potential presidential election of a retired general officer – one that threatens to unravel a modern social order that entirely revolves around the veneration of military service – is an investigation of our troubled real world. Less than 1% of the US have, are, or will serve in the military.

The national has waged nearly two decades of war across the world with little accountability to an electorate willing to write a blank check to it, no questions asked. Veteran has become an identity, a flag around which to rally political and cultural inclinations. War criminals have become public figures and welcome pundits. Given what's happened in the real world, is it so far a narrative leap to consider a veteran with superhuman abilities?

The book isn't perfect; Gallagher's first novel, *Youngblood*, had a tighter story arc, and the effort he takes to build a convincing world in *Empire City* sometimes feels like overkill. But it's a fascinating narrative. I've seen other readers comment on the novel's relevance – the whole thing has a *Man in the High Castle* feel to it. Recognizable as almost being our current reality, but tilted towards frightening. But the novel's relevance will hopefully fade over time, if the country can come to realistic grips with its military reality. What stands out to me about Matt Gallagher's second novel is that he was willing to do the legwork necessary to give contemporary war fiction a speculative edge, which puts it in territory more closely aligned with Joe Haldeman's graphic novel *Forever War* than it does with *Youngblood*, and enviable terrain if Gallagher is willing to claim it.

When I reviewed *Youngblood* a few years ago, I wrote that it delivered what we needed from contemporary war literature because it shunned the stereotypical war story for something more unique. With *Empire City*, Gallagher has reinvented himself yet again and produced another fresh, and timely perspective on the consequences of war.

New Nonfiction from Charles Stromme: “The Army Profoundly Regrets”

1972

I was back from a year of flying helicopters in Vietnam. The Army gave me a make-work job at Ft. Riley, Kansas, a base over-crowded with dejected Vietnam returnees. I hated it there, where they said, “Custer told us not to change a thing until he gets back.”

I was angry and disillusioned and clueless. A major called out to me in a hallway. “Captain, you’re going to be the notification officer next month.” He was an old major, a mustang combat vet in his last duty station. He wasn’t a bad guy and we had been working in the same battalion for several months without incident. But he hated me for being an aviator. I hated him for not being one.

“You’ll be on call for a month. When a new killed-in-action (KIA) report comes in you’ll visit the family with the chaplain and you’ll give the official first notice.”

I couldn’t bear the thought of inflicting that kind of pain on the good family of a good soldier. I was raw from the war. I didn’t want to live the back end of events that I had witnessed in Vietnam. My emotions scared me and brought back ugly memories. “No sir,” I said, “I won’t do that.”

He looked surprised. Likely no young captain had ever told him that he wouldn’t obey an order. “What do you mean?” he asked. “Do you understand that this is not a discussion, it’s an order?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I understand. But I won’t do that

job.”

“I can take this to the battalion CO if you want.” That was a profoundly underwhelming threat. I didn’t care, period, and I wasn’t going to do it. He brought out the heavy artillery: “I can court-martial you for this.”

“Yes sir, I know. You’ll do what you have to do but that won’t change my decision. I will not, under any circumstances, be the notification officer.”

I had unintentionally created a real problem for the major. He could, indeed, take this to the CO. He could certainly bring court-martial charges against me, charges against which there could be no defense. If he did, though, it would also bring to light his inability to control an officer under his command.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he said. In the Army that means “I’m going to give you some time to consider the error of your ways before I decide on your punishment.”

We did talk again a few days later, but there was nothing for me to reconsider. My mind was made up. I wouldn’t carry out his order. I understood that I would be punished and I would accept whatever punishment he and the CO deemed appropriate. It would surely be a court-martial, I thought.

But he surprised me by asking, “Can we reach a compromise?”

I was suspicious. Compromise is not the Army way. “What kind of compromise?”

“We need a presentation officer for the rest of the month. There are no presentations scheduled. If you’ll take the job, I’ll forget about this problem.”

