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Letters

Whistleblowing While You Work

Seattle

Tim Shorrock’s article on the NSA Four, “Obama’s Crackdown on Whistleblowers” [April 15], points to the problem of hiring private contractors to do the NSA’s work. Shorrock also reveals the revolving door between NSA personnel and the private companies they later work for. Profits motivate these contractors and pose a huge conflict of interest, and taxpayers are picking up the tab. These corporations have no loyalty to the American people, and they do not have to answer to us. That they could manufacture a need for the surveillance of private citizens is of enormous concern.

Shorrock reports that the whistleblowers have been harassed and blacklisted for speaking out. Average citizens are also under surveillance and harassed by groups like InfraGard and other for-profit agencies. (The military has also been a part of the organized bullying and smearing of whistleblowers and peace activists, according to the ACLU.)

I discovered I was on a watch list when I was detained at the US-Canadian border. Why? I don’t know; every FOIA request I submit is denied. If my name can appear on a watch list when I have done nothing to warrant it, then anyone can be vilified and harassed. We need more whistleblowers and more protection for them.

Seana Sperling

Jock’ Rape Culture

Reno, Nev:

I was drawn to Jessica Valenti’s “Rape—Still No Joke” [April 15], about the rape of an unconscious 16-year-old girl by two young men at a party, where the attackers and the onlookers “didn’t think anything was wrong,” proving this by broadcasting their crime on social networks. I have just learned that my 18-year-old grandniece was raped by a college football player at a party recently. No one is supposed to know about this assault—it’s a secret, a big secret kept by her family because of shame.

The attacker has been charged. My niece had to leave college because she couldn’t hold up under the harassment of the perpetrator’s teammates and others because she pressed charges. She is recovering at home without support from other family and friends because of the “no talk” rule. The rape was devastating, but barring friends and family from giving support is devastating as well. The adage “Your secrets keep you sick” applies here and could have the most severe consequence: suicide. Receiving love and care from people outside the immediate family would promote her processing this violation and is imperative for her healing.

I believe our “jock” culture is to blame, along with the media’s portrayal of women as toys to be used for the glory of men and their supremacy.

Anna Leet (pseudonym)

Gay Marriage: Outdated From the Start?

Salt Lake City

Melissa Harris-Perry (“Sister Citizen,” April 15) makes a cogent point that gay marriage equality is important but perhaps superfluous. As a marital and family therapist for forty years, I believe that apart from marriage equality, marriage as an institution is becoming outdated. One survey reveals that around 60 percent of Americans believe marriage is an anachronism. I expect they are mostly younger folks. Marriage has become burdened with accretions like parenting, economic stability, duty, roles and social status. Some of these characteristics are still relevant, but without the dynamism of a vital relationship between two autonomous people, marriage becomes an empty shell. I have seen the shells for years. So I don’t try to sustain the institution; I lead couples toward understanding the human need for vital, evolving connection with each other, not to a social institution.

That, I believe, is part of marriage equality.

Richard Passoth

letters@thenation.com

(continued on page 26)
Terror in Texas

Ask yourself this: Do you know the name of any one of the people killed in the West Chemical and Fertilizer Company disaster? Do you know how many of them there were? Their ages, aspirations, what they looked like, whether they left behind children or what messages they last posted on Facebook? Do you know what the cause of the explosion was? Or if investigators are still searching for an explanation?

You probably don’t know the answer to any of these questions, and I didn’t either until I started writing this. I didn’t know that officials have confirmed fourteen deaths, twelve of whom were first responders. I didn’t know the name Jerry Chapman, 26, who volunteered with the Abbott Fire Company and who, according to his girlfriend Gina Rodriguez, was training to be an EMT. I didn’t know the name Cody Dragoo, 50, who was both an employee of the fertilizer plant and a West firefighter (the town has an all-volunteer force). And I had never heard of West firefighter Morris Bridges, 41, who lived just a few doors down from the facility and whose 18-year-old son, Brent Bridges, stood in the yard as the blast that killed his father blew out the windows of their home.

I do know, however, the names and faces of Sean Collier, Krystle Campbell, Martin Richard and Lu Lingzhi. I know that Sean, 26, had been on the MIT police force for a little more than a year when he was allegedly shot by Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev; that Lu was a Chinese national studying at Boston University; that Krystle was a regular Boston Marathon watcher; and that Martin was just 8 years old and had recently made a sign that read No More Hurting People Peace. I’ve seen the photo of him holding, with obvious pride and joy, those words drawn on a sheet of blue construction paper more than a dozen times. I can’t get away from it on Facebook, and when it shows up on my feed, I can’t look away.

What separates these two groups of victims from each other? Surely not innocence, for they were all innocent, and deserve to be mourned. And yet the blunt and awful truth is that, as a nation, we pay orders of magnitude more attention to the victims of terrorism than we do to the more than 4,500 Americans killed each year while on the job. As former Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis once put it, “Every day in America, twelve people go to work and never come home.” Very little is ever said in public about the vast majority of these violent and unnecessary deaths. And even when a spectacular tragedy manages to capture our collective attention—as the West explosion briefly did, and as the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster did three years before—it is inconceivable that such an event would be considered a permanent emergency of world-historic proportions.

Let’s imagine that they were, as many already consider the Boston Marathon bombing to be. Let’s imagine that instead of sending a handful of investigators from the ATF and the Chemical Safety Board to West, Texas, we marshaled every local, state and federal resource available to discover the exact sequence of events that led to the explosion. Let’s imagine that a single question—Why?—became so urgent that the nation simply could not rest until it had overdetermined the answers.

We’d discover that the plant had recently been storing 270 tons of ammonium nitrate, which is 1,350 times the amount required to trigger Department of Homeland Security oversight, but...
the plant had failed to report its holdings to the agency. We'd find that the plant had violated at least six different federal and state regulations over the past decade, paying minimal fines, and that OSHA hadn't inspected the facility since 1985. Did this loose regulatory regime play a role in the disaster? If we conclude that safety violations led to the explosion, we might find the company that owns the plant, Adair Grain, negligent and culpable. But would we ascribe an ideology to its actions? If so, which ideology would we indict? Deregulation? Austerity? Capitalism? Would we write headlines that say OFFICIALS SEEK MOTIVE IN TEXAS FERTILIZER EXPLOSION? And could we name "profit" as that motive in the same way that we might name, say, "Islam" as the motive for terrorism? Would we arrest the plant's owners, deny them their Miranda rights and seek to try them in extralegal tribunals outside the Constitution, as Senator Lindsey Graham suggested we do with US citizen Dzhokhar Tsarnaev? Would we call for a ban on the production of ammonium nitrate and anhydrous ammonia? Would we say that "gaps and loopholes" in our nation's agricultural policies were responsible for the tragedy, as Senator Chuck Grassley suggested about immigration in the Boston bombing case?

No, we wouldn't. We won't do any of these things, because even if the West fertilizer plant disaster is ultimately understood as something more than "just an accident," it will still be taken as the presumed cost of living in a modern industrialized society. When it comes to terrorism, we have the opposite response. We launch wars against other countries, suspend the Constitution, and create massive state bureaucracies for espionage, covert operations and assassinations. Since 9/11, it's become a political imperative that our nation must go to any lengths, no matter how extreme, to combat terrorism, even though, like workplace fatalities, terrorism has been with us long before globalization lent it a more exotic and threatening provenance.

In our response to the problem of violence, there ought to be a path between callous indifference and total social warfare. And that's why the miserable and absolute failure of gun control legislation in the Senate—just two days after the Boston Marathon bombing and on the same day of the West fertilizer plant explosion—was especially galling. Like acts of terrorism, the murderous rampage at Sandy Hook Elementary School precipitated a national crisis. In the wake of that tragedy, our collective grief took a particular shape, the shape of democracy.

The deaths of those schoolchildren were linked to the fate of more than 30,000 victims of gun violence each year, and the impulse to act was channeled through our democratic system, where an overwhelming majority of Americans and a majority of the Senate expressed support for new gun laws, which were defeated nonetheless.

It's recently become a right-wing talking point that just 4 percent of Americans think gun control is the "most important problem facing the nation today." Implicit in this commentary is the idea that because gun violence isn't seen as the single most urgent issue, it isn't an issue at all; that as workplace fatalities are to a modern economy, so gun violence is to the Second Amendment—just a cost we all should get used to.

So America, here's your scorecard for the week of April 15, 2013: callous indifference: 2, total warfare: 1. RICHARD KIM
AUSTERITY’S GRIP: When blue-chip economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff published a 2010 paper making the case for austerity, the report was seized upon by conservative economists, politicians like Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan, and deficit hawks Alan Simpson, Erskine Bowles and Pete Peterson. The authors argued that when the ratio of public debt to GDP exceeds 90 percent, economic growth falls dramatically. With the United States and European nations nearing or exceeding that number, government efforts to stimulate the economy through traditional deficit-financed jobs programs would thus lead to slower growth, higher unemployment and worse debt.

But austerity’s theoretical underpinnings have been exposed as flimsy, constructed out of egregious spreadsheet error and goofy logic. Thomas Herndon, a graduate student in economics at the University of Massachusetts, recently discovered that Reinhart and Rogoff omitted basic and crucial data. A working paper by Herndon and his professors Michael Ash and Robert Pollin, a longtime contributor to The Nation, shows that average rates of growth for countries with 90 percent public-debt-to-GDP ratios between 2000 and 2009 were in fact comparable to—or higher than—those for countries with debt ratios from 30 to 90 percent.

Reinhart and Rogoff admitted their errors but claimed, incorrectly, that it remains true that high public debt levels are correlated with slower growth. In fact, as sensible economists observed when their study first came out, correlation is not causation. Government deficits and public debt rose as a result of the financial crisis, not as a cause. The International Monetary Fund, once a bastion of austerity economics, has admitted its errors, warning that austerity is sabotaging recovery. Will the Fix the Debt austerity clique do the same?

Don’t count on it. When asked about the discredited paper, Bowles maintained that he relies on “common sense and my own personal experience”—a dubious expertise given his failure, as a director of Morgan Stanley, to foresee the housing bubble and bust that devastated the economy.

We will be freed of austerity’s grip only when those in power return to fact-based politics and hear much more from the unemployed and the immiserated, and much less from bankers and their favored economists.

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

SACK COACH SAC! Perhaps the most disturbing feature of the Steubenville High School rape trial involving members of the school’s storied football team wasn’t the crime itself so much as the complicity of those close to it. Symbolic of this unholy marriage of jock culture and rape culture was the revered Big Red football coach Reno Saccocia, who didn’t seem to care that his players could have treated a 16-year-old girl this way. Many believed that he would, at the very least, lose his job for apparently failing to report the sexual assault. Instead, on April 19, “Coach Sae” was granted a two-year contract extension by the Steubenville school board. The decision was made even as a grand jury prepares to assess whether he and others obstructed justice in the case.

Whatever the grand jury concludes, the question of whether Saccocia should keep his job is not a difficult one to answer. Not when there are text messages sent by now-convicted quarterback Trent Mays reading: “I got Reno. He took care of it and shit ain’t gonna happen…. Like he was joking about it so I’m not worried.” Not when, after the boys were arrested and charged, Saccocia kept them on the team for eight more games. Not when Saccocia went nose to nose with a woman reporter looking into the rape case and said, “You’re gonna get yours.” The demand for accountability in Steubenville will not begin and end inside the school district: more than 134,000 people have signed a petition at Change.org demanding that Saccocia be fired. Until then, the spotlight will only get hotter.

DAVE ZIRIN

PROTESTING DRONE DEATHS: Kentucky Senator Rand Paul may have captured national headlines when he filibustered the nomination of kill list architect John Brennan as CIA director, but outside Washington, on-the-ground resistance to America’s new dirty wars continues.

On April 18, five peace activists were convicted of trespassing for blocking the entrance to the Hancock Field Air National Guard Base outside Syracuse, New York, part of a wave of protests organized by Upstate Drone Action. Since 2009, when the Air National Guard began operating MQ-9 Reaper drones from Hancock, frequent rallies have led to more than 120 arrests, often after activists have attempted to deliver an “indictment” to the base commander. “Extra judicial killings...are intentional, premeditated, and deliberate use of lethal force to commit murder in violation of U.S. and International Law,” it reads. “By giving material support to the drone program, you as individuals are violating the Constitution, dishonoring your oath, and committing war crimes.”

Military officers have refused to accept the letter, and one even filed orders of protection against seventeen nonviolent protesters. Yet the movement is undeterred. A three-day conference on drones in Syracuse will culminate in another demonstration on April 28.

At trial, the defendants read statements explaining their actions. Recounting the story of Tariq Aziz, a 16-year-old killed by a drone strike in Pakistan days after volunteering to document the devastation caused in his village by the attacks, Jim Clune declared, “The killing of the innocent must never be business as usual, the normal course of events, but should be seen as what it is. A catastrophe. An outrage.”

Andrew Bard Epstein

ACCESS DENIED: On April 16, the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces ruled that it lacked jurisdiction to consider Center for Constitutional Rights et al. v. United States & Lind, Chief Judge, the latest roadblock in a lawsuit seeking access to documents pertaining to the court-martial of Bradley Manning. The proceedings, in a military courtroom in Fort Meade, Maryland, have been virtually invisible to the public, and petitioners are fighting for transparency and freedom of the press. Among them are The Nation and Jeremy Scahill, along with Glenn Greenwald, Amy Goodman, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, as well as Kevin Gosztola, co-author of Truth and Consequences: The U.S. vs. Bradley Manning, and Chase Madar, author of The Passion of Bradley Manning. For further updates, visit ccrjustice.org.

The Editors
Washington’s War Crimes

The Boston Marathon bombing briefly united the nation in horror, grief and a commitment to persevere. That unity quickly disintegrated, however, as Republican senators called for treating the surviving suspect, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, a 19-year-old US citizen, as an “enemy combatant”—and for interrogating him at length while denying him access to an attorney. At Slate, conservative law professor Eric Posner proposed that Congress enact a new statute authorizing detention and interrogation without counsel for all “terrorism” suspects. Recognizing the suspect’s rights, the senators and the scholar claim, may deny us valuable intelligence.

These suggestions are flawed on multiple fronts. First, how can we declare someone an enemy combatant when there is no evidence that his acts were part of an armed attack by anyone other than himself and his brother? Not every act of terror is an act of war. Second, the Supreme Court has questioned whether the Constitution would permit detention as an enemy combatant of a US citizen arrested on US soil for domestic acts. It upheld the military detention of a citizen captured in Afghanistan, but five justices appeared to take the position that the same authority would not apply domestically, where the criminal justice system is readily available. Third, citizens can’t be tried in military commissions, because Congress limited those proceedings to foreign nationals. And fourth, even enemy combatants are entitled to consult with a lawyer to pursue a habeas corpus action.

