

SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

Diary of a Smoke Refugee

by [DAVID ROVICS](#)



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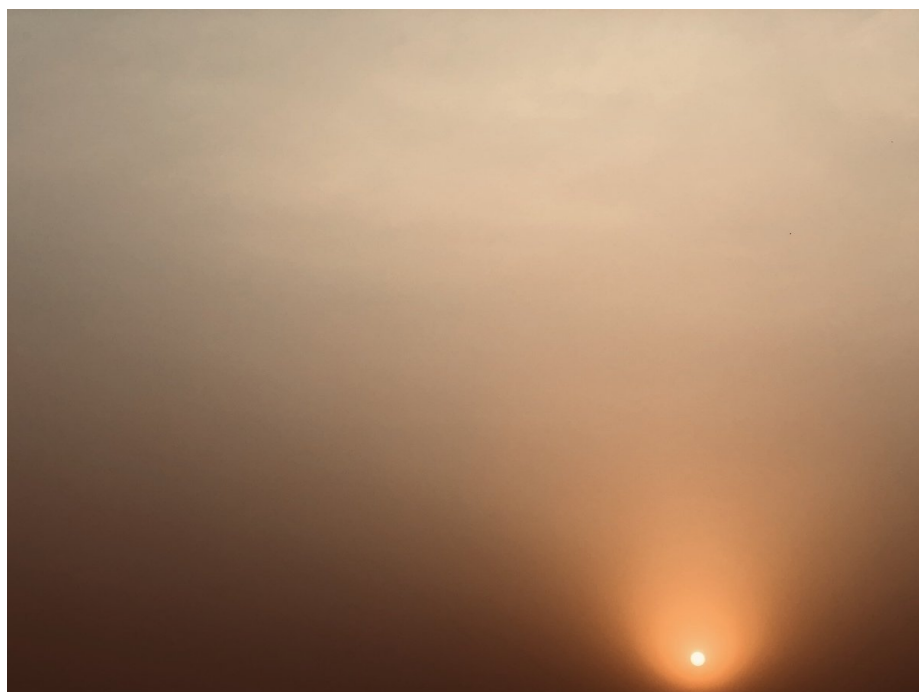
Biden's Foreign
Policy Advisors Show
Loyalty to Israel,
Defense Contractors

The CIA Book
Publishing
Operations

The Plot Against
Libya

'Collateral Murder'

Yemen's Unending
War



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

It's been quite a week here in Oregon. I know there are plenty of other horrors happening in the world. The invisible ones are the worst. Like tens of millions of children in the US going to bed hungry every night in recent weeks, or the tap

water in Flint and Gaza continuing to be undrinkable, or the many people every night in Yemen and India dying alone at home of disease, knowing it's pointless to go to a hospital that has no medicine and no equipment. The visible horrors are more dramatic, more newsworthy, and also deadly for some, devastating for many – Sudan and Alabama underwater. Siberia, California, and Oregon on fire.

The fires here in Oregon have further exposed the deep divisions in this society, as have all the other previous or ongoing catastrophes, from the 2008 financial crisis to the current global pandemic. They have also further exposed a government that, at every level – federal, state, county, and municipal – is deeply entwined with both corruption and incompetence. To be clear, I say this not to disparage the heroic efforts of firefighters and others in the course of this ongoing tragedy. As with the one thousand medical workers who have lost their lives in the course of their efforts to respond to the Covid-19 crisis in the US, the firefighters and others on the ground doing all kinds of mutual aid also suffer the consequences of corruption and incompetence higher up, for which they are by no means responsible.

Putting the broader current reality into some bit of context:

Huge swaths of the western US are made up of

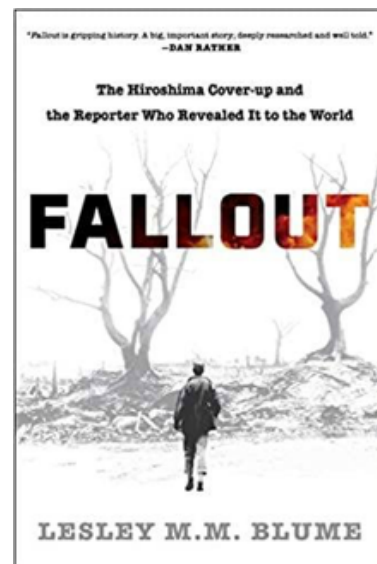


land that is controlled by the federal government, either by the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management. The job of the Forest Service is to make the forests available for corporations to profit from logging it all, and then they use federal tax money afterwards to deal with the resultant erosion, mudslides, mercury poisoning, and destructive fires that result. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) makes federal land available for corporations to drill for oil and mine for coal, uranium and other things.