A presentation officer is not quite as bad as being a notification officer. The presentation officer visits the family of a KIA soldier after they have already been given the news. He delivers whatever medals and awards the soldier had

earned and expresses the regrets and condolences of the Army.

There were only a few days left in the month and the major, after all, had said there was nothing scheduled. It looked like I might skate on this yet. "OK, sir," I said, "you've got a deal."



Tracer round trajectories, Vietnam war. (U.S. Air Force photo)

The next day an order came down. I was to make a presentation in three days to a family in southwest Kansas. My first thought was to refuse that order too, but I had made a deal. I was honor-bound to carry out my part of it.

The newly-grieving family deserved more than the Army offered in the way of condolences and they deserved someone better than me. They deserved someone who knew exactly what to do. I was terrified.

I picked up the meager package of medals and awards that the KIA soldier had coming and the orders and citations that go with them. I would travel to wherever the family asked me to be, in this case to their home town in southwest Kansas, in time for the funeral. I would make an awards presentation.

It's easier to describe than to do. No one tells you what to say. They just give you the medals, some dry military orders and a grieving family. You're supposed to honor and comfort them, even if you're only a dumb-kid captain like I was, with no experience in this sort of thing and no idea how to do what so obviously needed to be done.

It took most of a day to drive to the small farming town. Before I checked in at the local motel I drove out to find the family home where I was supposed to be in the morning. It was way, way out of town, a very large farm on flat wheat land that stretched forever. I went back to town, put on some civvies, ate and turned in for the night.

I set a 4 AM wake-up time, common for me in those days. I had worn my Army greens on the way down, with ribbon bars, wings and service patches – First Division on my left shoulder, First Cavalry on my right. Today I would wear my dress blues, complete with full medal display. Even on a modestly decorated soldier like me, that uniform looked impressive. I loved the silver pilot's wings that symbolized the one great achievement of my life. I had paid dearly for them. Shave, instant motel coffee, re-spit shine my best low quarters (shoes, to the rest of the world) to a mirror finish and I was ready, or so I thought.

I drove out to the farm again. It was just past dawn but already a crowd of family, neighbors and friends was gathering. I parked in an out-of-the-way spot. Several men detached themselves from the main group and walked over. "Are you Captain Stromme?" one asked.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"We saw you drive by last night. Why didn't you come in? We thought you would spend the night."

Spend the night? That wasn't something I had imagined.

"Well, come on in. We're just starting breakfast. The newspaper editor will be a little bit late and we don't want to start before he gets here." The editor was a long-time family friend. People don't really come and go in small Kansas farming communities; they come and stay. The families had been close for generations. It wouldn't do for the paper not to cover the ceremony.

People came to meet me and shake my hand. Some asked about my patches and medals and wings, congratulating me for things they imagined I had done and making small talk, getting to know me.

The young soldier had been named Donald. I met his grieving parents right away. His mother shyly welcomed me, then went back to work in the kitchen with the other ladies. The father's welcome was a little warmer. What I didn't understand was that the fuss everyone was making over me wasn't about me at all. No, it was because I was a stand-in for their Donald. This was the welcome home that he would never have.

I sat with the father and some other men at a table reserved for the men-folk, a long, worn, heavy plank-topped table that could easily have been 100 years old. The women had their own tables; I caught several of them peeking over at me. They were normal in this world. I was the misplaced oddity.

Their men were normal, too. Most were brawny and muscled from a lifetime of hard work and heavy food, red-faced, calloused hands. Along with their wives they were straight out of Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*.

The coffee and breakfast were hot and good and I began to learn a few names. The father said, "So you were in the Infantry, too, like Donald?"

I nodded, swallowing. "Yes, sir. I was in the Infantry but I flew Huey helicopters. I didn't do any ground combat duty at all." And with apologies to my Infantry brothers, I still thank God for that. Most aviators do.

"Do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

"Well, sir, I'll do my best."