A sweeping new law authorizing isolation and interrogation of terrorism suspects would fare no better. The Constitution requires that people arrested without a warrant be brought before a judge for a probable cause hearing within forty-eight hours, at which point they are advised of their rights. Long-term detention without charge is not a constitutional option. On April 21, the Obama administration did invoke the “public safety exception” to Miranda to interrogate Tsarnaev without warnings, although it simultaneously said there were no immediate threats to public safety.

The truly perverse thing about these efforts is that they were designed to keep Tsarnaev away from lawyers, without evidence that a lawyer’s presence would obstruct investigations. David Kris, who headed the Justice Department’s national security division, has argued that providing terror suspects with lawyers actually helps get them to talk, because lawyers often understand that given the charges and evidence, the best thing a client can do to mitigate the penalty he almost certainly faces is to cooperate. So the solutions being suggested are in search of a problem that does not exist.

We can be virtually certain there will be other suggestions: that we increase camera surveillance, that we tighten our immigration laws still further, that we ramp up spying on Muslims and the like. Some reforms may make sense. But if history is any guide, many will betray our fundamental values and prove counterproductive.

A vivid reminder of the dangers of overreaction came, coincidentally, the day after the Boston bombing, when a nonpartisan, blue-ribbon task force sponsored by the Washington-based Constitution Project issued a report on US treatment of detainees in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The task force, after a two-year investigation, unanimously concluded that “it is indisputable that the United States engaged in the practice of torture,” and that “the nation’s most senior officials…bear ultimate responsibility for allowing and contributing to the spread of illegal and improper interrogation techniques.” The task force also found that the United States had “violated its international legal obligations in its practice of the enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention of terror suspects in secret prisons abroad.”

The task force found further that there was “no firm or persuasive evidence” that the use of harsh interrogation tactics “produced significant information of value,” and that the Office of Legal Counsel lawyers gave “erroneous legal sanction” to the practice.

These conclusions are unlikely to surprise Nation readers. But the report was not written by typical Nation readers or writers. The task force was chaired by Asa Hutchinson, a Republican who served in the Bush administration and has most recently acted for the NRA in its opposition to gun control; and by James Jones, a former Democratic representative and ambassador to Mexico. Its members included former senior government officials, a former president of the American Bar Association, two retired Army generals, a former FBI director and a former United Nations ambassador, along with several distinguished professors and doctors from across the political spectrum.

These days, it is difficult to find common ground between Democrats and Republicans on almost anything. Yet on this task force, they agreed—unanimously—that the Bush administration’s most senior officials are responsible for war crimes and abuses of fundamental human rights, including torture; enforced disappearances; and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.
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Smart Luxuries—Surprising Prices
By having the courage to render a consensus judgment, the Constitution Project’s task force may help us navigate the future with more resilience and commitment to our values than we showed after 9/11. But this report is not sufficient. Because it was not an official commission, the task force lacked the power to subpoena witnesses and to examine classified information.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has conducted just such an official investigation—and has written a 6,000-page report coming to conclusions that are said to agree with those of the task force. The committee has delivered the report to the executive branch for its comments, and will undoubtedly be guided by the executive on whether it can be released to the public. If we are to learn from the terrible mistakes of the past, Obama should declassify as much of that report as possible. To his credit, he declassified the “torture memos” written by Justice Department lawyers, saying that because he had barred such tactics in the future, the legal rationales underlying them could be made public. The same thinking should compel disclosure of much of the Senate report. Accountability is essential to ensuring respect for the rule of law, and true accountability cannot be secret. —DAVID COLE

David Cole, The Nation’s legal affairs correspondent, is a co-chair of the liberty and security committee of the Constitution Project.

The Chechen Connection

Bozeman

When a local newspaper here in Montana called for my views on a 19-year-old wrestler named Dzhokhar Tsarnaev with the confusing pedigree of being a Chechen from Dagestan who was reportedly born in Kyrgyzstan but mostly grew up in the United States, and what his motivations for the Boston Marathon terror attack may have been, I tried to use my background as the resident “Chechenologist” to help out.

Answering the second part of the question—“Why?”—was easy: I did not know Tsarnaev's motivations. But if he is guilty of the bombings—and I have little doubt at this point that he is—there must be a link to the deeply troubled history of Chechnya, and to the generations of anger, despair and trauma experienced by his people.

To start: Chechens are not Russians but a distinct national and lingual group, known as the Nakhs or Vainakhs, who are indigenous to the north slope of the Caucasus mountain range, where they have lived since before recorded history. Rather like Native American peoples, whose sad history is a strange and cruel mirror of the Chechens’ experience at the hands of Russian imperialism, the people of Chechnya do not call themselves “Chechens.” In their own language—as distinct from Russian as Navajo is from English—they are the Noxchi, which translates more or less as “the People.”

During the Murid wars of the nineteenth century, the Chechens were the backbone of Muslim tribal resistance to czarist expansion, earning their reputation as fearless Sufi-inspired warriors. After the resistance collapsed with the capture of Imam Shamil (an event somewhat akin to the surrender of Sioux/Lakota chief Sitting Bull), many of those warriors took their skills into exile, serving the Ottoman Empire in problematic border areas such as the Balkans and the Arab lands of the Levant, where they became known under the generic name Circassians, a term that includes related North Caucasus mountaineers such as the Ingush, Abkhaz and Adyghe, who were also driven into exile by the czars.

The ceremonial guard of Jordan’s king are Circassians; in Syria, they are (or were) concentrated in the Golan Heights but are now attempting a reverse migration to their ancestral lands in Russia, even while undetermined numbers of their “cousins” from Chechnya-in-Russia take up arms alongside jihadists against the secular Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

In the 1920s and ’30s, the Chechens maintained a low-boil resistance to Soviet rule and collectivization. But it was also thanks to Joseph Stalin and his commissars that Chechnya was first defined as an “autonomous republic,” a territorial entity replete with borders, an official “culture” and other Soviet-style attributes of statehood.

Many other marginal peoples in the USSR did not fare so well, and were thus absorbed into larger, non-Slavic nutshells whenever Stalin sneezed. For the Chechens, that sneeze came in February 1944, when Stalin and his fellow Georgian henchman Lavrenti Beria accused the Chechens of collaborating with the Nazis, dissolved their autonomous republic, and sent the new nonpeople into exile in Siberia and Soviet Central Asia. They were transported in boxcars chillingly similar to those that brought Jews to Hitler’s death camps. In the case of the Chechens, roughly half of the exactly 478,479 who were exiled died en route. The Vysl, or Deportation, became the defining event in Chechen collective memory, as resonant as the Trail of Tears for the Cherokees, the Retreat of the Nez Percé or the Holocaust of Europe’s Jews.

In the gulags and collective farms of Central Asian exile (mostly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), the Chechens honed their reputation for toughness. Some remain in Kyrgyzstan to this day, having chosen not to return to their homeland after their rehabilitation by Nikita Khrushchev in 1957. Those who did return to Chechnya did so with a collective bad attitude as well as a reputation for ruthlessness and organized crime.

Paradoxically, the Chechens also excelled in the Soviet security services: reminiscent of American Indians in the US armed forces, a disproportionately high percentage of Chechens rose to officer and even general rank in the Red Army, the police and the KGB. Dzhokhar Dudayev achieved the rank of major general in the Soviet Air Force, commanding a squadron of nuclear bombers in anticipation of World War III. (“Dzhokhar” is not—or was not until recently—a common first name among Chechens, and it seems fairly clear to me that the younger Tsarnaev was named after the now nearly legendary Chechen nationalist leader as opposed to being given a more familiar Islam-based name like Muhammad, Ahmad or Isa. So, the family seems to be part of the secular wing of traditional Chechen society, as opposed to the overtly religious part.)
It was General Dudayev who led Chechnya’s break with Russia in 1991, when the USSR collapsed. He didn’t so much declare independence as announce that Chechnya had never been part of Russia. This attitude—and the fact that Grozny, Chechnya’s capital, had become synonymous with organized crime—tempted Russian President Boris Yeltsin to “restore constitutional order” over the wayward, self-described Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1994, a military adventure that was also intended to serve as a distraction from serious problems in Moscow.

But what was supposed to have been a small victorious war did not go well for the Russians. After the loss of some 90,000 lives, most of them Chechen, and the destruction of virtually all of Chechnya’s infrastructure, Moscow had to sign a humiliating cease-fire in 1996. The carnage was truly mind-boggling and begs comparison now to battlegrounds like Syria. I covered the Chechen conflict as a journalist for various Western media outlets, and while I went to Grozny, I spent most of my time in the small farm town of Samashki, which was subjected
to a full-frontal blitz by Russian tanks and attack helicopters that killed at least 130 in a single day: April 7, 1995. The town was virtually razed once again, in March 1996. The PBS program Rights and Wrongs broadcast my material on the carnage as the “Samashki Massacre.” This led to the BBC asking me to do a follow-up on the aftermath that aired internationally in 1998, by which time I had come down with a bad case of PTSD. I do not know of a single observer of either of the Chechen wars—much less a participant—who was not scarred to his or her soul by the experience.

General Dudayev did not survive the first war. In murky circumstances, he was blasted into collective memory by what is believed to have been a laser-guided missile homing in on his satellite telephone as he waited to speak with an (allegedly) American interlocutor working on a peace deal. True or not, to this day, many Chechens are firmly convinced of a US connection to the assassination. Even more galling was President Bill Clinton’s description at the time of the brutal Russo-Chechen war as somehow akin to the American Civil War. Then came the nearly suicidal capture of Grozny by the Chechen resistance in August 1996, which forced Yeltsin to the negotiating table.

Despite its David versus Goliath victory over the Russian Bear, things did not go well for “independent” Chechnya. With Dudayev’s death, the tiny quasi-country slowly descended into lawlessness as well as an Islamist revival, thanks to the presence of Al Qaeda–connected fighters from the Arab world (many of whom had fought in Afghanistan), as well as even darker forces that many attribute to the KGB, now renamed the FSB. One result was the opening of an immense fissure in postwar Chechen society: on one side were the nationalists, who practiced a traditional form of Sufi Islam; on the other were growing numbers of Chechens whose devotion to the concept of an Al Qaeda–style Muslim caliphate superseded their loyalty to the Chechen nation-state itself.

It was a very confusing time.

In 1999, when these Salafists began exporting their fundamentalist ideology to the neighboring (Russian) Autonomous Republic of Dagestan, and then (allegedly) blew up a series of apartment buildings in Russian cities, Yeltsin’s prime minister (and then replacement president) Vladimir Putin launched the so-called “second” Russo-Chechen war, which arguably continues to this day.

Putin was assisted in this task by major Chechen defectors, which further divided Chechen society into at least three groups: the Dudayevist nationalists, who continue their guerrilla war from forest hideouts in upper Chechnya; pro-Russian collaborators, known as Kadyrovists, currently in control of the Russian-backed government in Grozny, who participated on the Russian side during the brief war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008; and the Al Qaeda–associated Salafists, whose war has expanded from the Caucasus region to Afghanistan, Iraq and now Syria. Of note here should be the confused division/union between the Dudayevists and Salafists, both opposed to the Kadyrovists, whose utter brutality in the service of Moscow has arguably brought blighted Chechnya more real independence than anything Soviet Major General Dudayev delivered to his country by proclaiming titular independence.

Much of the fighting has now shifted to neighboring Dagestan, the wild, mountainous sub-republic in Russia immediately to the east of Chechnya, where every valley seems to contain a different ethnic and linguistic group, and where the Caucasus Emirate holds sway (at least at night) over swaths of hardscrabble territory. Notably, the emir, or Commander of the Faithful, one Doku Umarov, has rejected any and all connection to the Tsarnaev brothers, declaring that the emirate’s jihad is against Russia, not the United States.

Finally, there is what we might call the Chechen “fourth estate,” people so battered by the wickedness of fate that they left their homeland as refugees to start “normal” lives elsewhere—like Boston. According to reports from friends and family, this is the group to which the Tsarnaev family belonged—or appeared to until recently.

At the very least, it seems clear that Dzhokhar’s older brother, Tamerlan, and perhaps Dzhokhar too, identified with extremist Islamists, as opposed to the strangely and sadly divided Chechen nationalists associated with Dudayev, the ill-fated first president of that equally ill-fated post-Soviet republic. I guess it will all come out as Dzhokhar is interrogated and tried; now my suspicion lies with the brothers having abandoned their compatriots’ weird and horrible 200-year-old resistance against Russia to embrace the Salafist line of global jihad against the United States.

Myself, I am filled with an immense sadness for all involved: the dead and the maimed runners and spectators of the Boston Marathon, as well as the soul-scarred citizens of the blighted state of Chechnya.

Thomas Goltz teaches courses on the Middle East and the Caucasus region at Montana State University. He is also the author of the “Caucasus Triptych” of Azerbaijan Diary, Chechnya Diary and Georgia Diary, as well as other books and articles. Chechnya Diary, published by St. Martin’s Press, is available on Kindle.

We are pleased to announce that with this issue, Michael Sorkin joins the magazine as its architecture critic. Michael is the author of numerous books on architecture and is also the principal of Michael Sorkin Studio, a New York City–based design firm devoted to practical and theoretical projects with a special interest in cities and green architecture. Michael is as critical of the forces impeding the creation of beautiful and just cities as he is acutely sensitive to the various feats of architectural engineering and artistry.

Also joining us is the poet and critic Joshua Clover, to write the monthly column “Pop & Circumstance.” A former staff writer at The Village Voice and Spin, Joshua will chronicle what happens when someone in the public eye poses the moment’s conflicts as timeless dramas, and presents these conflicts as if they contain all possibilities. Is pop provocation or consolation? Joshua will let you know.
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Books That Have Made History: Books That Can Change Your Life is your gateway to 36 great works that will expand your horizons and change the way you look at the world. Under the guidance of Professor J. Rufus Fears, a three-time “Professor of the Year” at the University of Oklahoma, you encounter outstanding works such as the Iliad, the Gospel of Mark, Beowulf, The Divine Comedy, Walden, and more.

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Moviegoers have any number of reasons to appreciate the achievements of the Indian-born filmmaker Mira Nair. The director of twenty-two titles (according to IMDb), she has created a body of work that not only elevates our cinema but elucidates our world, even as it simultaneously entertains and educates its audience. Her newest film, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, is in many respects her most ambitious. Based on the 2007 novel by Mohsin Hamid, it tracks the progress of a son of the Pakistani elite who, after receiving a scholarship to Princeton, finds success at a McKinsey-like global consulting firm, where he enthusiastically embraces the pitiless diktats of global capitalism and reaps its seductive rewards.