While old-growth forests also burn, the forests aren't destroyed by them – on the contrary, they need fire to prosper. But over a century of reckless logging practices throughout the region and beyond has resulted in a patchwork of tree farms, which are very vulnerable to being completely destroyed by fire.

The land that's not controlled by federal agencies is controlled by more local authorities, and of course much of it is privately owned. Real estate investment, speculation, and development are a huge part of the country's economy, along with property management. In the same way that the main job of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management is to facilitate the exploitation of the land and forests by private corporations, the main job of local government authorities, it seems, is to facilitate real estate transactions.

After decades of government dis-investment in



September 22, 2020

RICHARD C. GROSS

Chaos Galore

PAM MARTENS - RUSS
MARTENS

**3-Count Felon, JPMorgan
Chase, Caught
Laundering More Dirty
Money**

PATRICK COCKBURN

**Boris Johnson is Failing
So Badly Because He Still
Thinks Like a Newspaper
Columnist, a Disastrous
Weakness During This**

housing and the ongoing deregulation of the housing market, coupled with successful corporate-led campaigns to ban the practice of rent control in 48 out of 50 states, including Oregon, housing has become increasingly unaffordable in cities across the country, very much including all the major urban hubs of the west coast. The unaffordability of housing has resulted in people moving ever further from the urban centers, into areas that were undeveloped, as they say, until recently. First Portlanders unable to stay in their city were moving to Gresham and Oregon City. Then they were moving further out, to Molalla and Estacada, once the idea of the commute taking over an hour became a concept people were ready to swallow, if it meant the possibility of being able to afford decent housing.

Putting the past two weeks into the context of more recent events:

Since the videotaped murder of George Floyd by clearly sadistic police in Minneapolis on May 25th, Portland has been one of many cities across the US and the world where people have been protesting in one form or another, usually in multiple parts of the city at the same time, every day, against police brutality and racism, and increasingly around related issues that disproportionately impact the poor and people of color, such as access in this society to things like housing, health care, and, increasingly, food.

Crisis

RAMZY BAROUD

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MARK WEISBROT

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BINOY KAMPMARK

Assange on Trial: Bolting Horses, Death Penalties and Plots of Eviction

TOM ENGELHARDT

Fire and Fury Like the World Has Never Seen (2020 Version)

JOHN KENDALL HAWKINS

Tales From the Trump Apocalypse

SHAMUS COOKE

The Politics of Portland's Protests

JACK RASMUS

Ginsburg's Death and Trump's Emerging Legal Coup D'Etat

ROBBY SHERWIN

Righteous Rage

THOMAS KNAPP

Supreme Court: Playing for Time vs. Advise and Consent

ANDRÉS CASTRO

Burning Torches in The Hood

September 21, 2020

BETTY MEDSGER

The Legacy of Ruth Bader

The protest movement here in Portland involves people from all walks of life, of all ages, from all the various racialized groups, genders, etc. The protests have been continuously met with massive police brutality. As time goes on, people are becoming more and more organized, with different networks becoming well established, taking on crucial responsibilities such as providing protesters with food, water, and medical care. Other groups take on the responsibility of making sure there's a clear barrier around the gatherings, to make it harder for people to drive into the ranks of those assembled with motor vehicles. Others try to provide some semblance of security, keeping a lookout for suspicious characters laden with assault rifles and American flags, such as the member of Patriot Prayer who was killed in the course of the extremely tense atmosphere of the violent Trump Cruise that came to Portland on August 29th, during which time the police largely absented themselves, and allowed uncontrolled combat between fascists and antifascists to take place in the streets of the city. Michael Reinoehl was involved with doing security at the protests, and had been for a long time. Five days later, unmarked police vehicles pulled up at the apartment where Michael was staying, outside of Lacey, Washington, and executed him right there, in a hail of bullets.