They asked me some ordinary questions. Where was I from, what did I do at Ft. Riley, what was Vietnam like?

What was Vietnam like? I still don't know, even though I had been there for 366 days minus an R&R in Hawaii. I had flown its skies at very low levels, walked in a couple of its cities, spoken to a few of its people. But that wasn't what they wanted to know. What they really wanted to know was "What is war like?" and "Why did Donald have to die?"

Then his father, cut from the same rough cloth as his neighbors, asked me, "What do you know about claymore mines?"

I was surprised by the question. I happened to know something about claymores, but it isn't a subject to be discussed lightly at breakfast. They are God-awful weapons, small, curved plastic packages of death on little steel legs. They explode violently when triggered, spraying 700 deadly steel balls in a broad arc. They have "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY" in raised letters on the front to remind GIs which way to point them when they're setting them out. I had been trained with them but I had never deployed one for real. It's not something that aviators often do.

I told them a little bit about claymores, though I didn't tell them all of that.

The father nodded. "Donald was killed by a claymore mine."

The room was silent, everyone looking at me and expecting... something. I was appalled, unable to say anything meaningful. What could I say? Not for the first time I lamely expressed my condolences.

"His coffin got here yesterday," the father said. I had already seen it, on its bier in the front room. "It was sealed, you know, but we got it open."

I thought, you opened your son's sealed coffin? They are sealed for very good reasons.

Grimly, he said, "It took us a while, but we finally got it open. He looked pretty good. We just took a peek from the shoulders up."

Donald had been cut in two by the claymore. They didn't see the bottom half. The people who prepare KIA bodies had apparently done a good job with his remains and his father wanted us to believe he'd seen what he hoped to see, the handsome young boy he had loved. But his eyes were full of stunned grief, and I wasn't sure even he could believe what he said.

He smiled a sad half-smile. "How 'bout I show you his room?"

I thought, "Please, God, let this be over."

The family had a huge basement. This was tornado country and most people had them. This one was finished in grand farm style. We entered Donald's basement bedroom. It was the room I would have slept in had I spent the previous night. Donald had left for Vietnam only a few weeks before. His room was fresh, clean, the bed made for him, or maybe for me. I imagined I could still smell a boy's scent.

He had earned a full-ride agriculture scholarship to Kansas State University, the leading aggie school in the region. K-

State is located in Manhattan, Kansas, not far from where I lived. Shortly before admission he had decided to enlist in the Army. You know, before it was too late to see any action.

They showed me his yearbooks, his sports pictures, prom pictures of Donald and his girlfriend. She wasn't there yet. They brought down his Future Farmers of America awards, his 4H projects and certificates, his award buckles, his letter sweater. All for me to see, to bear witness that Donald had lived, that Donald was a person worth remembering. What I saw was a freckle-faced boy, a parent's dream, and I thought of a father's cruel last view of his son.

The minister arrived. The editor was late and we waited for him as though we were waiting for royalty. When he finally arrived he took me aside, asking "Did they tell you we opened the casket? God, it was awful."

Then we gathered in the front room with Donald's casket. This wasn't the funeral. That would come later in the day in the family church, with sermon and music, then the burial. I would not attend. This was the farewell, though. This was coming over to visit Donald like they always had, to say good-bye in much the same way they had said good-bye to him a few weeks before. Some friends and family spoke, then it was my turn.

The Army does little enough for its men and women but one thing it does well is train them to be soldiers. I was, am, a product of that training. It, and luck, had kept me alive when nothing else could have. Unfortunately, no one had taken the time to train me to be a presentation officer. Where was the Army Training Manual for this situation? What did it say?

When the father introduced me, I panicked. I was at a complete loss for words. I had only a few things to work with: the few minor medals themselves, the dry orders that accompanied them and whatever I could think of to say on the spot. I had thought of some words while driving down the day before. I

even rehearsed them a couple of times in my motel room. I don't know if they were appropriate because I couldn't remember any of them.