The year is 2001 and, of course, a crisis is coming. Watching the towers come down, the young man—none too subtly named Changez (Riz Ahmed)—finds himself excited by the audacity of the attack upon this arrogant empire in spite of his moral revulsion at the mass murder. Lunching later with an elegant "Turkish publisher whose business he has been instructed to shutter, Changez finds himself compared to a janissary—Christian boys captured and trained to attack their homelands by the Ottoman Empire—and cannot entirely disavow it. In the novel, told in the first person, he explains, “I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine.” Nair says it was this story that compelled her to purchase the rights to Hamid’s novel.

Changez grows a beard, quits his job, breaks up with his lover (Kate Hudson) and moves back home to Lahore to oppose the imperialists. He “reluctantly” exchanges the fundamentalist as (Kate Hudson) and moves back home to Lahore to oppose the imperialists. He “reluctantly” exchanges the fundamentalist as imperialism for a more personal and ignominious cause. The Pakistani government, desperate to shut the CIA bureau in Peshawar down, offers to allow the CIA to do so under extraordinary circumstances. Two French DGSC agents were posing as journalists in Somalia when they were abducted in 2009. It is an awful idea in general, but we deny that the CIA would use ‘journalism as cover.’ The agency’s spokespeople, such arrangements remain a reality. As he writes in an e-mail, “in a 2002 memo CIA director George Tenet refused to deny that the CIA would use ‘journalism as cover.’ The agency’s stated policy has been to avoid using American journalists and organizations as cover, but even this policy has a giant loophole, allowing the CIA to do so under extraordinary circumstances. Two French DGSC agents were posing as journalists in Somalia when they were abducted in 2009. It is an awful idea in general, but we are creating a fictional espionage film…. The scenario in our film is far from implausible.”

Implausible? No. Unhelpful? Yes—or so I fear. Wheeler argues (and Nair concurs) that “journalists are persecuted because they are journalists, not because their perpetrators actually believe they are spies. Accusing innocent journalists of being CIA spies is most often a refuge of scoundrels—an excuse used by terrorist groups or totalitarian governments (like Assad’s Syria) to attack or persecute people whose articles they don’t like. These entities will continue to find reasons to persecute journalists like Daniel Pearl.” But if that is the case—if journalists are frequently accused of imagined CIA ties by those who abhor their reporting—why provide cinematic reinforcement of the stereotype that their attackers are seeking to exploit?

Wheeler also argues that my concern “radically over-inflated our influence.” I surely hope so. But either way, I urge you to see this intelligent and challenging film and to ponder the myriad mysteries it so thoughtfully illuminates.
Anwar al-Awlaki's youngest brother, Ammar, was nothing like him. While Anwar embraced a radical interpretation of Islam and preached jihad against the United States, Ammar was pursuing a career at an oil company in Yemen. Ammar was Canadian-educated and politically well connected. He dressed in blue jeans, wore hip Armani eyeglasses and sported a goatee. His hair was slicked back, and he had the latest iPhone. In February 2011, Ammar told me, he was in Vienna on a business trip. He had just returned to his hotel after sampling some of the local cuisine with an Austrian colleague when the phone in his room rang. “Hello, Ammar?” said a man with an American accent. “My wife knows your wife, and I have a gift for her.”

Ammar went down to the lobby and saw a tall, thin white man in a crisp blue suit. They shook hands. “Can we talk a bit?” the man asked, and the two sat down in the lobby. “I don’t actually have a gift for your wife. I came from the States, and I need to talk to you about your brother.”

“I’m guessing you’re either FBI or CIA,” Ammar said. The man smiled. Ammar asked him for identification.

“Come on, we’re not FBI, we don’t have badges to identify us,” the man said. “The best I can do is, I can show you my diplomatic passport... Call me Chris,” the American added.

“Was that your name yesterday?” Ammar replied.

Chris made it clear that he worked for the CIA. He told Ammar that the United States had a task force dedicated to “killing or capturing your brother”—and that while everyone preferred to bring Anwar in alive, time was running out. “He’s going to be killed, so why don’t you help in saving his life by helping us capture him?” Chris said. Then he added, “You know, there’s a $5 million bounty on your brother’s head. You won’t be helping us for free.”

Ammar told Chris that he didn’t want the money, that he hadn’t seen Anwar since 2004 and had no idea where he was. The American countered, “That $5 million would help raise [Anwar’s] kids.”

“I don’t think there’s any need for me to meet you again,” Ammar told Chris. Even so, the American told Ammar to think it over, perhaps discuss it with his family. “We can meet when you go to Dubai in two weeks,” he said. Ammar was stunned: his tickets for that trip had not yet been purchased, and the details were still being worked out. Chris gave Ammar an e-mail address and said he’d be in touch.

Ammar returned to Yemen and talked to his mother. “You stop it. Don’t even reply to them, don’t contact them again,” she said. “Just stop.” When Chris began e-mailing him after their meeting, Ammar didn’t respond.

On May 2, 2011, the night President Obama informed the world that Osama bin Laden had been killed by a team of Navy SEALs in Pakistan, thousands of Americans poured into the streets in front of the White House and in New York’s Times Square, chanting, “USA, USA, USA!”

The families of people killed on 9/11 spoke of bin Laden’s death bringing closure. But the Al Qaeda leader’s demise...
breathed new life into Washington’s global “war on terror.” The elite Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), once shrouded in secrecy, became a household name overnight. The Disney Corporation tried to trademark the term “SEAL Team Six,” and Zero Dark Thirty, a high-profile Hollywood film, was hastily rewritten to focus on the operation; the filmmakers were even given access to sensitive material.

While the battle over leaks concerning the operation—as well as the various contradictory stories on how bin Laden was killed—raged in the media, the White House was deeply immersed in planning more lethal operations against so-called “High Value Targets.” Chief among these was Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen of Yemeni descent born in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Three days after Obama’s news conference on bin Laden, the president’s counterterrorism team presented him with an urgent intelligence update on Awlaki. Along with signals intercepts by JSOC and the CIA and “vital details of Awlaki’s whereabouts” from Yemeni intelligence, the White House now had what it believed was its best shot to date at killing the radical cleric, whose fiery speeches denouncing the United States—and praising attacks on Americans—had placed him in the cross-hairs of the US counterterrorism apparatus.

US military aircraft were at the ready. Obama gave the green light. JSOC would run the operation. A Special Ops Dragon Spear aircraft mounted with short-range Griffin missiles blasted into Yemeni airspace, backed by Marine Harrier jets and Predator drones, and headed toward Shabwah Province. A Global Hawk surveillance aircraft would hover overhead, the US personnel running the op could not see what was happening below. A former JSOC planner, who read the after-action reports on the strike, told me that the mission had satellites that provided only “top-down imagery.” With such satellites, he said, “You’re looking down at ants moving. All they saw were vehicles, and the people in the vehicles were smart.” Dust, gravel, smoke and flames had shielded the High Value Target. The Harad brothers quickly marshaled Awlaki and his driver into their Suzuki Vitara SUV and took Awlaki’s vehicle. They gave Awlaki directions to a mountain area where he could take shelter. Awlaki hastily said goodbye and sped off in the Suzuki. The Harad brothers then headed in the opposite direction, driving in the truck the Americans had tried to blow up moments earlier.

As the two vehicles took off in opposite directions, the Americans running the operation had to decide which one to follow. They stuck with Awlaki’s truck. Awlaki looked up and saw the drones still hovering. He managed to make it to the mountains. From there, he watched as another round of missiles shot out of the sky and blew up the truck, killing the Harad brothers.

As JSOC celebrated what it thought was a successful hit, Awlaki performed his evening prayers and reflected on the situation. Speeches denouncing the United States—had placed him in the cross-hairs of the US counterterrorism apparatus.

n the evening of May 5, Awlaki and some friends were driving through Jahwa, in rural southern Shabwah, when their pickup truck was rocked by a massive explosion nearby, shattering its windows. Awlaki saw a flash of light and believed that a rocket had been fired at their vehicle. “Speed up!” he yelled at the driver. Awlaki looked around the truck and took stock of the situation. No one was hurt. The back of the pickup was filled with canisters of gasoline, yet the vehicle had not exploded. AlHamdalilah, Awlaki thought, according to his detailed account of the incident that later appeared in Inspire, the English-language magazine published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). “Praise God.” He called for help.

While Awlaki and his colleagues scrambled to get away from what they thought was an ambush, JSOC planners watched via satellite as his truck emerged from the dust clouds that the Griffin missile had caused. They’d missed—there had been a malfunction in the targeting pod, and the missile’s guidance system was unable to keep a lock on Awlaki’s vehicle. It would now be up to the Harriers and the drones. Strike two: a massive fireball lit up the sky. Just as the celebrations at JSOC were about to begin, the mission’s planners watched in shock as the truck emerged once again from the smoke. Its back bumper had been damaged, but the truck was on the run. The Harriers were running low on fuel and had to abandon the mission. The third strike had to come from one of the drones. Awlaki peered out the window, looking for the perpetrators of the ambush. It was then that he saw it: a drone hovering in the sky. As smoke and dust engulfed the area, Awlaki told the driver not to head toward any populated areas. They pulled into a small valley with some trees.

Two brothers, Abdullah and Musa’d Mubarak al Daghari, known among the members of AQAP as the al Harad brothers, were speeding to Awlaki’s rescue. As the drone hovered overhead, the US personnel running the op could not see what was happening below. A former JSOC planner, who read the after-action reports on the strike, told me that the mission had targeted satellites that provided only “top-down imagery.” With such satellites, he said, “You’re looking down at ants moving. All they saw were vehicles, and the people in the vehicles were smart.” Dust, gravel, smoke and flames had shielded the High Value Target. The Harad brothers quickly marshaled Awlaki and his driver into their Suzuki Vitara SUV and took Awlaki’s vehicle. They gave Awlaki directions to a mountain area where he could take shelter. Awlaki hastily said goodbye and sped off in the Suzuki. The Harad brothers then headed in the opposite direction, driving in the truck the Americans had tried to blow up moments earlier.

As news spread of the attack, anonymous US officials confirmed that the strike had been aimed at Awlaki. And for a time, they thought they had accomplished the mission. The US drone operators “did not know that vehicles were exchanged and resulted in the wrong people dying and [that] Awlaki [was] still alive,” a Yemeni security official told CNN. The Americans who were after Awlaki were not deterred...
by the failure of the strike in Shabwah, and thanks to intensive intelligence gathering, they soon would have another chance. “I want Awlaki,” President Obama reportedly told his counterterrorism team. “Don’t let up on him.”

In April 2011, Ahmed Abdulkadir Warsame, a Somali man with alleged links to his country’s militant Islamic group Al Shabab, was captured by JSOC forces in the Gulf of Aden. He was taken to a military brig aboard the USS Boxer, where Warsame was held incommunicado for more than two months before being transferred to New York and indicted on charges of conspiracy and providing material support to Al Shabab and AQAP. Warsame had recently met with Awlaki, and his interrogation sessions in JSOC’s custody, along with his seized computers and drives, yielded intelligence about the latter’s movements in Yemen.

Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, the oldest son of Anwar al-Awlaki, was born in Denver. Like his father, he spent the first seven years of his life in the United States, attending American schools. After he moved to Yemen with his family, his grandparents—Anwar’s mother and father—played a major role in his upbringing, particularly after Anwar went underground. Anwar “always thought that it is best for Abdulrahman to be with me,” Anwar’s father, Nasser al-Awlaki, told me. Anwar believed that his wife and children “should not be involved at all in his problems.”

Abdulrahman admired his father and had even chosen Ibn al Shaykh, “Son of the Sheik,” as his Facebook user name. But Abdulrahman was not his father; he loved hip-hop music and Facebook and hanging out with his friends. They would take pictures of themselves posing as rappers, and when the Yemeni revolution began, Abdulrahman wanted to be a part of it. As massive protests shook Yemen, he would spend hours hanging out in Change Square with the young, nonviolent revolutionaries, sharing his vision for the future and, at times, just goofing off with friends. But as the revolution continued and the government was brought to the verge of collapse, Abdulrahman decided to follow his urge to see his father.

One day in early September, Abdulrahman woke up before the rest of the house. He tiptoed into his mother’s bedroom, took 9,000 Yemeni rials—roughly $40—from her purse, and left a note outside her bedroom door. He then snuck out the kitchen window and into the courtyard. Shortly after 6 am, the family’s guard saw the boy leave but didn’t think anything of it. It was Sunday, September 4, 2011, a few days after the Eid al-Fitr holiday marked the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Nine days before, Abdulrahman had turned 16.

A short while later, Abdulrahman’s mother woke up. She started to rouse his siblings for morning prayers and then went to wake him, but Abdulrahman was not in his bedroom. She called for him and, while searching the house, found his note. In it, he apologized for leaving without telling her and said that he missed his father and wanted to find him. He also said he was sorry for taking the money. “When his mother told me about the letter, it was just like a shock for me,” Abdulrahman’s grandmother Saleha told me. “I said, ‘I think this will be just like bait for his father.’” The CIA, she feared, “might find his father through him.” The family called around to Abdulrahman’s friends, but he had already boarded a bus at Bab al Yemem, in the old city in Sana’a. His destination was Shabwah, the family’s home province and the scene of repeated US airstrikes aimed at killing his father.

By early September, however, US surveillance aircraft had pinpointed Anwar al-Awlaki’s location far from Shabwah—at a small house in Khashef, a village in Jawf about ninety miles northeast of Sana’a. Villagers began seeing drones hovering in the skies above. Washington’s drone war had kicked into full gear in Yemen, so the presence of the aircraft was not particularly out of the ordinary. But what the villagers did not know was that the White House’s counterterrorism teams were watching one specific house—watching and waiting. Once they got a lock on Awlaki’s coordinates, the CIA deployed several armed Predator drones from its new base in Saudi Arabia and took operational control of some JSOC drones launched from Djibouti as well. The plan to assassinate Awlaki was code-named Operation Troy. The name implied that the United States had a mole leading its forces to Awlaki.

As the Americans surveilled the house where Anwar was staying in Jawf, Abdulrahman arrived in Ataq, Shabwah. He was picked up at the bus station by his relatives, who told him that they did not know where his father was. The boy decided to wait in the hope that his father would come to meet him. His grandmother called the family he was with in Shabwah, but Abdulrahman refused to speak with her. “They said, ‘He’s OK, he’s here,’ but I didn’t talk to him,” Saleha recalled. “He tried to avoid talking to us, because he knows we will tell him to come...
Timeless Whoppers

“I know that it’s not possible that this child could be mine...”

JOHN EDWARDS
THE WOULD-BE DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE FIRST DENIED HAVING AN EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIR WITH A FORMER CAMPAIGN WORKER, THEN ADMITTED TO THE AFFAIR WHILE DENYING PATERNITY OF THE CHILD.

(EDWARDS ALSO ALLEGEDLY PERSUADED A CAMPAIGN AIDE TO SAY THAT HE WAS THE FATHER INSTEAD.)
back. And he wanted to see his father.” Abdulrahman traveled with some of his cousins to the town of Azzan, where he planned to await word from his dad.