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JOHN FEFFER

Trump's Scorched-Earth Policy

SAM PIZZIGATI

Remembering Ike, Our Unexpected Egalitarian

BOB FLAX

The U.S. Government Should Be Supporting International Law—Not Undermining It

DEAN BAKER

Beyond Fighting the Last Trade War

THOM HARTMANN

Trump's Destruction of America Started With Reagan

NICK LICATA

Bridging Individualism

Song for Michael Reinoehl



Oh and of course then there's also the pandemic, the various societal impacts of which probably need no introduction by now.

On the first weekend of September, a week after the deadly, 600-vehicle Trump Cruise, another Trump Cruise was planned. Hundreds of pickup trucks with over-sized US flags on the back of them, making them look a lot like those pickup trucks that get rigged up as mobile rocket launchers by groups in Afghanistan or Libya, were back in the Portland suburb of Clackamas, a county named after the Indian nation whose unceded land we are occupying now. So soon after they invaded Portland, so soon after the execution of Michael Reinoehl, this time they went from Clackamas to the state capital of Salem, bypassing the regional center of resistance that Portland has become.

By September 7th, the extreme wind event teamed up with the years of so-called drought, downed power lines, a multitude of dry lightning strikes, a

**and Community to
Sustain our Democracy**

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**In the Night Kitchen of
the Next Election: a
Parody**

Weekend Edition

September 18, 2020

Friday - Sunday

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**"Law and Order" vs.
"Empathy and Healing"**

PAUL STREET

**For Real Resistance: The
Fascist Trump-Barr
Regime Can't Simply Be
Voted Out**

BRIAN CLOUGHLEY

**Be It Trump Or
Biden, Iraq is Doomed**

JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

**Roaming Charges: Smoke
on the Water, Lies
Burning in the Sky**

RICHARD C. GROSS

Raising Fear

EVE OTTENBERG

**Surprise! Still No
Economic Relief from
Washington**

GEORGE WUERTHNER

**Misinformation Raging
Like Wildfire**

ANDREW LEVINE

**Democrats: Can't Live
With 'Em, Can't Live
Without 'Em**

JOHN LAFORGE

century of terrible forestry practices, and decades of the cancerous suburban expansion caused by the exponential rise in the cost of housing over that time, all came together to cause the massive fires already ravaging California to do the same in Oregon. I was in Cathedral Park, where one of the last events related to Black Lives Matter was taking place, before all protest activities basically took a solid week off to focus on the apocalypse.



Mic Crenshaw and other great local hip-hop artists were performing, after the speeches were over. Several hundred were gathered beneath the very high bridge that is above the park, and the sky was completely shrouded in smoke from the fires that had begun burning around much of the state. Several people were talking from the stage about

Germany: US Nuclear Weapons Shamed in Nationwide Debate

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George Atiyeh, Opal Creek Champion

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Are Environmentalists Too Compromised to Fight for Real Solutions?

LOUIS PROYECT

Nature, Science and Revolutionary Struggle

THOMAS MOUNTAIN

Poisonous Gas Not Tear Gas

BINOY KAMPMARK

Assange on Trial: Diligent Redactions and Avoiding Harm

NAKIYA WAKES

What the Flint Water

threats from fascists that people had been getting, folks threatening to come to the park and be violent. The decision was made to end the event early, but it continued, with a sort of “stay at your own risk” caveat. Some people left, but most stayed until all the performers on the sound truck were done.

I think there was one other, very scarcely-attended protest after that, before priorities really shifted. As large parts of Oregon were under evacuation orders, those being evacuated needed all kinds of assistance. The groups who had been providing food, water, medical care, and other things, generally began mobilizing to do what they could to help out with the broader effort that various elements of the government, churches, the Red Cross, and so on, were involved with, in terms of providing for basic needs.

The Trump Cruise elements of society were surely involved with fighting fires and feeding people, I’m just assuming, but some of them were and are also involved with setting up illegal roadblocks in various parts of the state, looking for people they consider suspicious, which seems to include anyone wearing black, and people of color with big cameras, such as OPB photojournalist, Sergio Olmos. One road block mentioned in the news was in Corbett, east of Portland, where I have recorded most of the albums I’ve put out since I moved to Portland 13 years ago, at Big Red Studio, which was even closer to being evacuated during the

Eagle Creek conflagration of 2017.

