

Killing for comfort; Assassination and the American political psyche

In a pub in rural New Zealand two men, one old and one young, come together to discuss world affairs, to have a drink and swap insults. They start by discussing an article, or a batch of articles, that one of them, usually the younger, has selected. During their conversation they also access other articles, the younger man via his smart phone and the older one via his venerable laptop, which also holds his database of geopolitical literature, and if rumour is to be believed, more besides. In addition there is a ghostly editor who also inserts references, often making snide remarks about the old man and correcting his lapses of memory.

Today's article is:

- Jeffrey St. Clair, "**Roaming Charges: The CIA's Plots to Kill Castro**," *Counterpunch*, 2 December 2016. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/12/02/roaming-charges-the-cias-plots-to-kill-castro/>
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"Hi Sage, what's that you're drinking?"

"Hi Marty. It's a sav from Marlborough called Isabel. Not a bad drop.¹ "

"Well, you don't usually spit wine out in disgust."

"True, but sometimes it does test one's fortitude."

"And drives you to another one?"

"Something like that.... But not here – Bill knows what to stock"

Marty returns to the table with the glass of wine, and something multi-coloured in a tall glass for himself.

The Sage grimaces at the sight of Marty's drink. "What the hell is that? Another of Bill's girly drinks?"

"It's a cocktail, Sage, a cocktail. What we young sophisticates like to drink."

"Looks pretty noxious to me. No wonder you're not getting very far with that Swedish girl"

"Huh, little do you realise how sexy Swedes find cocktail-drinking sophisticates."

"Does that just cover men and domestic animals, but include women as well?"

"The envy of the elderly is a pathetic sight. Anyway, I've got this article I want to discuss."

“The one you sent me, on CIA attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro?² Well, they certainly tried quite a few times and came up with a number of weird and wonderful ways; saturating the radio station he broadcast from with LSD, cigars laced with drugs or poison, thallium salts in his shoes, as well as the good old favorites of sniper rifles and tommy guns.”

“But they didn’t succeed and he died at a very ripe old age – older even than you Sage – of natural causes.”

“Not quite 90 yet, Marty. Yes, although I guess some of the stories are apocryphal or embellished, there is little doubt they made quite a few attempts and the CIA, according to that article, admitted to at least five or six. And that’s one of the interesting things about this business, the way that crimes are rather cheerfully admitted.”

“These admissions – are they particularly American?”

“Oh, I think so. Soviet archives were rather foolishly opened to the Americans after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³ And of course the Brits have the 30 year rule, when some archives are opened up. But basically governments keep the past, or the incriminating parts of it, pretty close to the chest. If they collapse, as with the Soviet Union, or are defeated like Germany and Japan, then things are different. But governments with a continuing link to the past are pretty circumspect.”

“But the Americans are not?”

“Well they certainly lie through their teeth, but it is a much more open society than others, and a stronger division of power.”

“Division of power?”

“Between the Executive, in other words the president and administration, Congress, and the Judiciary. Their squabble can get pretty virulent and it makes for dysfunctional governance, especially in foreign affairs. The fights over the Iran deal are just one example. Usually it’s a tussle between the White House and Congress but sometimes the judiciary throws a spanner into the works.⁴ But let’s not get side-tracked on that. The point is that for geographical and historical reasons the US government is much more open.”

“Geography and history?”

“The US is the unchallengeable dominant power in North America, and is protected by wide oceans on either side. It has huge natural resources so it is impervious to blockade. The only time they’ve had problems with foreigners on American soil, apart from 9/11, is when the Brits burnt Washington in 1812. So that provides quite a span of history to provide a sense of invulnerability and confidence. If you’ve got nothing to fear then it’s easier to let it all hang out. For instance the CIA released information about its various activities in the past, including assassination attempts on Fidel, the coup in Iran and so forth; what are called the ‘family jewels.’⁵”

“Do they let it all hang out? All as in everything?”

“Not everything, but much more than others. The American state – the government, the establishment think tanks and foundations, and the elite media – spews out an incredible amount of

material each day, into the public domain, available via the wonders of the internet to the furthest reaches of the world.”

“Even little old New Zealand”

“Yes, even here on the edge of Antarctica”

“So we have a good idea of what they are up to?”

“Not really. Quantity is not quality. Much of it is pedestrian, cliché-ridden, full of platitudes and euphemisms, and coded, always coded.”

“Coded?”