At the White House, President Obama was faced with a decision—not of morality or legality, but of timing. He had already sentenced Anwar al-Awlaki to death without trial. A secret legal authorization had been prepared and internal administration critics sidelong or brought on board. All that remained to be sorted out was the day Awlaki would die. Obama, one of his advisers recalled, had “no qualms” about this kill. When the president was briefed on Awlaki’s location in Jawf and also told that children were in the house, he was explicit that he did not want to rule any options out. Awlaki was not to escape again. “Bring it to me and let me decide in the reality of the moment rather than in the abstract,” Obama told his advisers, according to author Daniel Klaidman. Although scores of US drone strikes had killed civilians in various countries around the globe, it was official policy to avoid such deaths if at all possible. “In this one instance,” an Obama confidant told Klaidman, “the president considered relaxing some of his collateral requirements.”

Awlaki had evaded US drones and cruise missiles for at least two years. He rarely stayed in one place more than a night or two. This time was different. For some reason, he had stayed in the same house in Khashef much longer, all the while being monitored by the United States. Now the Americans had him clean in their sights. “They were living in this house for at least two weeks. Small mud house,” Nasser said he was later told by the locals. “I think they wanted to make some videotape. Samir Khan was with him.”

On the morning of September 30, 2011, Awlaki and Khan, a young Pakistani-American from North Carolina who is believed to have been the editor of Inspire, finished their breakfast inside the house. US spy cameras and satellites broadcast images back to Washington and Virginia of the two men and a handful of their cohorts piling into vehicles and driving away. They were headed toward the province of Marib. As the vehicles made their way over the dusty, unpaved roads, US drones, armed with Hellfire missiles, were dispatched to hunt them down. The drones were technically under the command of the CIA, though JSOC aircraft and ground forces were poised to assist. A team of commandos stood at the ready to board V-22 helicopters. As an added measure, Marine Harrier jets scrambled in a backup maneuver.

Six months earlier, Awlaki had narrowly avoided death by US missiles. “This time eleven missiles missed [their] target but the next time, the first rocket may hit it,” he had said. As the cars sped down the road, Awlaki’s prophecy came true. Two of the Predator drones locked onto the car carrying him, while other aircraft hovered as backup. A Hellfire missile fired by a drone slammed into his car, transforming it into a fireball. A second missile hit moments later, ensuring that the men inside would never escape if they had managed to survive.

The Yemeni government sent out a text message to journalists. “The terrorist Anwar Awlaki has been killed along with some of his companions,” it read. It was 9:55 am local time. When villagers in the area arrived at the scene of the missile strike, they reported that the bodies inside the car had been burned beyond recognition. There were no survivors. Amid the wreckage, they found a symbol more reliable than a fingerprint in Yemeni culture: the charred rhinoceros-horn handle of a jambiya dagger. There was no doubt that it belonged to Anwar al-Awlaki.

On September 30, during a visit to Fort Myer in Virginia, Senator Wyden found it ‘an enormous struggle’ to extract from the administration its legal rationale for killing US citizens.

President Obama stepped up to a podium and addressed reporters. “Earlier this morning Anwar Awlaki, a leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, was killed in Yemen,” Obama declared. “The death of Awlaki is a major blow to Al Qaeda’s most active operational affiliate.” The president then bestowed upon Awlaki a label that had never been attached to him publicly before, despite all of his reported associations with Al Qaeda: “Awlaki was the leader of external operations for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. In that role, he took the lead in planning and directing efforts to murder innocent Americans,” Obama asserted.

While the White House and some leading national security officials assured journalists and the public that the process of targeting and killing Awlaki was lawful, the administration refused to make its evidence public. Some lawmakers—whose security clearances and committee assignments authorized them to review the kill process—alleged that they were not being sufficiently briefed by the White House. “It’s important for the American people to know when the president can kill an American citizen, and when [he] can’t,” Senator Ron Wyden told me. Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon, has served on the Senate Intelligence Committee since 2001 and often found himself at odds with the Bush administration over secrecy and transparency issues. Now, under a Democratic president, he found himself waging the same battles—and some new ones. Wyden said that he repeatedly asked the administration to provide its legal rationale for killing American citizens without trial, calling his attempts to extract this information “an enormous struggle.”

Nasser al-Awlaki believed that the US and Yemeni security forces could have arrested his son, but that they did not want to see Anwar stand trial and present a defense. It is also possible, Nasser suggested, that the United States did not want to give him a platform to spread his message more widely. “How is it that Umar Farouk, who tried to blow up the airplane, or Nidal Hasan, who actually killed those soldiers, how are they now having, let us say, a fair trial?” Nasser asked. “My son did not get that fair trial.”
As the Awlaki family mourned the death of Anwar, their attention turned to their grandson, Abdulrahman. He had gone to Shabwah to find his father, and now his father was dead.

After Abdulrahman heard the news of Anwar’s death, he called home for the first time and spoke to his mother and grandmother. “That’s enough, Abdulrahman. You have to come back,” his grandmother Saleha told him. “That’s it.” The conversation was brief. Abdulrahman said he would return home soon, but that he wanted to wait for the roads to clear. There were police checkpoints and fighting along the route, and he did not want to be detained or caught up in any violence.

As Abdulrahman mourned, the boy’s family members in Shabwah tried to comfort him and encouraged him to get out with his cousins. That was what Abdulrahman was doing on the evening of October 14. He and his cousins had joined a group of friends outdoors to barbecue. There were a few other people doing the same nearby. It was about 9 PM when the drones pierced the night sky. Moments later, Abdulrahman was dead. So, too, were several other teenage members of his family, including Abdulrahman’s 17-year-old cousin Ahmed.

Early the next morning, Nasser al-Awlaki received a phone call from his family in Shabwah. “Some of our relatives went to the place where [Abdulrahman] was killed, and they saw the area…. And they told us he was buried with the others in one grave because they were blown up to pieces by the drone. So they could not put them in separate graves,” Nasser told me.

With the horror setting in that their eldest grandson had been killed just two weeks after their eldest child, Nasser and Saleha watched in disbelief as numerous news reports identified Abdulrahman as being 21 years old, with anonymous US officials referring to him as a “military-aged” male. Some reports intimated that he was an Al Qaeda supporter and that he had been killed while meeting with Ibrahim al-Banna, an Egyptian citizen described as the “media coordinator” for AQAP.

When I visited Nasser after Abdulrahman was killed, he showed me the boy’s Colorado birth certificate, which states that he was born in 1995 in Denver. “When he was killed by the US government, he was a teenager; he wasn’t 21. He wouldn’t have been able to enlist in the military in the US. He was 16,” Nasser told me. Days after the killing of Abdulrahman, the United States released a statement, as usual feigning ignorance about who was responsible for the strike, even though “unnamed officials” in the United States and Yemen had confirmed it. “We have seen press reports that AQAP senior official Ibrahim al-Banna was killed last Friday in Yemen and that several others, including the son of Anwar al-Awlaki, were with al-Banna at the time,” National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor told the press, in a statement that strangely cast Abdulrahman as something between an Al Qaeda associate and a hapless tourist.

“For over the past year, the Department of State has publicly urged US citizens not to travel to Yemen and has encouraged those already in Yemen to leave because of the continuing threat of violence and the presence of terrorist organizations, including AQAP, throughout the country.”

While the Awlakis opposed Anwar’s killing and believed that the United States had exaggerated its claims about his involvement with Al Qaeda, Nasser told me that his family understood why the United States wanted Anwar dead. “My son believed in what he did,” Nasser said, “but I am really distressed and disappointed by the killing, the brutal killing, of his son. He did nothing against the US. He was an American citizen. Maybe one day he would have gone to America to study and live there, and they killed him in cold blood.”

The CIA later claimed that it did not carry out the strike, asserting that the supposed target, al-Banna, was not on the agency’s hit list. That led to speculation that the attack that killed Abdulrahman and his relatives had been a JSOC strike. According to The Washington Post, senior US officials acknowledged that “the two kill lists don’t match, but offered conflicting explanations as to why.” The officials added that Abdulrahman was an “unintended casualty.” A JSOC official told me that the intended target was not killed in the strike, though he would not say who was. On October 20, 2011, military officials presented a closed briefing on the strike to the Senate Armed Services Committee. With the exception of the statements from anonymous officials, the United States offered no public explanation for the attack. The mystery deepened when AQAP released a statement claiming that al-Banna was still alive. The Awlakis began to wonder if perhaps Abdulrahman was, in fact, the target of the strike.

Senate majority leader Harry Reid, one of the handful of US lawmakers who would have had access to intelligence on the strike, seemed to suggest that this was the case when asked about the killing of the two Awlakis and Samir Khan. “I do know this,” he said on CNN, “the American citizens who have been killed overseas…are terrorists, and, frankly, if anyone in the world deserved to be killed, those three did deserve to be killed.”

Robert Gibbs, former White House press secretary and a senior official in President Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign, was also asked about the strike that killed Abdulrahman. “It’s an American citizen that is being targeted without due process of law, without trial. And he’s underage. He’s a minor,” reporter Sierra Adamson said. Gibbs shot back: “I would suggest that you should have a far more responsible father if they are truly concerned about the well-being of their children. I don’t think becoming an Al Qaeda jihadist terrorist is the best way to go about doing your business.”

While emphasizing that they were not prone to conspiracy theories, the Awlakis told me it was difficult to understand why Abdulrahman would have been killed, especially if al-Banna was not there. Who, then, was the target? “It is up to the US government to be sure about the kind of information they get before they take any action against anybody. So I don’t believe it was just an accident,” Nasser said.

After Abdulrahman’s killing, President Obama was ‘surprised and upset and wanted an explanation,’ a former senior US official told me.
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An anonymous US official later told The Washington Post that Abdulrahman’s killing was “an outrageous mistake…. They were going after the guy sitting next to him.” But no one ever identified who that was. As far as the family knows, their grandson was sitting with his teenage cousins, none of whom had an affiliation with Al Qaeda. Decisions on “targets, drones—these are made only by the highest US government authorities, the CIA and all that. Why did they specifically target these guys?” Nasser demanded. “I want answers from the United States government.”

The Obama administration would fight passionately to keep those answers secret, invoking the “state secrets” privilege repeatedly—just as George W. Bush had done throughout his eight years in office.

A former senior official in the Obama administration told me that after Abdulrahman’s killing, the president was “surprised and upset and wanted an explanation.” The former official, who worked on the targeted killing program, said that according to intelligence and Special Operations officials, the target of the strike was al-Banna, the AQAP propagandist. “We had no idea the kid was there. We were told al-Banna was alone,” the former official told me. Once it became clear that the teenager had been killed, he added, military and intelligence officials asserted, “It was a mistake, a bad mistake.” However, John Brennan, at the time President Obama’s senior adviser on counterterrorism and homeland security, “suspected that the kid had been killed intentionally and ordered a review. I don’t know what happened with the review.”

Caitlin Hayden, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council, would not answer questions about the former official’s assertions, saying that she “can’t address specific operational matters and won’t go into our internal deliberations,” adding: “We cannot discuss the sensitive details of specific operations.” In an e-mail, she pasted a lengthy statement citing the public pronouncements of various US counterterrorism officials, much of which had already become part of the White House’s boilerplate response to any media inquiries regarding the drone strikes.

Brennan, who is now director of the CIA, recently answered an inquiry from the Senate Intelligence Committee on such after-strike reviews. When civilians are killed, Brennan said, “we not only take account of the human tragedy, but we also go back and review our actions.” Analysts “draw on a large body of information—human intelligence, signals intelligence, media reports, and surveillance footage—to help us make an informed determination about whether civilians were in fact killed or injured,” Brennan asserted in his written response. “In those rare instances in which civilians have been killed, after-action reviews have been conducted.” No such review of Abdulrahman’s killing has ever been made public.

The consensus that has emerged from various anonymous officials commenting on Abdulrahman’s killing was that it was a mistake. I asked the former senior administration official, John Brennan, why, if that was the case, the White House didn’t publicly acknowledge it. “We killed three US citizens in a very short period,” he told me. “Two of them weren’t even targets: Samir Khan and Abdulrahman Awlaki. That doesn’t look good. It’s embarrassing.”

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**A Thousand Cuts**

‘Sequestration’ is treated as political theater, but those feeling its effects aren’t entertained.

by GABRIEL THOMPSON

Except for the heavily armed guard at the entrance, there is little to suggest that the sprawling Navy air base outside Lemoore—a town of 25,000 in central California—is anything but an oddly placed subdivision. Driving through its streets, we pass manicured lawns, several playgrounds, even a McDonald’s. It is not until we come to an intersection that the first hint of our location appears. Daddy, your princess has missed you! reads a handmade sign, swaying gently in the wind.

“You see those all the time,” says Jack Boogaard, the longtime assistant superintendent of business for the Central Union School District, which operates two schools on the base. The stress caused when parents are deployed, along with the constant shifts in student population as families cycle in and out, poses a unique challenge to teachers. “I’d say most students here are gone in three years,” Boogaard tells me as we park in front of Akers Elementary, which serves about 700 pupils. As we cross the lot, a roar cuts through the damp air. We look skyward, our eyes tracing a fighter jet as it suddenly appears between clouds and disappears again.

I follow Boogaard into the principal’s office, passing a large mural of a bald eagle and a line of youngsters filing into the cafeteria. Inside the office, a redhead man and a Latina woman are standing in front of a board, trying to solve what appears to be—a judging from the looks on their faces—a very difficult problem. It takes a few moments before they realize we’ve arrived. “Oh, sorry for the wait,” says Karla Orosco, who teaches seventh-grade science. “We were actually just trying to figure out how to deal with the sequester.” She and the

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*Gabriel Thompson is the author of Working in the Shadows (Nation Books). He is writing a biography of Fred Ross, the legendary organizer who trained Cesar Chavez, titled America’s Social Arsonist.*
principal, Heiko Sweeney, motion for us to take seats around a table. “We’re down a teacher we’ve never been down before, and it’s thrown our whole schedule off.”

As in other public schools across California, steep cuts in state funding have hit Akers Elementary over the last several years. All told, the district’s four schools have lost nearly 20 percent of their teaching staff—including art, music, physical education and technology instructors—along with several custodial workers and administrators. So when California voters passed Proposition 30 in November, which raised taxes to generate $6 billion a year for schools, it promised some much-needed relief.

“We thought that now with the state budget coming around, we’d be getting some of the money back,” says Sweeney, who has been with the school for nineteen years. But the sequester has landed Akers—and the district as a whole—in crisis mode. The situation here is especially grave because the district depends on a separate federal funding stream, called Impact Aid, to cover 30 percent of its budget. Impact Aid is a lifeline for schools located on or near military bases and Native American reservations, closing a gap created by the lack of property taxes. And unlike most education dollars, which are funded a year in advance, Impact Aid money arrives the same year it is to be used. By failing to reach a budget deal in Washington, Congress has just stripped $350,000 from the district’s budget.