As fires were increasingly burning in the less populated areas of Clackamas, threatening the biggest towns in the county, leveling some of the smaller ones, and threatening the main urban center of the state, Portland, just to the north of Clackamas County, local officials here in Multnomah County and in the city of Portland were very active on Twitter, and presumably in other media, encouraging us all to download an app called Everbridge, so we would make sure to get emergency notifications related to the spreading and uncontrolled fires, and possible evacuation plans.

Dwelling on this point for a moment: when a child is abducted and is being transported in a car, or when Portland was under a curfew because of what they call riots, my wife, my teenage daughter, and I all receive text notifications on our phones about these things. They come in with a loud noise, and then you have to look at the message before you can do anything else with the phone.

Given that the state seems to obviously have the capacity to send push notifications to residents of the state with phones, why do we now need to download this app? Who knows. But what can quickly be ascertained by anyone with half a brain are the following: on the Google Play store, the app has been downloaded 500,000 times or more, which is also an indication that it has been

downloaded by fewer than a million people. Reviewers give the app a 2.3 star rating, with widespread complaints that it just doesn't work. Since County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury was encouraging everyone to download the app, I did so, as did my wife, Reiko. She has an iPhone, I have an Android. We're both proficient at this sort of technology, and neither of us could make the app work. Neither of us have ever received a notification from this app since we downloaded it and registered ourselves with it to the best of our abilities. Neither of us have received any other notifications on our phones regarding the ongoing fires through any other means, either.

In Jackson County, in southern Oregon, where the cities of Medford and Ashland are, and where the suburb of Phoenix used to exist, incredibly, the existing emergency alert system that interrupts local radio and TV programs to tell us what's going on, was never used. Also never used were the emergency text notification system that has been used before in the state of Oregon, as I mentioned previously. The only notification system they were using was this app, Everbridge, which we were all supposed to have downloaded by now. But as you can see on the app store, even if close to a million people may have downloaded the app, that's only a fourth of this state's population. And the app doesn't work, as anyone who tried to use it might have discovered long before this catastrophe.

My friend Jason Houk was one of thousands of

people in Oregon whose homes were completely destroyed in the fires. His home was in Jackson County.

By the weekend of September 11th, the air quality in cities up and down the west coast were the worst in the world. All of us who have for months now been getting a crash course in epidemiology have lately been learning about the existence of something called the Air Quality Index. As the business press has had to discover new adjectives to describe the catastrophically dire state of the economy, so the meteorologists have had to start inventing new categories of bad weather. For the first time, that weekend the local air was no longer being described as “hazardous.” It had now graduated to a new term: “smoke.” It was no longer being called a type of air, it was a new gaseous substance with a different name altogether.

I looked upon my wife and teenage daughter with a combination of admiration and horror as both of them expressed a lack of interest in getting out of the city for a while. Fires were raging in the county just to the south, the air was virtually unbreathable, all activities that any of us had been involved with had been canceled for the time being, such as my protests, such as the toddler’s preschool, the teenager’s rock gym, my wife’s tennis sessions. But out of a sense of solidarity with the majority of the population of the city that was unable to get away from the smoke because

they were too busy trying to keep their jobs or couldn't afford a hotel room, they didn't want to leave.



Admiration aside, I had different priorities. When two of my aunts teamed up to offer to pay for us to get a hotel room anywhere where the air quality was significantly better than Portland, until things improved, I insisted we leave town. Which worked with my wife and our youngest children, but not with the teenager, who insisted on staying in Portland with her other mother, sealing the doors and windows, and staying inside.

The four of us bailed last Sunday and headed to Astoria. I had studied Air Quality Index maps and fire maps, which all confirmed what I already suspected. In Oregon, the main fires were in the

massive valley that goes up and down the state, on the other side of the mountain range that is beside the coast. The climate has always been much drier to the east of that mountain range, and then to the east of the next range, it's desert. This is the case in all the three western states. This thin strip along the edge of the continent is kept moist and foggy by big weather patterns that tend not to change much, even in recent decades. The mountain range keeps the fog on the west side of it, and the hotter it gets east of the range, the more that keeps the fog from spilling over, thus trapping it along the coast. The northwest tip of the state of Oregon, the city of Astoria, has weather very reminiscent of the west coast of Ireland, for the same sorts of reasons having to do with what happens when trade winds meet land masses.