“Yes, everything has to be interpreted, often turned upside down and shaken until some meaning drops out. For instance, a standard theme is how the US is threatened by the rest of the world – by big countries such as China or Russia, middle countries such as Iran, small countries such as North Korea. Ridiculous, of course. It is the US than threatens other countries, that invades them, organised coups and fixes elections, not the other way round. So when you read this stuff you have to work out what, if anything, it means. Anyway, that’s a discussion for another time. A two bottle of wine one.”

OK, but before we leave that, what about the stuff about the Russians interfering in the 2016 presidential elections?”

“Mostly nonsense, but again another time.”

“And another bottle or two of wine?”

“Something like that. Another interesting aspect of this relative openness is its connection to American Exceptionalism.”

“Exceptionalism? That’s the idea that the US is special, an inspiration for the world, and the last, best hope for mankind?”

Yes again a big subject but one result is that if the Americans think of themselves as exceptional that also puts them above law and morality.”

“Like Nietzsche’s Superman?”

“Ah, deep waters there. Perhaps. Anyway, if you are above the common herd that what for others would be crimes –assassinations, coups, invasions, etc. are part of your natural rights and even duty and so, in that sense, don’t have to be hidden.”

Marty sipped his drink, sighed with contentment, burped, and asked, “You said earlier that this openness was one of the interesting things about the assassination business. What else?”

“Well, I think the main thing is the way that assassination, especially under Obama, has become perhaps the main way of waging war.in fact a couple of enterprising academics at the University of

Massachusetts have set up a Center for the Study of Targeted Killing.⁶ Assassination has become the 'policy of choice' of the Obama administration."⁷

"Rather, say, than invasions as with Afghanistan and Iraq?"

"Yes. That level of state level violence has continued, but has been outsourced to the Saudis, the Qataris, the Turks, jihadists in general, but without substantial number of American boots on the ground."

"Libya and Syria?"

Yes. But let's leave that aside for the moment and just think about assassination. The practicalities of it as a political instrument – efficacy, cost and benefit, etc. – and what it suggests about the American psyche."

"Looks like we're going to need another round before you launch into that", said Marty finishing off his cocktail. "Same again?"

"I think Bill's got a new Aussie red in. I'll try that."

Marty returns shortly with two glasses, one a vibrant melange of colours, the other a deep red. "High Street McLaren Vale Shiraz 2014 for your pleasure."⁸

"Cheers Marty. "

"So, the practicalities of assassination?"

"OK. What have we got? How to do it, why to do it, and costs and benefits, all ultimately tied in a bundle."

"How to do it", reflected Marty. "Exploding cigars and sniper rifles out, and drones in I guess."

"Exactly. For unprotected targets at least – tribal leaders in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and places like that with no air support. Not used against the likes of Putin, Xi, Kim and so forth, though the question of retaliation is obviously a factor, presumably a bigger one, there."

"But drone assassinations has been the signature tune of the Obama administration, hasn't it?"⁹

"Yes, and obviously that's partly driven by the development of drone technology, but it also reflects a political strategy."

"In what ways?"

"Partly it's a reaction to the Bush 'boots on the ground' invasions. One great advantage of drones is that they are cost free."

"Not to the victims and their families surely."

"No, but that doesn't count in the eyes of the US government, or the public in general. Nor in fact does the financial cost, even though that is quite small. When it comes to military expenditure the more expensive the better."

“The military-Industrial complex?”

“Yep. But most important is that there are no American lives lost. In fact we have this obscene situation where there are concerns about the angst that the drone pilots sometimes suffer –how many children did you kill today, Daddy? – and the occupational overuse syndrome caused by pushing the kill button too many times. So much so that they are schemes to award them battle honours.¹⁰”

“That’s gross!”

“True. But then there’s the bigger question of why. What effect does the removing of one enemy – usually a man, though that’s not really the issue – really have? For instance it is said that Hitler rejoiced on hearing of Roosevelt’s death in April 1945 because he thought that the US would pull out of the war just as Russia had abandoned the war against Prussia in 1872¹¹.

“Well, he got that wrong!”

“Not for the first time, but he only had a month left to commit errors of judgement. A good case of a false historical analogy. Whatever happened in 1762 was irrelevant to 1945. Whatever the role of Roosevelt in getting the US into the war with Germany by then of course the commitment was far greater than the man himself. Not a case of assassination, though I gather some people think FDR was murdered, but an example of how when things get underway, with the involvement of institutions and public opinion, then the death of one person probably makes little difference to the commitment to a course of action, and that applies as much to the Taliban as it did to the American juggernaut.”