“We’re such a unique population,” says Sweeney. “For us, Impact Aid is critical.” Indeed, the district, with just under 2,000 students, serves an astonishingly diverse population. Along with the two schools on the base, a third, Central Union Elementary, is located next to the Santa Rosa Rancheria (in California, rancherias are akin to small reservations). Most of the students in that school are members of the Tachi Yokut tribe; very few of their parents have a high school diploma. The district’s fourth school faces its own stark challenges: it is located in Stratford, an isolated Latino farmworker outpost, where the area residents have a 36 percent unemployment rate and the median family income is $29,716. Come September, the sequester will strip the school of $15,000 in Title I funds.

In the district, salaries and benefits account for 85 percent of the budget. “It’s not hard to figure out,” says Boogaard. “If you need to eliminate expenses, that’s where you’ve got to go.” He tells me that if the cuts aren’t reversed, the district will be forced to consider cutting another three to four teachers. For now, the plan is to eat into the reserves and hope that the politicians come to their senses.

I ask Sweeney what steps he’d need to take if the sequester’s cuts—which come on top of the 20 percent cut in state funding already in place—become permanent. “I wouldn’t even want to think that could happen,” he replies. “It would be...devastating.” Cutting the teachers at Akers would also result in a reduction in the number of adults available to help students deal with non-academic challenges, such as the deployment of their parents. “Some of these kids go through a lot of stress,” says Orosco, who grew up in the area, graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and came back home to teach. She says that when a parent is deployed, it’s not uncommon for a student to try to fill in as the missing parent for a younger brother or sister. “I’ve taught in tough schools, in gang schools,” she adds, leaning forward in her chair. “But these kids need more counseling services.”

“When parents are away on the ship for nine months, they want to be reassured that their kids are being taken care of back home,” Boogaard tells me. “If we’re cutting like this, then they’re not being taken care of like they should.”

As with many places in the country still reeling from the recession, the residents of Kings County aren’t in a position to absorb new cuts.

The lack of immediate consequences was, of course, entirely predictable: most of the cuts were to be rolled out over a series of months. But now that suddenly stretched agencies have begun to study their spreadsheets and future cash flows, it’s clear that a new wave of hardship has begun to sweep the country. Head Start programs are losing classrooms; cancer clinics are turning away Medicare patients; funding for critical scientific research is in jeopardy. The already compromised ability of our nation to meet the basic needs of millions of its people—from shelter and food to childcare and medical treatment—is about to be further degraded.

As with many places in the country still reeling from the recession, the residents of Kings County, where Lemoore is located, aren’t in a position to absorb new cuts. Nearly one in five people here lives in poverty, with many earning subsistence wages harvesting crops or working in the dairies that dot the countryside. In a region where decently paying jobs are hard to come by, the sequester promises to furlough more than 1,000 civilian employees on the base. As the Hanford Sentinel reported, this could have a major effect; a 2008 assessment found that the civilian payroll there totaled more than $73 million. “That’s such a key part of the local economy,” a Kings County administrator told the paper. “That’s why I worry about it having an impact.”

Like much of inland California, the region is solidly Republican; as I enter the county on Highway 198, I drive by lettuce fields and almond trees, passing a black-and-white sign, courtesy of the local Tea Party, that reads Only Free Men Own Guns. But no one I speak with is interested in discussing the sequester as political theater; they’re too busy...
Hurting the Homeless

by GREG KAUFMANN

Sequestration can seem a little vague, abstract, difficult to wrap your head around. But here’s what it means when it comes to housing: up to 140,000 fewer low-income families receiving housing vouchers, more children exposed to lead paint, higher rent for people who can’t afford it and a rise in homelessness.

These are among the human costs of sequestration noted in a new paper by Doug Rice, senior policy analyst at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP).

“These kinds of cuts are really unprecedented,” says Rice, noting that the total number of available vouchers has been cut only twice before in the thirty-nine-year history of the Section 8 program. “But here we are, in 2013, looking at severe cuts even at a time when the number of families in need has been rising sharply.”

Indeed, since 2007 there has been a 32 percent increase in the number of families with children living in shelters and emergency housing. Each year, roughly 1.5 million Americans spend time in emergency or temporary shelters.

Currently, only one in four eligible households receives a voucher, and there are waiting lists in almost every community. Of the households in the program, half include seniors or people with disabilities. The remaining households are mostly families with children. The average annual household income of a voucher recipient is just $12,500.

Due to the sequestration, local agencies have begun “shelving” vouchers, which means that they aren’t reissuing them to families on the waiting lists when other families leave the program. Some agencies have even withdrawn vouchers from families who had received them but are still searching for an apartment. They are alerting families in the program that their assistance may be terminated later this year. They are proposing rent increases on current tenants, and will likely consider increasing fees on utilities, parking and other services. The CBPP report notes that these policies “are likely to steer families into neighborhoods with more crime, lower-performing schools, and less access to jobs.”

While 140,000 fewer low-income families will receive vouchers by early 2014—including the risk of homelessness for many families already deemed at risk—there will simultaneously be cuts in federal funding that enables communities to assist homeless people. The Emergency Solutions program awards grants to local communities for emergency shelters, temporary rent assistance and other services that help families avoid homelessness; these grants face up to a 34 percent cut.

“Communities will be forced to either close down shelters or cut back efforts to prevent homelessness or re-house homeless families,” writes Rice.

At the same time, the Continuum of Care program awards grants targeting “chronic homelessness”—the population of those with mental or physical disabilities who are homeless for extended periods of time—will likely be reduced by at least $180 million.

Sequestration will also result in housing agencies receiving only about 70 percent of the administrative funds that they are eligible for this year. That means they will be less able to perform property inspections and address “potentially serious problems” in apartments.

Because of cuts in other Housing and Urban Development programs, there will be reduced efforts to minimize children’s exposure to lead in older units, and decreased production of new affordable housing for low-income seniors and people with disabilities. Further, local agencies will receive only about half of the funding needed to cover new repairs and renovations this year—never mind the $26 billion backlog of capital needs in public housing developments.

At best, these cuts mean deteriorating living conditions for too many families. At worst, they mean more affordable units lost to disrepair. Already there are 260,000 fewer public housing units today than there were in the mid-1990s.

Not to be lost in all of this is the effect these policies have on children over the long term. Children in housing-insecure families are more likely to be food insecure, in poor health and at risk for developmental delays. “They are much less likely to be productive economically [as adults] if they live in deep poverty as young kids, and part of this is a housing situation,” says Rice. “For kids to do well in school, stable housing in a decent, safe home is a pretty important component.”

Rice has done a real service with this report. The questions are the same ones that seem to come up again and again when it comes to issues that are important to low-income people: Is anyone listening, and does anybody give a damn?

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is simply the most recent chapter of an austerity agenda already in place, opening up new holes in a sinking ship.

“Our staff is cut down to the bone,” says Hoskins. He notes that they’ve already eliminated four out of six maintenance worker positions and outsourced groundskeeping. The agency currently has nearly 6,000 people waiting to receive vouchers, in a county whose population is only 151,000. The sequester guarantees that new families in need of rental subsidies—like the several homeless families who are living in the motel where I stay—will continue to go without. And so goes the nation: according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the sequester will cause nearly 110,000 families to lose their housing vouchers this year and will strip $96 million from homeless assistance programs [see “Hurting the Homeless,” by Greg Kaufmann, page 22].

Perhaps the most perverse aspect of these gratuitous cuts is that the first people to feel their blows are also the ones least able to absorb them. On a bright April afternoon, I visit Eva Rodriguez at her spacious home, where she has run a daycare center for the last seven years. Three children are seated at a table in the backyard, making pancakes out of Play-Doh beneath a poster that reads BULLY FREE ZONE. A wooden cabinet is overflowing with art supplies that promise messy fun—glitter, paste, paints—while a nearby canopy shelters a gymnastics area with tumbling mats. During my visit, the only time I see a child cry is when they have to leave.

In the past, Rodriguez, who lives in the county seat of Hanford, has received children through Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, administered by the Kings Community Action Organization. Unlike traditional Head Start, which is pegged to the school year, the migrant program operates on the farmworkers’ season, beginning on April 29 and running through December. And unlike Head Start centers, the family care option provides more flexible hours. This is critical, as many local agricultural jobs—such as those in the packing sheds—have irregular schedules. Workers typically arrive at the job with little idea of how long they’ll be needed, and their shifts sometimes extend for well over twelve hours.

“I spent twenty years in the fields,” says Rodriguez, who came to the United States from Mexico in 1975. “So I know what it means for parents with young children. When you work in the fields, you can’t afford to pay anyone to watch them.” Back when she was a twentysomething working mother with two small children, she was forced to bring her daughter and son—then age 4 and 5—to the fields, where she would try to keep an eye on them while harvesting peaches and grapes.

“Parents are already calling,” Rodriguez adds. “Just an hour ago, a woman called looking for a spot. They’re beginning peaches next week, and she’s got two kids and a baby. She has no idea what she’s going to do.” For farmworkers, there are few quality childcare options: those who don’t bring their kids to the fields are often forced to leave them in unlicensed centers, which are frequently crowded and may offer little more than hours of uninterrupted television watching. Rodriguez, on the other hand, is a certified teacher’s assistant and, since her center is a Head Start placement site, the kids here follow a schedule that includes everything from twice-daily teeth brushing to
estled in a mass of concrete houses in a poor neighborhood in Amman, Jordan, is a bare two-room apartment, home to a 30-year-old Syrian named Maher, his 24-year-old wife Nour, their young son and daughter, and five members of his wife’s family. Only a few rays of sunlight filter into the apartment’s damp outer room, and all nine people sleep in the more habitable inner room on cushions given to them by their neighbors. Maher’s family has a small combination heater-stove courtesy of a charity organization, no refrigerator, and a four-foot-square bathroom with a squat toilet. The walls are peeling so badly that picking at the paint is a pastime for the children.

Maher, who asked that their real names not be used for the sake of family still in Syria, fled his hometown of Homs, Syria, with his wife and children in mid-February of last year, after the Syrian Army began shelling the area. The four of them moved to another city in Syria before fleeing in January to Jordan. They wound up in Za’atari in northern Jordan, the country’s biggest camp for Syrian refugees. Maher once had a Kia and a job installing satellite dishes, but now he spends his days looking for work in Amman or helping friends find aid organizations from which he, too, has sought cash assistance, blankets, heaters and clothing.

But Maher is growing desperate. He arrived here with 500 Jordanian dinars, or about $700; then he spent 300 of that to pay a driver to help him escape from Za’atari and another 150 on his first month of rent. (Syrians don’t need a visa to enter Jordan, but they’re allowed to live outside the refugee camps only if they cross the border legally—which Maher and his family did not—or are bailed out by a Jordanian sponsor.)

“We give them free food, diapers, books,” she says. “You can tell the difference when the kids get to kindergarten: they’re ready.”

This year, the childcare crisis for local farmworkers promises to be especially grave. The Kings Community Action Organization usually has ninety-six home daycare slots for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start; but the sequester—which is carving $75,000 from the program—will force them to drop up to fifty kids. At the moment, the agency is looking over its waiting list and will soon start breaking the bad news to a number of parents. “I’ve got parents calling me all the time, trying to find out if they’re going to get in,” says Veronica Muñoz, the organization’s family childcare coordinator. “All I can say to them is that they have to wait.”

One of the parents who could be dropped is Silvina Ruiz, a 42-year-old single mother of three from Nayarit, Mexico. Last year, while she packed boxes of cherries and garlic, she was able to drop off her infant son at a home daycare center through the program. At the moment, a friend is watching her son, who is now 1, but the cost of childcare—$125 every two weeks—adds significantly to her living expenses. Currently making $10 an hour, she has been forced to rent out two rooms in her three-bedroom house to make ends meet. But the strategy hardly seems sustainable: Silvina and her three sons—the others are 13 and 17—are packed into a single room.

When I ask if she has any savings, Ruiz rolls her eyes. “Economically, it doesn’t work,” she says in Spanish. “That’s why Head Start is such a big help. And it’s good for the kids. My daycare worker was great: she taught my son how to do new things, she gave him food, she spoke to him all day. What are we going to do if we don’t have this program?”

Many Syrian refugees in Mafraq, Jordan, live in houses that are barely habitable.

“We Can’t Live in a Camp”

After fleeing violence at home, Syrian refugees struggle to eke out a new life in Jordan.

by ELIZABETH WHITMAN

Elizabeth Whitman is a journalist based in Amman, Jordan. She has previously reported for Inter Press Service from the United Nations and is a former Nation intern.
The Nation

May 13, 2013

Crowd hovers around a truck parked outside the home of a Syrian family in the northern Jordanian city of Mafrak. Members of a local church working with the international aid organization Mercy Corps have just finished delivering a gas canister, heater, blankets and mattresses to one family. When other Syrian families see the truck, they flock to it.

While the government is not interested in providing humanitarian aid, the UN, other aid organizations and the Jordanian government are hard-pressed to provide for these people adequately. Many aid workers acknowledge that the short-term assistance they are able to offer is unsustainable, while planning for long-term projects is nearly impossible without guaranteed funding. And the refugees are suffering the consequences.

The perception remains that the Syrian rebels, not the refugees, are the priority of the United States and its allies in the region.
Syrians are desperate, but they are not the only ones in Jordan who need help; the poverty level in the country was 13.3 percent in 2008, and the unemployment rate is estimated at 12.2 percent. Father Sahawneh and others say that the rents in cities like Mafraq and Amman have at least doubled with the influx of refugees. “There must be more help for the Jordanians themselves,” he says.

At the same time that Syrian refugees have put increased strain on public services, Jordan is under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to close its budget deficit—$2.49 billion in 2012—and implement an austerity program. “We need hundreds of millions of dollars to help Jordan get through this period,” says Harper. “The international community does have that type of funds,” he adds. “We’ve seen it in Iraq.”

Donors pledged $1.5 billion in humanitarian aid for the Syrian crisis at a conference in Kuwait in January, but until mid-April, when Kuwait made a $300 million donation, actual funding languished at around 30 percent of the pledge. Among refugees, the perception remains that Syrian rebels are the priority. Gulf states including Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed to funnel millions of dollars per month to pay opposition fighters’ salaries as early as April 2012. The CIA and State Department have had ties to the Free Syrian Army since March 2012, if not earlier; Secretary of State John Kerry recently announced another round of aid, bringing total US funding to the Syrian opposition to $250 million.

Without guaranteed funding, and with the promised humanitarian aid merely trickling in, long-term planning and implementation are virtually impossible, NGO officials say. “There’s a lot of uncertainties and moving parts,” says Saba al-Mobaslat, program director for Save the Children Jordan. “You continue struggling with the fact that your work with refugees might be cut off or jeopardized.”