I began, speaking directly to Donald's father but loud enough for the room: "The Army profoundly regrets the loss of your son." Where did that come from? What did it mean and why did I say it?

I spoke of the American commitment in Vietnam, the one in whose name their son and friend had died. I read the medal commendations, then shared what I knew about each of them. I was wearing nearly all of Donald's medals and more myself and I spoke of the comradeship in arms signified by those medals, pointing out his and my own in turn.

Finally I ran out of things to say. Almost. My ad hoc performance needed an ending but what do you say in those circumstances, to those people gathered there?

I handed Donald's father the small group of medals with their accompanying orders. The words I chose were "Sir, on behalf of your son's comrades in the United States Army, I salute you." Then I raised my hand and saluted, a smart Infantry officer salute or so I imagined, one that would impress the women and children.

Since I had made all this up, the father had no idea what, if anything, he was supposed to do. A silent awkward moment passed, then he stood and slowly raised his hand, callused and scarred from a lifetime of farming, and returned my salute as though we had practiced yesterday.

The minister spoke again, then we prayed for Donald, for all soldiers, for America, for ourselves. I made my excuses and left, not looking forward to the long drive home. The day had drained me, saddened me, used me up.

I wanted a drink, but that was no surprise. Alcoholics usually

do. I wanted to make love to my wife. Not out of lust or love. I owned some of both, certainly, but neither was in play now. No, I wanted her because I wanted to feel that I was human and alive, cleansed and renewed by the act and not in pieces in a stainless steel box forever in the ground. I didn't know how else to find that comfort. Mostly, I wanted to be held and loved, to be told that everything was going to be all right, that I would be OK. The Army doesn't tell you how to ask for that, either.

That 1972 day is long gone. Back then I thought I could see my entire life stretching out predictably before me. A career of some sort (the FBI, I thought), a home with 2.5 children, grand-kids eventually, strength and joy mixed with occasional sadness, and at the end the personal satisfaction of a life well lived. Nothing lay ahead for Donald. Everything lay ahead for me.

Dr. King's Final Dream

We recently witnessed the 50th anniversary celebration of the famous 1963 "March on Washington", which was a peaceful gathering in the nation's capital to advocate for Civil Rights for African-Americans. The original event climaxed with the magnificent speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called the "I Have a Dream" speech, and rightly considered the most important piece of modern American oratory. What went unmentioned at this recent celebration was the same thing that has generally been lost to history: the fact that Dr. King's vision went beyond just civil rights. The official name of the event was "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Dr. King knew that civil rights and voting protections were essentially hollow achievements if they were not accompanied

by the arguably more important economic rights that would provide more jobs and opportunity for poor Americans (no matter Black or White). The March is generally considered to be one of the important catalysts that led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act – two highly important and symbolic new laws that were nonetheless mildly enforced. On the occasion of this semi-centennial anniversary, let's take the time to assess the legacy of the March as well as Dr. King's more profound and controversial vision for America.

The March on Washington and the subsequent passage of the two above-mentioned laws were the impetus for a massive change in the American political landscape that still has very real ramifications. When the former slave states of the South saw that the Federal government was no longer going to implicitly support their violent segregation and terrorism of their large Black population, the White leaders of the South led an exodus away from the Democratic party (which had passed the civil rights laws) to the Republican party (which had been the party of Lincoln and Emancipation 100 years earlier). The rampant white supremacism that united the "Solid South" thus led to cynical politicians like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan exploiting the new "Southern Strategy", a gambit designed to actively alienate Blacks and minorities in order to gain full access to the electoral block of the southern states. It was a hugely successful strategy that allowed the Republicans to win all but three presidential elections from 1968-2008. The election and re-election of Barack Obama, as well as demographic change, seems to have finally rendered ineffectual the 40-year dominance of the cynical Southern Strategy.