“Yeh, but Truman wasn’t Roosevelt; there were differences surely.”

“Yes, no doubt some pretty substantial ones, but the war continued. The Nazis were defeated, Hitler committed suicide. But you do raise an important point. Assassination may have no great effect, but it can also make things worse for you. The bugger you put in power might be worse than the one you’ve killed. There’s a nice story about Nixon choosing Spiro Agnew as his Vice-President because no one in his right mind would assassinate him knowing that would put Agnew in the White House.”¹²”

“OK, the next time I order an assassination I’ll check out who’s next in line. But I guess in many cases – say in the Middle East – the Americans don’t know or can’t be sure who’s next in line?”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right. In which case it might be wise to stick with the devil you know. In fact it seems that often the Americans don’t know very much about the people they kill. It has been suggested that in many cases the victim is fingered by personal enemies – you hate the guy in the next valley and tell the Americans he’s Taliban, and they take him out for you – and in other cases people give spurious information for the rewards that are offered.¹³ But that’s only part of the problem. Many argue that these drone attacks create more insurgents than they kill.

“Civilian casualties?”

“Yeh, that’s one part of it. The American authorities claim that they are scrupulous about avoiding collateral damage, to use the old euphemism, but I think we can be sceptical about that.¹⁴ An air

force which can bomb its own hospital by mistake – as in Kunduz in Afghanistan in 2015 is not immune from mistakes.”¹⁵

“Like the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in the late 1990s?”

“Except that probably wasn’t a mistake.¹⁶ Anyway, those were airstrikes; drones I guess are more ‘surgical’ but lots of people must get killed or maimed in addition to the intended victim. One estimate had 28 killed for every intended victim.¹⁷ These are bombs, after all. Most people, especially I would think in tribal, less affluent societies, are constantly in the company of other people. It’s only in place like New Zealand where a person can live alone on a quarter-acre of paradise, in the company of a dishwasher and a washing machine. No relatives. No servants. I would make a great target for a drone.”

“I wouldn’t talk too loud Sage!”

“And of course apart from collateral casualties all these victims have relatives, probably a lot of them. They would be considered heroes, martyrs. If your father or uncle has been killed, in a cowardly fashion, by the infidel then that would probably incite you to take up the cause.”

“So it’s like the hydra in the film?”

“I think it started off as a Greek myth, Marty, but yes, cut off one head and two grow in its place.”

“So perhaps not a wise strategy after all? You create more enemies than you eliminate?”

“But there’s a further twist. One of the traditional problems in armies is that the wrong officers get killed.”

“How come?” Marty looked puzzled.

“It’s the young, vigorous, more-educated junior officers on the front who are vulnerable and the generals who are tired, devoid of fresh ideas and busy fighting yesterday’s war who are safe. Drones invert that. Andrew Cockburn has tracked down some interesting research conducted by an American soldier in Iraq. He documented that when the Americans killed a local commander he was rapidly replaced, often by a relative – that aggrieved son or nephew – and the new guy was much more energetic and effective than the old one.”¹⁸

“A bit like you and me, eh Sage.” Marty grinned

“War is hell, Marty, not a Swedish girlfriend.”

“Sometimes I’m not sure there’s a big difference.”

“You said it Marty, not me. I’ve never met her. Anyway Cockburn is rightly puzzled that America pursues with such enthusiasm a strategy which is demonstratively counter-productive.”

“It does seem strange. So what do you think is behind it?”

“My feeling is that it is a matter of the American psyche, or the American myth. As we’ve discussed the US sees itself as exceptional and that leads to the concept of leadership. American politicians

love talking about leadership. How the world welcomes American leadership and how America has a duty to pick up the burden.”

“No longer just the white man’s?”

“Obama might well just be a blip. We’ll see. But certainly American imperialism has traditionally been imbued with the concept of racial superiority. Apparently the journal *Foreign Affairs*, the prayer book of the American foreign policy establishment first saw life with the title the *Journal of Race Development*”.¹⁹ Certainly Henry Luce, who coined the term ‘the American Century’ back in 1941 would surely have thought it was a white man’s job.”

“Henry Luce of Time/Life?”