If you watched the weather reports, you would have thought the air was terrible throughout the western US. If you looked more closely, you'd see there were exceptions. My aunts, and others, were encouraging us to fly to the east coast – to the northeast, specifically, where I grew up, which thus far is well insulated from fires, if not from floods. Good that we didn't consider that option, out of a combination of fear of flying during an out-of-control pandemic and various other considerations, because the airport soon closed to most flights anyway, due to the smoke.

We drove on the sparsely-populated streets, past the countless tents and the increasingly gray faces

of the people still living in them, to the highway that leads north and west, and ends where the continent ends, in Astoria. As we got to the other side of the last of the mountains, the grass and all the other vegetation got greener, and soon we were at the ocean, enshrouded in fog which smelled only slightly of campfire. A slightly smoky fog, rather than just billowing, orange-tinged ash, passing as air.

The real refugees are those whose homes were destroyed. We were just temporary refugees, and very privileged ones. We had a sponsor paying for a hotel room. But this is also the case with refugees from Syria or Honduras or anywhere else. The ones with the means to escape are the lucky ones. The ones who can escape, in a private car, to a hotel room, are luckier still.

To compound the sense of guilt I was already feeling, as we settled into our hotel room, I heard from other folks who had already escaped to Astoria or some other town on the north coast, but who were heading back into the smoke because they could no longer afford the extortionist rates the hotels were charging. During our five days in Astoria, other folks joined us who hadn't been planning to leave Portland, but who just couldn't stay in the smoke any longer.

As has been the case for a very long time, I'm glued to news coverage in various forms. Hanging out with small children, as I'm usually doing in

recent years, this takes the form of listening to radio and podcasts through an ear bud in one ear, while I'm at the playgrounds and such. The governor has been holding daily press conferences, which I've been listening to.

I'm sure they have a decent air filtration system at the capital, but I had an immediate sense of respect for the woman, if only for the fact that I think she was addressing us from Salem, which at the time had some of the most toxic air of any city on Earth. When we left Portland, the AQI was over 500.

The most notable thing about the governor's press conferences was the fear of public speaking that you can hear in her voice and in the voices of every member of her staff. You can hear when the governor tries to sound like she's emoting, and puts this breathy quality in her voice that we're supposed to understand as empathy. Maybe she feels empathy, I'm not saying she's a sociopath, necessarily, but the empathy fails to come through. At least she was audible, which was not the case with any of her staff members, speaking on Zoom or something, from their various locations. At the first conference there was nobody playing the role of host, so there were lots of awkward transitions, until the governor realized midstream that she better play that role herself, if no one else was going to do it. Which was good, because she was the only one who seemed to be using equipment at her office that allowed her

broadcast to be audible through OPB's feed. With a good headset on, listening on my phone to OPB, I could just barely hear the other speakers, such as the guy managing the overall fire response, who seems to have moved to Oregon quite recently from somewhere in Maine. What really shocked me was that day after day, the audio quality of these press conferences never improved.

The continually poor production values of their little fireside chats were compounded by much of the stuff they were saying, when you could figure out what it was. Apparently the Oregon Employment Department is starting a new Disaster Unemployment program, in addition to the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, PUA. But after six months, tens of thousands of people in Oregon who qualify for PUA have yet to receive a dime from the Employment Department, which is running on 1980's technology and has suffered from a Covid outbreak within the ranks of the staff, as well as having offices closed due to the fires. And now we're supposed to believe any of us will receive timely assistance from them now? The governor made no mention of this reality, preferring her fantasy version, where she's at the helm of a functional state.

Ballad of the Oregon Employ...



Listening on many national news reports to the governor of California's press conferences, while also making efforts to coordinate a response to the ongoing emergency, he has blown much of his hot air in the form of partisan political diatribes aimed at President Trump and the Republican Party. Candidate Biden has done the same, inferring that if we want to avoid more such fiery calamities, we'd better not vote for the "climate arsonist" Trump, which Biden is apparently not, despite a long political career pointing to his culpability in our current ecological collapse. Governor Gavin Newsom wants to blame climate change on the catastrophic situation, and federal policies around climate change, and thus deflect the lion's share of responsibility for this mess, which lies at the doorstep of the capitalist system, and the real estate investment and unregulated real estate development that underpins it, from which he and most of his colleagues in government throughout the west coast profit from personally and politically.