On another front, the Supreme Court decided in June of this year to effectively erase one of the most important provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act: a clause which provided Federal oversight and protection of voting rights in nine mostly Southern states with the most egregious history of racial

discrimination and disenfranchisement. The Supreme Court voted 5-4 in favor of dismantling part of the law, with the five conservative judges who were appointed by Republican presidents united on the matter. Their rationale was that the Voting Rights Act had worked so well to protect voting rights from discrimination and to allow minorities to vote that it was actually not needed any longer. That is like saying that because the Fourteenth Amendment has worked so well to stop slavery it is no longer needed on account of there being no slaves at the moment. This foolish decision obviously does not take into account the fact that many states have moved from the "first generation" techniques of disenfranchisement, such as literacy tests and outright intimidation (or even physical violence in the worst cases) to stop Blacks from going to the ballot box, to more modern and subtle techniques of racial gerrymandering, voter ID laws, and restricting voting times and access. An example of the extreme gerrymandering that has made of mockery of the democratic process are the states of Pennsylvania and Ohio: both states voted for Obama by solid percentages of 5% and 3%, respectively, yet in Pennsylvania Republicans won 13 of 18 seats in the House of Representatives, and in Ohio it was 12 of 15 for Republicans. Similarly, when the Supreme Court made its recent decision to re-allow discrimination, Republican-led states such as Texas and North Carolina literally could not wait a single day to reinstate the types of voting restrictions that we wished had already vanished from public acceptability. Finally, on the anniversary of the March there was not a single Republican who attended the event, neither to give a speech nor to even support the idea that equality is something to be supported by that party. This is despite the fact that event organizers and the King family had strongly wanted and tried to get leaders from both parties to make it a non-partisan affair, and despite the fact that all elected Congressmen were invited to attend. This reflects extremely poorly on the Republican party, which has yet to abandon the success of its 40-year Southern strategy and cannot accept that its time has come and

gone. It also reveals that in the 50 years since the March on Washington we still have much work to do to protect freedom against intolerance, and that for every step forward that we make we also have to guard against those who want to take us a step (or more) backwards.

Dr. King himself continued the fight for five years after the March until he was assassinated in April 1968 at the age of 39. A poor white man with an old rifle was convicted for the murder and spent his life in prison, but the findings have always been highly suspect and it is certain that much more powerful forces were at work to silence Dr. King. The reason is that Dr. King was a controversial figure who, despite the peaceful and positive March on Washington, was actually increasingly active against the general economic and political status quo. In the five years between the March and his assassination, the focus of his work and his rhetoric evolved from fighting for civil rights to fighting against the entire system that produced war and poverty at home and abroad. Specifically, he began to express doubt about the efficacy of the Vietnam War. Some of the first opposition to the Vietnam War came out of the civil rights movement, maybe because it was easier for Blacks to distrust the government claims that it was fighting for freedom. A gathering in 1964 in Mississippi held at the same time of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution compared the use of force against Vietnam to the violence Blacks faced everyday at home in Mississippi. In 1967 (a year before he was killed) Dr. King gave a speech in New York called "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." In this speech, he spoke forcefully against the American war in Indochina, saying that the goal of the US was "to occupy it as an American colony." He also said that the US government was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." This vocal stance put him in opposition to President Johnson, who had earlier signed both of the new laws protecting civil and voting rights. He continued to speak out against the unlawful military action in Vietnam, and in January 1968 he called for

another march on Washington against “one of history’s most cruel and senseless wars.”

Directly connected with his anti-war and anti-Vietnam views, Dr. King began to advocate for anti-poverty programs and social welfare at home. “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” For decades after World War Two, the US was by far the wealthiest and strongest country in the world, and spent a large majority of its budget on military spending and only a fraction on social welfare. Today the US is still easily the wealthiest and strongest country in the world and spends more on military than the next 10 countries combined, and yet poverty and income inequality have both increased, rather than decreased, over time. Dr. King’s vision reached to the heart of the matter and saw that the American government spends vast amounts of money to establish and maintain a global empire and a military state, but basically disregards the huge numbers of its own citizens who were poor and without hope.