“That’s the one. And significantly the son of white American missionaries to the yellow Chinese. He bemoaned what he saw as America’s reluctance to take up the global leadership. Let me get his essay up on my laptop – it has some quotes which are pungent with the flavour of his times, his class, and his ethnicity.”²⁰

“Here we are:”

Among serious Englishmen, the chief complaint against America (and incidentally their best alibi for themselves) has really amounted to this -- that America has refused to rise to the opportunities of leadership in the world.

“A bit before women’s lib, eh Sage? I guess he considered women too frivolous to be capable of serious thoughts about weighty issues.”

“Well there’s an irony there, and a lesson about jumping to conclusions. In fact his second wife, Clare Booth Luce was, according to Wikipedia at least, no demure housewife but quite a formidable woman; a writer, politician and America’s first female ambassador.”²¹ Mind you, another Clare, Clare Hollingworth the British war correspondent thought she was a pampered elitist.²²

“OK...but why ‘Englishmen’ rather than ‘the English?’”

“Good point. Don’t know. Perhaps just a linguistic quirk – that was the usage. The English language does have unnecessary genders, unlike say Chinese, which causes a lot of angst and aggro. Personally I find the use of ‘they’ to mean ‘he’ or ‘she’ grating, but there’s no easy solution.”

“Could be worse Sage, I understand that in France even tables and windows have a sex life.”

“Indeed, but when gender is embedded so thoroughly in a language it’s perhaps easier to cope with. It’s interesting to look at de Gaulle’s famous speech to the nation in 1961 when he was having a little problem with the generals over Algeria.²³ He’s there in his uniform, the very symbol of a male dominated society and what does he say? “*Françaises, Français ! Aidez-moi !*” French women, Frenchmen, help me. “

“But that’s like ladies and gentlemen, *damen und herren, mesdames et messieurs*. Women are put first but they are still second class citizens.”

“Agreed. But that’s the point; we have to be cautious about reading too much into a linguistic expression. So when Henry Luce referred to ‘Englishmen’ he may have revealed himself as a male chauvinist pig, but perhaps not’

“Male chauvinist pig! That dates you Sage.”

“So many things do Marty. Anyway, I think the key part is the ‘English’ rather than the ‘men’. One of the important things in the 20th century was the way that British global leadership – the empire and more – was handed over relatively freely into American hands.”

“What about Suez?”

“Not all smooth sailing but very consensual compared with the US relinquishing some control to China. With England and America it was seen to be within the family. The old man might not have been completely happy but it was better than the inheritance going to the neighbours, Germany or Russia. With American hegemony it’s quite different and I think the US may well go to war with China in an attempt to block the loss of hegemony.”

“So no ‘peaceful rise’?”

“No. Anyway that’s a separate issue; back to leadership. And a couple more quotes from Henry Luce. How about this for a paean to confidence, a confidence that the world was at its feet and it had the power to manage the affairs of mankind, benignly but with firmness against those who resisted. And this was February 1941, nine months before the US entered the war and when Germany and Japan were riding high:”

Closely akin to the purely economic area and yet quite different from it, there is the picture of an America which will send out through the world its technical and artistic skills. Engineers, scientists, doctors, movie men, makers of entertainment, developers of airlines, builders of roads, teachers, educators. Throughout the world, these skills, this training, this leadership is needed and will be eagerly welcomed, if only we have the imagination to see it and the sincerity and good will to create the world of the 20th Century.

But now there is a third thing which our vision must immediately be concerned with. We must undertake now to be the Good Samaritan of the entire world. It is the manifest duty of this country to undertake to feed all the people of the world who as a result of this worldwide collapse of civilization are hungry and destitute -- all of them, that is, whom we can from time to time reach consistently with a very tough attitude toward all hostile governments. For every dollar we spend on armaments, we should spend at least a dime in a gigantic effort to feed the world -- and all the world should know that we have dedicated ourselves to this task.

“I suppose some of that did happen. There was the Marshall Plan, a certain outpouring of American technology and management skills, but they didn’t actually feed the world, did they? There was that food aid programme PL something, wasn’t there?”

“PL 480. Food for Peace. The cynics would say as much a scheme to subsidise American farmers, and American shipping as feeding the hungry. And of course fighting Communism, and winning hearts and minds.”

“I see that he wants to spend a dime – that’s 10 cents, right? – on food aid for every dollar on armaments, so I guess that shows what his priorities were.”