If the exurbs such as Molalla and Paradise are the most vulnerable areas in this brave new climate, let's be very clear that the biggest victims of these fires are the people who couldn't afford to live in the places that get most of the firefighting resources, the places where most of the residents commute to to work, the bigger cities. And any efforts to mitigate this situation with better forest management will suffer the same fate as efforts to solve the housing crisis through little band-aid

solutions they come up with for that — they will fail, certainly as long as the underlying problem of unregulated capitalism that drives the ever-expanding exurbs to keep expanding as they are doing.

Roaming the streets of Astoria, on the boardwalk and in the outdoor seating areas of the cafes on the piers, we observed, met or overheard conversations of many different people. It's a town with two centuries of history as an international hub of fishing, canning, and trade, there at the mouth of the gigantic Columbia River, which leads to the sprawling ports of Portland, through which much of the world's trade has long passed on a daily basis. The canning and fishing is nothing like it was once, but there's a big Coast Guard presence in town, along with some functioning industry, lots of fishing boats and other sorts of boats, and it reeks of history, with many of the buildings that played a prominent role in the labor wars of the early twentieth century still standing as they were, such as the Finnish social center, and the American Legion hall, with the river still filled with functioning, though soggy-looking, wooden pilings, with large buildings atop them, with cars and trucks and cafes and canneries and little ad hoc museums.



With this backdrop, the sidewalks and grassy knolls are filled with a wide variety of people. Some of them are to be found there in Astoria year round – like the middle-aged women frequenting the cafes in the morning, talking about goings-on at the arts center, and the many people living near the trolley shelters, drinking cans of beer, and the gothic-looking teenagers who clearly have no appreciation for the fact that they live in paradise, and wish their parents would move back to Portland, where there are protests and night life.

Then there are the visitors. Some of them are actual tourists, which Astoria would normally have more of this time of year, but for the pandemic. But most of the visitors were playing the role of tourist because they were smoked out

of their towns. Many families crammed into pickup trucks with several dogs and too many suitcases. Along with them, guys who looked like they hadn't left the pot farm in years, but were being put up there by the Red Cross, and had no idea what "a card for incidentals" meant, when asked for one by the hotel clerk. I felt like a snob for even noticing that interaction, but when you are a frequent traveler, it becomes easy to spot folks who have never stayed in a two-star hotel before, or who have never been through an airport security line.

Other visitors were clad entirely in black, like I generally am. In large urban centers throughout the world, this is a very common way to dress. Outside of those centers it's less common. Less common still are people clad entirely in black, who also have visible tattoos, piercings, and white, punk rock or political slogans on their clothing. There were many people who fit this description around town, more than on previous visits to Astoria, and I got the impression that many of them were smoke refugees like us. I also got the impression that all the American flags around this Coast Guard town was making them uncomfortable. I wondered if anyone had yelled at them, as had happened to me in recent weeks, when posterizing in certain Portland neighborhoods east of the 205. I was pushing a stroller around Astoria, insulated from those types of interactions by the small children. The only comment I heard was a suburban-looking woman commenting to

her friend that all the articles of clothing I was wearing were the same shade of black. They were clearly entertained by this, which made me smile.

Having returned to Portland, with the AQI at a much more reasonable level, back to the usual rating in the high double digits, the mayor's ban on CS gas has proven to be the farce that it obviously was, since he didn't ban the use of chemical weapons by the police, but only this particular one. As the air became breathable again and the fires were becoming contained, the protests resumed. Adding fuel to the fires of the ongoing social unrest in this country, news of ICE's apparent forced hysterectomy ring inspired renewed efforts at abolishing that particularly onerous agency, along with the police in general. Copious clouds of tear gas and other forms of wanton police brutality have characterized the past two nights on the streets of Portland. As Arun Gupta tweeted the other day, "Pardon the catastrophic global warming, we now return you to your regularly scheduled state violence."



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CounterPunch

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