“There must be a long-term solution,” says Sahawneh. He calls for investing in housing infrastructure to accommodate the Syrian refugees. In the city of Mafraq, Syrians number 70,000—more than the city’s 50,000 residents. “It can’t just be food package after food package,” he adds.

Outside the Syrian Women’s Association in East Amman, a young mother of five from Dara’a, Syria, shares her experiences while nursing her 9-month-old daughter. Her name is Wason; her husband is still in Syria, and she and her children are staying with one of his friends in Amman. “We have nothing,” she says. “But how long can we stay with this friend?”

In mid-February, Wason went to UNHCR to register and was told to return in July. She points to a black trash bag of clothes that she has just gotten from the Syrian Women’s Association. “They gave me that,” she says, her voice hushed yet strained to the point of breaking, her eyes sharply desperate. “Otherwise, no one is giving me anything. Where can I go? What can I do?”

Letters
(continued from page 2)

Anthony Lewis & Noam Chomsky
Cambridge, Mass.
Eric Alterman writes that Anthony Lewis “found himself under fire...from Noam Chomsky, because Lewis...refused to recognize what Chomsky believed were the evil intentions that lay behind America’s nefarious activities.”

In Towards a New Cold War, Chomsky referred to Lewis (not the only occasion on which he praised Lewis in print) as “a serious and effective critic of the war” and “the most outspoken dove on the New York Times.” He then cited this passage by Lewis, from a retrospective column on the Vietnam War: “The early American decisions on Indochina can be recognized as blundering efforts to do good. But by 1969 it was clear to most of the world—and to most Americans—that the intervention had been a disastrous mistake.”

Chomsky observed: “Our own respectable doves share some fundamental assumptions with the hawks. The US government is honorable. It may make mistakes, but it does not commit crimes. It is continually deceived and often foolish...but it is never wicked. Crucially, it does not act on the basis of the perceived self-interest of dominant social groups, as other states do.”

This, Chomsky concluded, amounted to a failure to “apply to the United States the intellectual and moral standards that are taken for granted when we analyze and evaluate the behavior of officially designated enemies or, for that matter, any other power.”

Anthony Lewis was an admirable man. But his faith that good intentions lay behind US policy in Indochina deserved to be challenged. And still does.

George Scialabba

Alterman Replies
New York City
These are my notes from my 1989 discussion with Lewis, upon which I based my column: “I’ve only seen professor Chomsky once in my life: It was this time he published this vast book on the press, and he was addressing a meeting at UMass, Boston, where he had denounced me, and as I announced my name, there was a hush across the room. But that is all I remember about it. Professor Chomsky has a generally conspiratorial view of life; there is a conspiracy between the press and the right-wing forces that rule society. My experience tells me differently. I don’t think Vietnam was a conscious evil of the kind that Professor Chomsky always seems to see. I think there was a less conscious evil than just a miscalculation and ignorance.”

Eric Alterman

Horror of War Comes Home
Taos, N.M.
Reading Jonathan Schell’s review of Nick Turse’s Kill Anything That Moves [Feb. 4] and the letters that followed (“Letters,” March 4, April 29), I wonder whether there might be a connection between the many My Lais I’ve heard about for years and the 58,000-plus suicides and the high number of PTSD cases afflicting Vietnam veterans. I also wonder whether the suicides of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans might have a connection to atrocities they committed. The wanton killing of men, women and children cannot occur without adverse impact on the minds of the perpetrators, unless they are psychopaths.
Andres Vargas
In early 2012, the National Library of Israel announced a competition for a new building in Jerusalem. The site was one of special prominence—near the Knesset, the Supreme Court and the Israel Museum—and the project enjoyed enormous national prestige. The competition was sponsored by two entities: the Israel National Library Construction Company and Yad Hanadiv, a foundation funded and controlled by the Rothschild family and the principal funder of the library project.

The track record of the Rothschilds in sponsoring Israeli architectural competitions is somewhat checkered, which isn’t surprising for a rich and powerful organization participating in processes where the outcome is, theoretically, beyond its control. In the case of the Knesset competition (also financed in large measure by Rothschild money), the controversy surrounded the undistinguished composition of the jury and the visibly mediocre quality of the results. When, in the 1980s, Yad Hanadiv got involved in sponsoring the contest for a new Supreme Court building, it was wary of entering a process over which it lacked final say and resolved—once burnt—not to risk the embarrassment of the Knesset affair. Writing in the online business magazine Globes, and drawing on research by architect Yaniv Pardo into the Supreme Court competition, Meirav Moran has explained (quoting Pardo) that Yad Hanadiv tried to protect itself by playing “the game in such a way as to fulfill their interests while appearing to be fair.” It wanted “to control all stages of the project while being the sole authority for planning and implementation and satisfying all bodies…and to make it look as if public conduct was proper.” The manipulation came in the form of an attempt to stack the jury and also to add a clause to the terms of the competition allowing the foundation to cancel the jury award under “an exceptional circumstance.” This was a blatant conflict with national regulations that required an anonymous tendering process from qualified architects, to be judged by a group of professionals. Fortunately, in this case, the jury was able to agree on a winner—Ada Karmi-Melamede—who went on to complete a building of high quality.

When the library competition was announced, it almost immediately became mired in similar issues of power and manipulation. Like many such competitions, it was conducted in two stages: a general call to Israeli architects (which ultimately produced eighty-one entries), with the intention of winnowing the entries down to twelve for more detailed development in the second stage. However, the sponsors also decided to invite four well-known international offices and four leading Israeli firms to proceed directly to the second round. Allowing such a free pass is not entirely unusual, although with the library Yad Hanadiv turned the idea of an “open” competition into a charade: two-thirds of those advanced to the finals skipped the first round, making the odds for the rest of the participants far longer. Almost immediately a storm of criticism arose, including a petition signed by many Israeli architects calling for the contest’s cancellation. Arad Sharon, an architect who helped launch the protest, was quoted in Haaretz saying that “the terms of the competition constitute a death blow for the architectural sector. This…is a colossal humiliation.”

And yet on it went. Four Israeli architects...
Segal, having attempted to be reasonable with all concerned, has been forced to go to court.

est yet original and unique.” And so it was. Organized around a series of courtyards on a challengingly proportioned site, Segal’s building was a highly functional deployment of a complex program, extremely well considered climatically and elegantly expressed in austere, yet striking, tectonics.

Then the assault began. First came an attack on Segal by Yair Gabbay, an attorney from the Jerusalem Municipality Planning and Building Committee, who threatened to thwart the permit process for the new building unless the National Library Board promised to “cancel the results of the tender and start a new process to choose a worthy planner for the National Library from among the Zionist architects living in Israel.” Gabbay’s beef with Segal had to do with the latter’s authorship a decade ago (with Eyal Weizman) of the fine book A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture, which succinctly examined the spatial specifics of Israeli settlement policy. In a letter to the prime minister, the mayor of Jerusalem and the media, the hyperbolically frustrated Gabbay wrote, without a whit of self-consciousness, that the book “reflects the depths of insanity plumbed by frustrated people who can’t get their way via democratic means” and insisted that no architect should benefit from public funding while “spitting on Israel all over the world.”

Having attempted to be reasonable with all concerned, Segal has been forced to go to the courts to counter both the manifest injustice he has suffered and the sponsor’s own retreat into the narrowest (and phoniest) legalism, and to demand that he be reinstated as the winner and offered a contract. I’ve been sorting through the claims and counter-claims and have spoken with Segal, corresponded with Wang (as well as the library and several of the jurors), and read the legal submissions to the sponsors and the courts. What is clear is that Wang supported the project with funds and office space, and that one of her employees—Yonatan Cohen, an Israeli friend of Segal’s, who does seem to have done much of the heavy lifting to produce the final drawings—was shifted to reduced pay and worked on the scheme in Wang’s office. Wang also provided a variety of other office services, including the hiring of a freelance computer renderer. Finally, Wang asserts that Segal failed to inform her that the competition was open only to Israeli architects and that, in effect, her contribution was secured under false pretenses.

Wang’s central claim is that Segal had promised her equal credit as one of four authors: herself, Segal, Cohen and Matan Mayer (another young Israeli architect, who provided substantial assistance and, along with Cohen, has signed a document relinquishing any claim to rights for the project). Cohen has also written a letter to the library stating in part that “it was perfectly clear to all persons involved in the planning that the work was the creation of Rafi, who is the architect of this project and who is the superior authority in anything related to planning, from small to large details. Rafi was the one who presented the initial concept of the planning by way of a set of sketches that were very clear, and any decision related to planning derived from that set of sketches.” To be sure, it appears that Wang’s firm, the HyperBina Design Group, was not properly cited in the initial press release of the results—though on its website, HyperBina takes credit for the project and lists Segal as a collaborator, somewhat undermining Wang’s claims of interest in equity. But beyond the question of being credited for her support, Wang insists that she played an important personal role in the creation of the design, not merely in helping to enable its documentation. Segal, for his part, continues to assert that he was the author of the scheme (and contractual documents pertaining to Wang’s involvement clearly establish his ultimate authority over it); that the requirement for an Israeli license (which only Segal possessed) was clear to Wang and a matter of public knowledge; and that he was always prepared to recognize the contributions made by all the members of the team.

Rafi Segal is a friend, and I haven’t the
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Nearly all architectural work is collaborative, to help meet the usually impossible deadline. A team is gathered in a cooperative raisings or to spontaneous performance with experience in competitions of this type of Harvard’s architecture department and to the best of my knowledge is not a practicing designer. Her expertise is urban planning and real estate development.” He goes on to explain that Segal’s winning competition proposal clearly bears the marks of his previous work and thus represents his design authorship. It is very consistent with his sensitivity to the urban context, both in terms of the site and the larger historical context, his use of simple geometric patterns, the inclined plane and ‘cut out’ strategy, the abstracted and restrained exterior and several other architectural features which are reoccurring elements in his work.

Furthermore, conceiving of and resolving a project of this complexity requires years of experience and active design practice. In short, Wang’s claim to authorship, which would mean that she personally served in a collaborative role, acting jointly as a principal designer, is clearly unfounded.

Cohen also explains what those of us with experience in competitions of this type know all too well: they are always somewhat frantic, collaborative, midnight-oil undertakings with strong affinities to barnraisings or to spontaneous performance pieces. A team is gathered in a cooperative spirit and works flat-out to get the thing done against high expectations and low odds of success. People come and go according to the time they have available and their particular abilities and resources, pitching in to help meet the usually impossible deadline. Nearly all architectural work is collaborative, and it is surely always right to credit those who participate for the help they’ve given; any failure by Segal to adequately acknowl-

edge such contributions must be corrected. However, while it is clear that Wang made an administrative and financial contribution to the project, the question of authorship is not opaque: it belongs to Segal, the instigator of the project, the organizer of the team, and the obvious sensibility—and hand—behind the design.

Did the sponsors of the competition accept Wang’s argument because they were looking for a way to get rid of Segal because of his politics, or because they were cowed by her legal claims? It’s hard to say, but their punctilious insistence that the commission be rescinded because Segal could not reach a legal agreement with Wang is not merely disingenuous but vicious. According to Segal and to documents submitted to the court, there were lengthy negotiations with Wang during which he offered her appropriate credit, a generous financial settlement, and his apologies for any aspect of the competition project he failed to clearly disclose. Throughout, Wang apparently remained unyielding (a document from her lawyer attests that she flatly declined Segal’s settlement offer), preferring to pull the temple down around all concerned rather than find an amicable resolution. Wang should remember her prior friendship with Segal, swallow her injured pride, forgive any perceived affront, reach an agreement and allow the project to go ahead. Enough of relying on the law to be the ass it too often is.

In depriving Segal of the commission, the sponsors acted in the worst of faith. Their anodyne assertion that “Segal’s proposal was disqualified in light of deficiencies discovered in it” neither addresses the public’s interest in the construction of what had been hailed as the best design mere weeks before nor the flimsy core of Wang’s charges against Segal. No genuine investigation could have been undertaken in the brief time between the award and the dismissal, and I find it unbelievable that a sponsor—and an immensely powerful one at that—committed to the architect and design it had chosen was incapable of intervening to smooth any ruffled feathers and arrive at an understanding that would have allowed the project to proceed. I find it equally impossible to believe that the sponsors were so clueless about the creative character of the competition process.

Segal, a man of gentle demeanor, has been deeply hurt and humiliated by the affair and has lost the opportunity of a lifetime. Alas, the wheels of justice turn exceedingly slow, and his case will not be heard until May. Taking advantage of this lag, the sponsors have rapidly initiated a do-over and have already released a call for another “competition”—structured much differently and more controllably than the first—which clearly seeks to establish immoveable “facts on the ground” before the thing works its way through the courts.

In this new round, the call is not for a design but for a statement of qualifications from experienced Israeli firms (who can presumably partner with the appropriately luminous intergalactic starchitect). They are obliged to demonstrate that they’ve recently constructed a large public building with a substantial budget, and also to employ a minimum number of architects in Israel. The jury has been reduced to the key Rothschild, the chair of the Yad Hanadiv, Komisar-Barzacchi and Fernández-Galliano (whose collusion I find both surprising and disappointing). And it must be observed that a particular segment of the Israeli population—and, presumably, of the readership of the library—has been excluded, as usual, from any participation in the process.

Among the many ironies of this story is that one of the jurors who strongly supported Segal—Craig Dykers of the firm Snøhetta, recently the subject of flattering profiles in The New York Review of Books and The New Yorker—was himself catapulted to global prominence at a young age precisely on the strength of having won a competition for a major Middle Eastern library: the Alexandria Library in Egypt. The newly configured arrangement—with its dependence on credentials rather than design and the absence of any distinguished practitioner on the jury—cannot by any stretch be legitimately described as a competition, and it will also ensure that youthful or non-mainstream designers do not participate. Indeed, the sponsors have, with calculation, dashed the hope that dances behind every architectural competition: that a brilliant and unexpected design will emerge from an imagination that has not taken the easy path through established styles in order to get to the top.

Esther Zandberg, long the leading architectural writer in Israel, has called what has happened to Segal a “targeted assassination.” I strongly urge architects of conscience to refuse to profit from Rafi Segal’s misfortune by participating in this grotesque process. I especially urge those architects who were beaten fair and square in the original competition to have the courage to speak up about this affront to both architecture and justice.
Risky Business

by STEPHEN MIHM

n 2010, Goldman Sachs chief executive Lloyd Blankfein was summoned to testify before the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, which was charged with investigating the role of derivatives and other arcane investments in the 2008 economic meltdown. Still smarting from the flogging he was given by the press the previous year for boasting that the financial sector was doing “God’s work,” Blankfein adopted a more pragmatic approach in heading off calls for increased regulation and oversight. “Taking risk completely out of the system,” he warned, “will be at the cost of economic growth. We know from economic history that innovation—and the new industries and new jobs that result from it—require risk taking.”