In 1968, Dr. King started the Poor People’s Campaign to fight for economic justice in general, aimed at helping not only Blacks but all disadvantaged people. He saw that poor white people were in the same boat as poor black people, but that both were wedged apart from fighting together for their economic rights because of the man-made issue of racism. He condemned a system that spent lavishly on making war against poor countries across the globe while ignoring its poor people at home and refusing to guarantee them a living wage. His new message was intentionally more revolutionary than his earlier calls for equal rights. He lost support from many politicians, unions, white allies, the press, and even some of his fellow civil rights leaders. This did not stop him from continuing his new mission to fight against the ingrained injustice of a system that rewards greed but ignores the helpless. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover had long monitored Dr. King for

subversive activity, and from 1963 until his death he was the target of an intensive campaign of investigation and intimidation intended to discredit him. Wire-tapping was authorized by Attorney General Robert Kennedy in 1963, and the FBI harassed him constantly, culminating in a letter threatening to reveal allegations of extramarital affairs unless he committed suicide. Dr. King dismissed the forces stacked against him and continued to fight for justice until he became too dangerous to the powers that be, and he was silenced.

The tragedy of all wars is not only the horror and death that is brought mostly upon weak and innocent civilians, but the fact that the soldiers fighting the wars often come from the same disadvantaged backgrounds and have no mutual enmity with each other but are manipulated all the same by the class of war profiteers, crony capitalists, and power-mongers. This is the case with the Vietnam war, protested by Dr. King and by millions of other Americans; in that war the world's most advanced military spread destruction, murder, and mayhem against a poor peasant population on the other side of the world that wanted the freedom to live their own lives in peace. Dr. King fought against the injustice of a government that could profess to defend freedom overseas while supporting oppression at home. Today, I think we know what he would be fighting for if he saw that we were still preaching the same freedom while hypocritically attacking and bombing other countries, supporting coups d'états and violent dictators, creating a massive intelligence infrastructure that indiscriminately spies on citizens at home and abroad, sending unmanned "drones" to fire missiles at military-age males in other countries without due process or legal justification, and building a vast network of private prisons across the country to make incarceration a profit-making business that preys on the poor and minorities, all while saying that there is not enough money to support education, health care, social programs, homeless people (who are often veterans), to raise

the minimum wage, or to enact Dr. King's solution of instituting a living wage. The truth that Dr. King knew was that there is a deep connection between the evils of racism, poverty, materialism, and militarism; for him, the only solution was "a radical restructuring of society" that would go beyond giving lip service to high ideals in order to actually defend justice and fairness and human dignity.

The achievements that came from the Civil Rights movement were due not only to strong leadership, but to the idea of sustained solidarity. This is to be the only solution if we are to continue to fight for progress and a more just society. The March on Washington came about by the unified efforts of six independent civil rights organizations, as well as a wide coalition of students, unions, churches, and white Americans that sympathized with the cause. Differences were put aside so that real progress could be made. Only strength in numbers is able to create the pressure needed to force change from unwilling politicians, who otherwise benefit from stasis. More importantly, we must see each other as one human family rather than a group of various classifications, and to ignore those who profit from the division of the weak and the strong. Only by standing together in great numbers with common cause against the power elite can we change an unfair system and try to bend the arc of history towards justice. As Dr. King showed, this means going beyond mere words or beliefs and becoming socially and politically active, not standing by when we see injustice in our communities or our country at large, and joining groups of like-minded activists who are also willing to make a difference. Dr. King made a real difference in fighting for justice and paid the ultimate price for his principles; the way to honor his legacy and his dream is to get involved and not stand on the sidelines. The only way to guarantee freedom and justice is to ensure that they are extended to everyone, rich and poor, home and abroad.