“Indeed. But no doubt lots of people got food they wouldn’t otherwise have so that has to be taken into account. On the other hand I suspect that food handouts damage local agriculture. And the big irony is that the major transformation in food production in the world has been brought about by the people that Luce, as the son of missionaries, loved to hate, the Chinese Communist Party.

²⁴Another discussion there. Back to Luce’s thoughts on leadership. How’s this for confidence and self-assurance?

Most important of all, we have that indefinable, unmistakable sign of leadership: prestige. And unlike the prestige of Rome or Genghis Khan or 19th Century England, American prestige throughout the world is faith in the good intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and ultimate strength of the whole American people

“Wow. Or self-delusion? I can’t see that the American Indians or the victims of the American conquest of the Philippines would see it that way.”

‘Indeed, President Duterte would agree with you.²⁵ Mind you, despite the self-deception Luce does have a point. There is a difference in general between American imperialism and his examples - of Rome or Genghis Khan or 19th Century England. The Americans can massacre and enslave people quite as ruthlessly as anyone else; they kill each other at home with considerable flair, so it’s not surprising they do it abroad. But for specific historical reasons it’s probably fair to say that the Americans have done more ‘imperialism by prestige’ than any other the others, especially since the early 20th century when they became richer than anyone else and less dependent on stealing other people’s resources, which has been the major driving force of imperialism.”

“Imperialism by prestige?”

“All established empires have prestige – what Joseph Nye has popularised as ‘softpower’ as well as hardpower, things like military force and economic leverage.²⁶ All sorts of interesting examples abound. The tributary system of the Chinese empire, for instance has parallels because for a long time China, like the US today, was richer than the countries on its periphery and didn’t have to be rapacious and therefore used softpower, especially its cultural power, as an important attribute of its statecraft. As far as I know the spread of Islam though Southeast Asia by Arab traders was also based on softpower rather than the military force that the Europeans used for extending Christianity. And then there is our own Treaty of Waitangi.”

“So you’re saying that the Treaty of Waitangi was a result of English softpower?”

“British rather than English. Henry Luce overlooks the fact the Scots and Irish played a big role in running the empire. But yes, the British didn’t take over New Zealand by military conquest, or even a show of force such as used by Commander Perry to ‘open up’ Japan, though force was later employed during the ‘Land Wars’ between the settlers and Maori. New Zealand was naturally very poor in terms of native flora and fauna, and because of geographic isolation had been bypassed by development around the world, and of which Britain at that time was the leading proponent. Guns, cotton fabrics, writing, roast lamb – all part of the softwar package the Brits offered.”

“You’re wandering again Sage!”

“Yes. Old age. At least I’m not rabbiting on about my early sex life.”

“That wouldn’t take long!”

“One Swedish girlfriend does not a summer make. Anyway, leadership. Luce is very keen on it, thinks this is what differentiates America from its rival, and is confident that the world would happily embrace it if the US ‘rises to the opportunity.’”

“And American politicians have followed him ever since?”

“I’m not sure that he actually started the leadership thing, but he was certainly influential at a time when the US could put it into practice. But yes, it has been a common theme. For instance Obama, in some speech – let me look it up – ah, yes, here we are in 2014 talking about ISIS –”

America, our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden. But as Americans, we welcome our responsibility to lead.²⁷

“Yeh, Henry Luce would have been happy with that. Not much change over 75 years. But the Americans are not the only ones who talk about leadership are they? What about das Führer and Il Duce? “

“Indeed, but both Hitler and Mussolini saw themselves as leaders of their own people, and I’m sure didn’t think of it encompassing the subjects of their empires. Who would want to be a führer of untermenschen? And I don’t suppose Queen Victoria saw herself as a leader either of the British people let alone imperials subjects. So I think the imperial usage is very much exclusively American.”

“Ah”, Marty asked quizzically, “what about Trump?” With which he loped off to the bar carrying their empty glasses.

“Yes, not quite his style”, admitted the Sage on his return, “and that could be an interesting development. A clear break, at least in terms of rhetoric, with decades of American imperialism going back to Henry Luce, and perhaps a century to Woodrow Wilson. I’ve had a quick glance while you’ve been away doing your duty – for which thanks – and haven’t come across him actually using the word leadership in the global context. The establishment thinks he’s not the right sort of person to run the empire and that’s one of the charges against him. For instance Ian Bremmer in Time:”

America’s interactions with other nations will be guided not by the conviction that U.S. leadership is good for America and the world but by Trump’s transactional approach.²⁸

“So American hegemony is equally good for the world as for America?”