On the surface, this seems like a reasonable statement, even if the esoteric instruments peddled by Goldman Sachs have done little to foster industrial innovation. But the “economic history” of risk taking—and risk management—is far more vexed, judging from Jonathan Levy’s brilliant *Freaks of Fortune*. Levy argues that in the early United States, risk was more than a means of fostering growth; it was central to “the emergence, in tandem, of a new individualism and a new corporate financial system in nineteenth-century America.” Assuming risks in the capitalist marketplace, Levy writes, was a distinctly American way of securing individual independence. “To assume a risk, to take it, make it your own, to master it, or even just enjoy the existential thrill of it, was a birthright of the democratic soul, a soul born in commerce.”

But therein lay a paradox or two. The brave new world of independence inevitably led individuals to seek to manage and mitigate risk. In doing so, they became dependent on an emergent corporate financial system that peddled insurance policies, derivatives and other instruments that promised to lessen the perils of the sea. These “perils of the sea” did not consist of chance events that could be defined with any kind of probability. Rather, they were literally God’s work, “exercised from a realm beyond and outside of secular time, inscrutable to human agents.” Not surprisingly, as Levy wryly notes, “there was no greater advocate of the scope of human agency than a sued insurance company,” and “no greater advocate for the ‘acts of God’ than the insured owner of a destroyed cargo.”

Merchants did not leave everything to God and the insurance companies, however: they sought to minimize their risk in ways not so dissimilar from the now-infamous slicing and dicing of securities implicated in the recent financial crisis. Merchants rarely sank their capital into a single ship; rather, they divided their investments among many different vessels and cargoes. These individual risks could be insured by an underwriter. But the hedging did not stop there. The underwriters rarely assumed the full burden of any individual risk; instead, numerous underwriters (often other merchants) combined forces to assume the risk in return for a portion of the premium. In this way, one merchant’s interest in a trading vessel or its contents—typically one-sixty-fourth of the total—might be insured by dozens of individual or corporate underwriters. In turn, the underwriters might hand off some or all of their portion of the risk to others via reinsurance—a practice banned by the British in 1745 but revived in the United States after the American Revolution. When a ship sank, it could take years to unravel—let alone litigate—the tangled skein of risks taken and risks assumed in advance of the voyage. The dockets of early federal courts in the United States were swamped with such cases.

Life insurance depended more than anything else on the rise of the slave trade. Ships carrying African captives, or sugar, rice and cotton grown by slaves: all helped foster increasingly sophisticated forms of risk management. An economic system dedicated to depriving other people of their liberty became the template for risk management in a comparatively free, liberal, capitalist society. And though slavery was central to the emergence of risk management in the eighteenth century, it became a bulwark of conservatism in the nineteenth. Levy claims that slaveholders in the antebellum South eschewed the latest modes of managing risk, especially life insurance, which became widely available in the 1840s and 1850s. They thought it a poor substitute for what one pro-slavery advocate called “slavery insurance”: the ownership of human beings as a way to hedge risk. “Domestic slavery,” the writer concluded, “is nature’s mutual insurance society.”

Anti-slavery advocates thought of risk differently. Led by men like the abolitionist Elizur Wright, who would eventually become the nation’s first actuaries, they urged white middle-class men to hedge risk by purchasing life insurance policies. This was a tough sell at first: the idea of commodifying a life struck many as profane. But abolitionists sincerely believed that “every man belongs to himself” and thought it made eminent sense to insure that self—one’s human capital—against misfortune. Unlike other methods of hedging risk—the ownership of land or slaves—life insurance policies mitigated risk via new, distinctly modern methods rooted in mortality statistics and probability theory.

Life insurance was one way to hedge against the risk entailed by living in a capitalist economy; savings banks were another. These institutions, which proliferated in the urban North beginning in the early nineteenth century, took the modest savings of workers and directed them toward putatively risk-free investments. Though initially founded as charitable institutions to help the poor (and keep them off public assistance when hard times hit), these institutions acquired a life of their own, especially as growing numbers of working-class laborers turned to them to tame the uncertainty that increasingly characterized their economic lives.

When slavery died with the Civil War, Northern reformers welcomed the former slaves to modern risk management. Now that the freedmen owned themselves, in a manner of speaking, they owned their risk. As one Union general told a group of recently freed slaves, “In slavery, you did not think of the future…. In freedom, you must have an eye to the future, and have a plan and object in life.” Republicans went on to create an institution

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aimed at training former slaves in the art of saving for the future: the Freedmen’s Bank.

This story has been told before, but Levy offers a new twist. The freedmen did indeed learn lessons about risk management after they put millions of dollars of their hard-earned savings into its coffers—but not the lessons that the bank’s founders had in mind. Though initially quite stable and secure, the Freedmen’s Bank fell into the clutches of the speculators Jay and Henry Cooke, who funneled the freedmen’s savings into the high-risk bonds of the Northern Pacific Railroad. When the Panic of 1873 struck, it wiped out the Cooke brothers—and many of the bank’s depositors. In the process, the former slaves grasped what a growing number of participants in the nation’s unstable and unpredictable capitalist economy realized around the same time: that risk management and the freaks of fortune could be two sides of the same capitalist coin.

This became especially evident by the 1870s and ’80s, when Americans moved west in vast numbers, settling new lands in order to secure independence for themselves and their families. Conventional wisdom held that farming offered a sanctuary from the freaks of fortune: financial panics might come and go, but the land would endure, offering sustenance, stability and security.

But buying land required borrowing money. Banks and other financial firms were keen to lend because, after the Panic of 1873, investors burned by railroad bonds were looking for alternatives. A new generation of financial corporations arose to buy up farm mortgages, bundle them, and then slice and dice them in ways that apportioned them relative to an investor’s tolerance for risk. The risk of the mortgage, itself undertaken by a farmer seeking to eliminate risk by owning land, would become atomized in these acts of legerdemain as mortgages moved from their originators through multiple layers of financial intermediation. As with the collateralized debt obligations that nearly brought down the global economy in 2008, the owners of these securities could no longer accurately assess the underlying assets; as one broker happily declared in 1890, the Western farmer who borrowed the money “cannot treat directly with the eastern owner of the mortgage, for he cannot ascertain who that owner is.”

There was a cruel irony in all of this. If, as Levy argues, the condition of individual freedom in a liberal, capitalist society was the assumption of one’s own personal risk, this perversely led to a dependence on a corporate financial system that obliterated discrete individual “risks,” turning them into complex securities or anonymous probabilities. In this way, risk became systemic, detached from individual human beings; it lost its individuality. Instead, risk became a profitable new commodity among the countless commodities bought and sold in an increasingly impersonal, abstract, if not incomprehensible system of finance. When the system came crashing down, both the risk takers and the risk-averse found themselves playthings of forces far beyond their control, victims of perils they never imagined, and entangled with people they did not know. This was a most unexpected outcome. As Levy notes, “in the very act of underwriting liberal self-ownership the financial system also had the capacity to overwrite it.”

In the Gilded Age, some Americans sought a method of managing risk that was neither anonymous nor prone to systemic breakdowns. They found common cause in fraternal organizations like the Ancient Order of United Workmen (founded in 1868), the Modern Woodmen of America, the Knights of the Maccabees and the Knights of Pythias, among others. These national organizations, made up of local chapters, promised their members a social outlet. And their members obtained benefits in the event of death, disability or even unemployment.

Fraternal orders self-consciously rejected the probabilistic determination of risk favored by insurance companies. Instead, when a member died, every other member was “assessed” a set sum that paid a benefit to the survivors. A similar structure delivered benefits in the aftermath of less calamitous events. This was a secular system of risk management: members trusted their brethren, not God, to help them out in their time of need. But it did not subject them to the coldhearted actuarial calculations perfected by the likes of the Travelers Insurance Company, which called fraternalism a “revolt against the multiplication tables.”

The major flaw in this system soon became apparent. The benefits delivered by fraternal orders did not have the status of a contract—not initially. Instead, the assessments were paid voluntarily—and when members failed to receive their promised benefits, they took the fraternal orders to court. Decision after decision affirmed the idea that a certificate of membership in a fraternal order was a legal contract; one’s fellow members were on the hook for the benefits. In response, the fraternal orders reluctantly adopted the same actuarial methods used by insurance companies. “Corporate risk management,” Levy writes, “had co-opted
By the late nineteenth century, the emergence of futures contracts had upended the concept of insurance, detaching it from a tangible asset. Unlike earlier advances in risk management, speculators in grain futures did not actually take possession of the grain; they merely “set off” the difference between the price on the futures contract and the price in the market the day it came due. Those betting on the price of the grain no longer needed to demonstrate that they had an “insurable interest” in the underlying commodity; they merely wagered on the movements of prices. Critics tried to secure congressional legislation banning futures trading. They came close to succeeding, but could not surmount a novel argument posed by the Chicago Board of Trade and its allies: futures trading was a form of insurance; it was a means, one trader argued, of hedging against “wide fluctuations” in prices. When Blankfein appeared before the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission in 2010, he offered much the same defense: abandoning “market mechanisms created decades ago, such as derivatives,” he warned, would constrain “access to capital and the efficient hedging and distribution of risk.”

Defending derivatives nonetheless demands a more lofty line of argument, one that economists in the late 1890s happily provided. Allan Willett, who trained at Columbia, argued that “speculators serve society as insurers” by virtue of their frenzied trading, adding that “the benefit that society derives from this transaction is of the same kind as that which regular insurance companies confer.” Speculators, he argued, were “productive”; this was “God’s work,” indeed.

But only for the elect: ordinary small farmers lacked the cash or credit to speculate on margin, much less purchase a futures contract outright. Initially, they could use only so-called “bucket shops,” betting parlors that enabled ordinary men to hedge risk by wagering on the prices of commodities. But the large exchanges managed to secure a Supreme Court ruling that put the bucket shops out of business. With mortgages to maintain, small farmers had no choice but to sell their wheat to deep-pocketed speculators who could readily afford to store the grain, hedge the risk and maximize their profits.

The Populist movement of the 1890s tried to enlist the government on the farmers’ side, building warehouses where they could store their crops while awaiting more favorable prices. But the plan went nowhere, and for all the claptrap about how futures traders were the real “risk takers,” small-time farmers were

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the ones who truly took a risk by putting seeds in the ground. Burdened with debt, they had to sell at whatever the market would pay when the grain was harvested. Truly, this was “betting the farm.”

Levy closes with the story of George Walbridge Perkins, a financier who by the 1910s would become the most visible proponent of a new form of risk management designed to help quell labor unrest while ostensibly aiding employees. This was corporate profit sharing, though the shared profits came at a price: large industrial behemoths—so-called “trusts” like US Steel—rewarded only those employees who provided “satisfactory service” to the corporation by working twelve hours a day, seven days a week. Other corporations’ efforts at minimizing risks to employees (pensions, insurance benefits) reduced the requirements, but managers and owners inevitably set the terms under which risk might be reduced.

Perkins was a curious figure: toward the end of his life, he became an advocate for government-sponsored social insurance, an idea that died in the 1920s. Levy’s story largely stops here, though he briefly treats the New Deal and the social safety net it inaugurated. The consequences of that revolution in risk management were profound: “By the middle of the twentieth century something curious happened—the very expression ‘freaks of fortune’ all but dropped from the American vernacular…. The freaks did not survive the efflorescence of the New Deal order.”

It would seem that reports of their death have been greatly exaggerated. Since the 1970s, the great political project of the right has been to revive the freaks of fortune. Not that Reagan and his heirs would put it that way: they have invariably preached the virtue of individual responsibility and self-reliance. But the net effect is the same as that of owning one’s own risk. As Levy puts it, “Risk’s nineteenth-century liberal history appears to have a neoliberal doppelgänger.”

And Darkness Comes

by AARON THIER

When his short-story collection The Question of Bruno was published in 2001, the Sarajevo-born writer Aleksandar Hemon earned enthusiastic comparisons to Vladimir Nabokov, which had less to do with the particulars of Hemon’s fiction than with the fact that he began writing in English only after he arrived in the United States at the age of 27. What’s remarkable about Nabokov is his perfect icy fluency in a borrowed language. The joy of Hemon’s English, however, lies in the humor and vitality of its imprecision—its exuberant lack of fluency. His bizarre locations and unusual sentences make The Question of Bruno a memorable collection of stories, but The Lazarus Project (2008)—his compact, hilarious, enraged novel about returning to Sarajevo after the siege—is one of the great English-language novels of the last two decades. It is a splendidly orchestrated and unconventional performance of rage, a book not about accepting pain and loss, but about letting them darken the rest of your days.

With only a few exceptions, the war in the former Yugoslavia and its transform-

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The Book of My Lives

By Aleksandar Hemon.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 214 pp. $25.

Hemon tells the story of the war and of his own displacement in many different ways, but one always suspects that he’s telling this story to himself, shaping it and reshaping it in the hope that it may yield a kernel of sense. In “The Lives of a Flaneur,” in which he meditates on the loss of Sarajevo, he frames the story in geographical terms—as a tale of dislocation in the literal sense of the word. There is a chilling passage in which he describes volunteering at the International Human Rights Law Institute at DePaul University, where he was shown photos of ruined buildings in Sarajevo and asked to note their locations. The task “felt very much like identifying corpses.” He says earlier that he’d come to think of Sarajevo as an extension of his own mind. “If my mind and my city were the same thing then I was losing my mind,” he writes. “Converting Chicago into my personal space became not just metaphysically essential but psy-
The truth of Professor Koljevic’s motives is forever inaccessible and in some sense also irrelevant. The kind of truth Hemon strives for in “The Book of My Life” is a personal truth, the truth as he needs to understand it. The same can be said of the other essays in the collection. It doesn’t matter that these pieces are ostensibly nonfiction and that his previous work is ostensibly fiction. Fiction and nonfiction are equally contrived, and because writing is about representing the subjective human experience of the world far more than setting down the “facts” about it, the distinction is rarely as important as it seems. If Hemon believes that Radovan Karadzic was driven to great evil by the need to enact a Serbian epic poem, that belief is a kind of fiction. But the essay is more about Hemon than it is about Koljevic. “Now it seems clear to me,” Hemon writes, “that his evil had far more influence on me than his literary vision. I excised and exterminated that precious, youthful part of me that had believed you could retreat from history and hide from evil in the comforts of art.” It’s because of his professor, Hemon thinks, that his own “writing is infused with testy impatience for bourgeois babbling, regrettably tainted with helpless rage I cannot be rid of.”

The story of a madman dragging his country to ruin because of an infatuation with epic poetry is compelling, but essays like “The Lives of Grandmasters” are about chess, which Hemon played with his father as a boy and began playing again in Chicago as a refugee. The game, with its strict boundaries and immutable rules, is a constant against which other changes can be measured. When he visits his parents, he reflects that “everything we did together in Canada reminded us of what we used to do together in Bosnia. Hence we didn’t like doing any of it, but had nothing else to do.” Chess is the same and not the same. He beats his father for the first time but finds “no pleasure in it,” and the two of them “never again [play] against each other.”

The story of a madman dragging his country to ruin because of an infatuation with epic poetry is compelling, but essays like “The Lives of Grandmasters” emphasize the private nature of this collection. “Let There Be What Cannot Be” is a story of evil and despair, but it is not reportage; it is a personal essay, and the explanation it provides ought to be understood primarily as the way that Hemon himself has come to understand the war. The distinction is important, and never so much so as in “The Book of My Life,” which is about Nikola Koljevic, Hemon’s former literature professor. Koljevic—whose “patron saint” was the New Critic Cleanth Brooks—taught a course in which students analyzed “the inherent properties of a piece of literature, disregarding politics, biography, or anything external to the text.” During the war, he became one of Radovan Karadzic’s closest associates.

Hemon does not say explicitly that he thinks New Criticism led Koljevic to thoughts of genocide, and there’s no way to know the truth of it. Koljevic’s interest in New Criticism—a critical ethos that involves the calculated subordination of human feeling—may well have inspired his “genocidal proclivities,” but it may simply have reflected the inclinations he already had, or it may have had nothing to do with anything. It is the structure of the essay that makes the analogy plain, and that’s fine, because the essay is more about Hemon than it is about Koljevic. “Now it seems clear to me,” Hemon writes, “that his evil had far more influence on me than his literary vision. I excised and exterminated that precious, youthful part of me that had believed you could retreat from history and hide from evil in the comforts of art.” It’s because of his professor, Hemon thinks, that his own “writing is infused with testy impatience for bourgeois babbling, regrettably tainted with helpless rage I cannot be rid of.”
anger is very moving. “Isabel’s suffering and death did nothing for her, or us, or the world,” Hemon continues. “We learned no lessons worth learning; we acquired no experience that could benefit anybody.” But he did write the essay, and perhaps he felt compelled to do so because he hoped it would make the tragedy less incomprehensible, or, failing that, would make his own rage at chaos less intolerable.

Then again, maybe he wrote the essay because he could not do otherwise. We tell stories all the time, whether they help us to understand what’s happening or not. Hemon says in “The Lives of Grandmasters” that writing is a way to “organize [his] interiority,” but it’s more than that; stories are the very stuff of interiority. We tell them to ourselves all the time in order to be who we are and to grapple with the terror of what we might become. When we tell stories about death—that it isn’t the end, or that it is—all those stories are the same, and all of them are true.

Beyond

by STUART KLAYANS

Ira Nair comes up with only one moment of cinema in The Reluctant Fundamentalist and spends the rest of the 128 minutes refusing to think about it. Not that she’s obvious in her avoidance. Far from neglecting the rogue gesture, she surrounds it with expository monologues, polemical dialogues, diagrammatic incidents and a decade’s worth of editorial comment about the United States in relation to the Muslim world. Some of this scaffolding she borrows from the source novel by Mohsin Hamid, who contributed to the screen story; some she assembles with the help of other screenwriters. All of it is meant to explain the two seconds of truth that escape when Changez (Riz Ahmed), a young Pakistani expatriate with a fast-track Wall Street career, watches the television news on September 11, 2001, and abruptly breaks into a grin.

But why explain? The best reason to go to the movies—the only reason, some would say—is to encounter what The Reluctant Fundamentalist gives you just at that moment: the flash of emotion, unforced, unguarded and unapologetic. Films may give it to you on the face of an actor (such as Ahmed, who has the aquiline features and clever eyes of a subcontinental Gael García Bernal), or in any of a multitude of choices made by the director—the swerve of the camera toward an object of desire, the cut that propels you into the next image, the change of light that seems to bloom from within. Very little of this is ever truly spontaneous, of course; what you get, at most, is a well-prepared spontaneity. But to apply intelligence only toward the preparations, and never to the fact of the emotion itself, is like substituting taxidermy for a naturalist’s field study.

A bright young man of Muslim background, who has fallen in love with America and the luxury of opportunity it seems to offer, sees the Twin Towers destroyed by jihadis and can’t hold back a smile of pleasure. That’s the reality Nair pickles and stuffs. All of the issues on her intellectual agenda—capitalist inequity, cultural imperialism, racist contempt, abuse of police power on every level—might as well be so many units of formaldehyde, glue and kapok ticked off the supply list so long as she never allows Changez the freedom of his rage, humiliation and disillusionment, or lets loose as a director with any such feelings of her own.

Toward the end of the film, when Changez has transformed himself into a college professor in Lahore with reputedly Islamist views, he declares in effect that he is now seeking autonomy where he belongs, in Pakistan, rather than adopting someone else’s values in the America that has spurned him. But then, The Reluctant Fundamentalist is always declaring things. Where are the unprompted urges that should be the substance of autonomy?

Changez can’t even break up with his white American girlfriend without the argument turning into a CNN debate. Erica (Kate Hudson, presented by Nair with dark hair and an incipient jowl) wails at Changez to stop attacking her, sounding as if she were hallucinating a Muslim horde about to mate her for a recklessness born of wealth and privilege, as if she were the US military-financial state in heels and a downtown party dress. It’s a problem that Changez comes off as being entirely in the right in the lovers’ quarrel. The bigger problem of The Reluctant Fundamentalist is that this isn’t a lovers’ quarrel at all.

Terence Malick has produced 112 minutes of pure, sustained, glorious cinema in To the Wonder and left me wishing for about half as much. Life cannot happen only during the last golden hour of the afternoon. People cannot spend all of their time dancing away from you in the tall grass. Thought cannot be wholly purified into a few prayerful murmurs, uttered bodilessly on a soundtrack while the world floats by on waves of an intuited perfection. It’s admirable of Malick to want to subsume everything, including poverty and disease, into an aspiration toward the divine vision, but even Jesus needed to take time out to pass around drinks at a wedding.

Like The Tree of Life before it, To the Wonder brings you into a highly refined version of the minds of people of modest means and unglamorous circumstances, who live in the American West (Oklahoma in this case) and hunger for God. Neil (Ben Affleck) and Marina (Olga Kurylenko) have fallen in love in Paris, where he was presumably on vacation. Although Neil is frankly unwill-
ing to marry, Marina goes with him, her young daughter in tow, to dwell amid the tidy lawns, brick ranch houses and towering electrical lines of present-day Bartlesville. There, Neil has a job documenting environmental pollution (the screen has not witnessed so much affectless posing in front of toxic spills since *The Devil, Probably*), and Marina is left to twirl about the landscape and burn dinner. Occasionally Neil and Marina attend church, where Father Quintana (Javier Bardem) stolidly pushes himself to keep serving, despite a crisis of faith that makes him move like he’s underwater.

That’s about it by way of a story. *The Tree of Life* didn’t have much more—but it did give you the Big Bang, and dinosaurs, and the end of days, all of which cradled the memories of a 1950s childhood haunted by half-comprehended parental pain. The crazy ambitions of *The Tree of Life*, and the weight of its brooding, gave that film a force that’s missing from Malick’s new foray into wonder.

I most felt the lack in the scenes where Father Quintana ministers to the needy. Wasting, lesions and brutal deformation mark the people you see, who unmistakably are genuine unfortunates born on the streets of Bartlesville or Tulsa, not made in the makeup trailer. Malick puts these impoverished people on show, bathed in the miraculous cinematography of Emmanuel Lubezki, so he can transcend in his art the misery they can’t escape in life. I wouldn’t say Malick has wronged them; they were going to go on suffering with or without his camera present, and for all I know they may have profited by a few badly needed dollars by agreeing to be photographed. But for the audience, Malick’s treatment of these subjects is a cheat. Having acknowledged their pain, he wants to pass immediately to aesthetic bliss and spiritual peace, as if edged their pain, he wants to pass immediately to the show tent in one of those extended tracking shots that often signal nothing more than a director’s self-regard, but in this case tells you exactly what you need to know about the man you’ll be following. You get his body’s tempo, his tunnel vision, his enjoyment of a ruckus, his tunnel vision, his enjoyment of a nervous energy out to the midway, walking toward the show tent in one of those extended tracking shots that often signal nothing more than a director’s self-regard, but in this case tells you exactly what you need to know about the man you’ll be following. You get his body’s tempo, his tunnel vision, his enjoyment of a very minor celebrity (which he also disdains), and his way of wearing the atmosphere of colored lights, ruckus and gasoline fumes right on his skin. By this, I don’t just mean that Luke is well inked; I mean that Gosling is performing at the considerable height of his ability to combine sensibility and swagger.

The plot kicks in with the appearance of one of the willing victims of that sensibility and swagger, a coffee-shop waitress named Romina (played by Eva Mendes, who has never looked more beautiful or more wearily resigned). The surprise she brings Luke—the first and least of several unexpected turns in the movie—takes him off the carnival circuit. A subsequent chance encounter with a suspiciously friendly local man (Ben Mendelsohn) gives him the means to settle down—not that he’s good at settling, not that Romina wants him around, and not that his choice of company is wise. If the greedy generosity of Luke’s new benefactor weren’t warning enough, the woodland where the two men had met ought to be, with its trees dangling their dying roots out of the sides of eroded cliffs.

For a while, *The Place Beyond the Pines* plays like an exciting, gritty drama about crimes, domestic and other. Then, with the entrance of a compellingly unsllick and deglamorized Bradley Cooper as Avery, a rookie patrol cop with connections and brains that go beyond his job description, the movie takes its themes of manly duty, family ties and dangerous wrongdoing up a notch: out of the context of the working and drifting classes and into a setting of middle-class homes, political maneuvering and televised press conferences. Avery himself probably doesn’t know the degree to which he’s trying to do the right thing or seize the main chance. He, unlike Luke, has the opportunity to do both at once—but that doesn’t mean he’s free to leave Luke behind. When *The Place Beyond the Pines* transforms itself for the third and final time, we see how the consequences of Avery’s actions are played out in later years in the most volatile of all social milieus, and the one that unites all of Schenectady: high school.

*The Place Beyond the Pines* may have one too many plot contrivances and one and a half too few female characters (I’m counting Rose Byrne as being only partly present in the role of Avery’s wife, which is not her fault). Discount it for these shortcomings if you must—or give it the sympathetic attention that a serious and heartfelt movie deserves when it contains not a single patch of thoughtless filmmaking. Derek Cianfrance gets it right.

And then there’s Derek Cianfrance, who has made the most substantial, memorable and satisfying movie I’ve seen in the last couple of months, *The Place Beyond the Pines*. Concerned with the transmission of class differences and ideals of heroism over two generations and both sides of the law, *The Place Beyond the Pines* succeeds brilliantly at one of the most difficult and least discussed aspects of filmmaking: achieving a just proportion. How do you create mergers of character and actor that will seem human in scale and yet be big enough to carry a movie? How do you fit these figures into a credible environment that is precisely observed but more meaningful than its bare circumstances? Part of the genius of the Italian neorealists was their formulation of a persuasive way to solve this problem—a means of standing just far enough back, let’s say, so that their subjects would come out looking the right size in the frame. Cianfrance is no neorealist, but he has learned their lesson and knows exactly where to stand.

He sets his movie in Schenectady, which he portrays as being large enough for urban ills but sufficiently isolated and ingrown to border on the rural. It’s a place where his characters may choose to stay put but might prefer not to; where the poorer and darker-skinned people live apart from the richer and whiter, but not very far; where the ambitious find avenues for advancement and the larcenous for gain, but neither gets all that much. This is the low-middle range of America, where a great many people reside, and the stakes of life and death are calculated in five figures.

That’s high enough for Luke (Ryan Gosling), a carnival performer who specializes in gunning his motorcycle up and down the interior of a steel-mesh sphere. First seen in partial view in his trailer—where he’s just a field of tattoos on a muscled torso and a hand playing mumblety-peg—Luke soon takes his nervous energy out to the midway, walking toward the show tent in one of those extended tracking shots that often signal nothing more than a director’s self-regard, but in this case tells you exactly what you need to know about the man you’ll be following. You get his body’s tempo, his tunnel vision, his enjoyment of a very minor celebrity (which he also disdains), and his way of wearing the atmosphere of colored lights, ruckus and gasoline fumes right on his skin. By this, I don’t just mean that Luke is well inked; I mean that Gosling is performing at the considerable height of his ability to combine sensibility and swagger.

The performances match, of course. Harrison Ford, now entered into his old-coot period, twinkles and growsl as much as he likes as Rickey. (Who’s going to stop him?) Meanwhile, Chadwick Boseman, who bears a strong resemblance to Robinson, comports himself with restraint and dignity (except when jittering along the base paths) and even so comes out as the star of the film. There’s nothing else you need to know about the thoroughly corny and satisfying *42*, except that in the scene of Robinson’s first opening day in the majors, Helgeland chooses to include the singing of the national anthem in its entirety—and where I watched the film, at the Magic Johnson Theater in Harlem, some of the audience members joined in.
Puzzle No. 3281

JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

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1 Earth’s grief (6,5)
8 Placard includes caustic synthetic (9)
9 Resort island’s cold, endless month (5)
10 Playthings held back by noisy otters (4)
11 Dull spin I livened up inside, probably voting Democratic? (10)
13 Staff hosts replacing 100 with a ruse (9)
15 Also note Breton (5)
16 Shaped cedar, making a bow (5)
18 Validate corrupt ex-president within natural disaster (5,4)
20 Van Gogh gets angry about leader of Oakland baseball team (3,7)
22 Raised money on the radio (4)
24 Singer/actress goes after a bit of orange pigment (5)
25 Completely destroy nearest headless, crazy pirate (9)
26 Those that 14 recycled, saving a tree (11)

DOWN
1 How you don’t want your business to go, and what might save you just in time? You betcha (5-2)
2 Newspaper article with idiot burying the lead (2-2)
3 John, the Spanish heavyweight (5)
4 Cheer up sodden drunk? That’s tough (4-5)
5 Pace wildly around front of card table? OK (10)
6 Diminished bureaucracy had the last word on top (7)
7 Filed letters multiple times… as if I care! (12)
8 Decomposing deposit before blowing a whistle, say? (12)
12 Lacking a raise, keep an eye on rosy present-day panacea (6,4)
14 Go “om nom nom nom nom” and go “om nom nom nom”—that’s what 26 do (3,2,4)
17 Playwright to mark box on a list for audience (7)
19 What a meteorologist would know about: a tune and a liturgy (3,4)
21 Key football player starts late (5)
23 Middle-Earth monster, a killer in black and white (4)
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