“That’s the argument implied by the leadership concept. Here’s the Editorial Board of the Washington Post – and there are few places in the American establishment higher than that, warning before the election that ‘A President Trump could end the era of American global leadership’:

In sum, the election of Mr. Trump would likely bring about the end of the era of American global leadership that began in 1945. The U.S. alliances built after World War II, which have been the

foundation of that strength, would be disregarded. A new, cynical, self-interested America would emerge...²⁹

“OK, so the America that brought us all those coups and wars – Iran, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya – was not cynical and self-interested?”

“OK, Marty calm down. The point is that it was done under the banner of leadership, under the pretence, if you like, that it was done for *their* benefit as well as America’s. So Trump may well go to war, in fact probably will go to war, but won’t fuss with this particular cant.”

“Like the schoolmaster caning the naked bum of a pupil claiming ‘this hurts me more than it hurts you.’”

“A bit lurid but yea. Trump will say ‘you deserve this you little bastard and I hope it hurts like hell. Hypocrisy is perhaps not one of his vices³⁰”

“Of which he has many.”

“But crucially not that one. Anyway, let’s leave Trump aside for the moment. He’s a future event, let’s just focus on the past. So we have this concept of global leadership as an overarching description of American imperialism from the 1940s at least up to the end of the Obama administration. Leadership implies a contract freely entered into by leader and led.”

“Freely? Isn’t also making them an offer they can’t refuse?”

“Indeed, there is always the iron fist inside the velvet glove. And remember that Luce only wanted to spend ten cents on softpower for dollar on hardpower. But in general the US is not the mafia, although power is power and there are similarities. However the main point is that the American elite sees America’s role as beneficial, as being ‘good for the world’ and its leadership being a ‘burden’. That’s another common word and was used recently by Stephen Hadley George W. Bush’s national security advisor in a confab at the United States Institute of Peace. I think he was suggesting that the electorate turned to Trump partly because the burden of their beneficence was becoming too onerous.”³¹

“Hang on Sage, we’ve been through three rounds, and I’ll be ready for another one soon, and I can’t the connection between this and drones and assassination.”

“OK, don’t get impatient. I’m getting round to it. So we have this concept of beneficent leadership and inherent in it the idea that this leadership is essentially embraced by the world. For instance, according to this guy in the Daily Telegraph ‘Many in the Pentagon were convinced ... that American forces would be welcomed by rapturous crowds’.³²

“But they weren’t.”

“Yeh. So if we take this at a more general level we can see that there is a dissonance between he conceptual myth and revealed reality’

“So not so much ‘why do they hate us?’ but ‘why do they resist us?’”

"Exactly. So how is this to be explained? We know that all these Afghans and Iraqis really welcome us, in their heart of hearts, for coming to look after them, but then they go and plant IEDs and blow up our Humvees. Why?"

"Right. I think I see where you're coming from."

"It must have been those four cocktails that have unleashed your cognitive powers."

"Three. You're losing count. So it must be the 'bad guys' leading them astray."

"Exactly. So what's the solution?"

"You put a drone up in the sky and when you see a bad guy you kill him."

"Right. And when resistance doesn't stop what do you do?"

"Kill another one. But then you get the hydra problem."

"Doesn't matter. That just proves you haven't killed enough bad guys."

"So even though the strategy doesn't work, or is in fact counter-productive, it is not discredited by failure?"

"But it is not seen as failure because that would put into question the concept behind it. And that concept is essential to the self-esteem of the American foreign policy elite, or the pre-Trumpian one anyway. And of course Obama exemplified this and took the policy of assassination to new heights. His Tuesday 'kill list' meeting where he would personally select the people who were to be assassinated had more than a touch of the macabre about it. And was taken by the *New York Times* at least as an example of his principle and devotion to legality. It seems to have been a quasi-religious ceremony where sacrificial victims were chosen and the beneficial and righteous supremacy of the *Pax Americana* solemnly and symbolically upheld. That the strategy was ineffective and indeed counter-productive was irrelevant."³³

"So the killing of the bad guys proves that the killer is a good guy? Sounds a bit like killing for comfort."

"And with that rather grotesque thought perhaps we should take a break and discuss something really disgusting, like the weather, or you and your Swedish girlfriend."

"At least she's not frigid. Did you see, middle of summer and snow on the Milford Track?"

"Enough of gloom, off to the bar with you for a final drink."

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