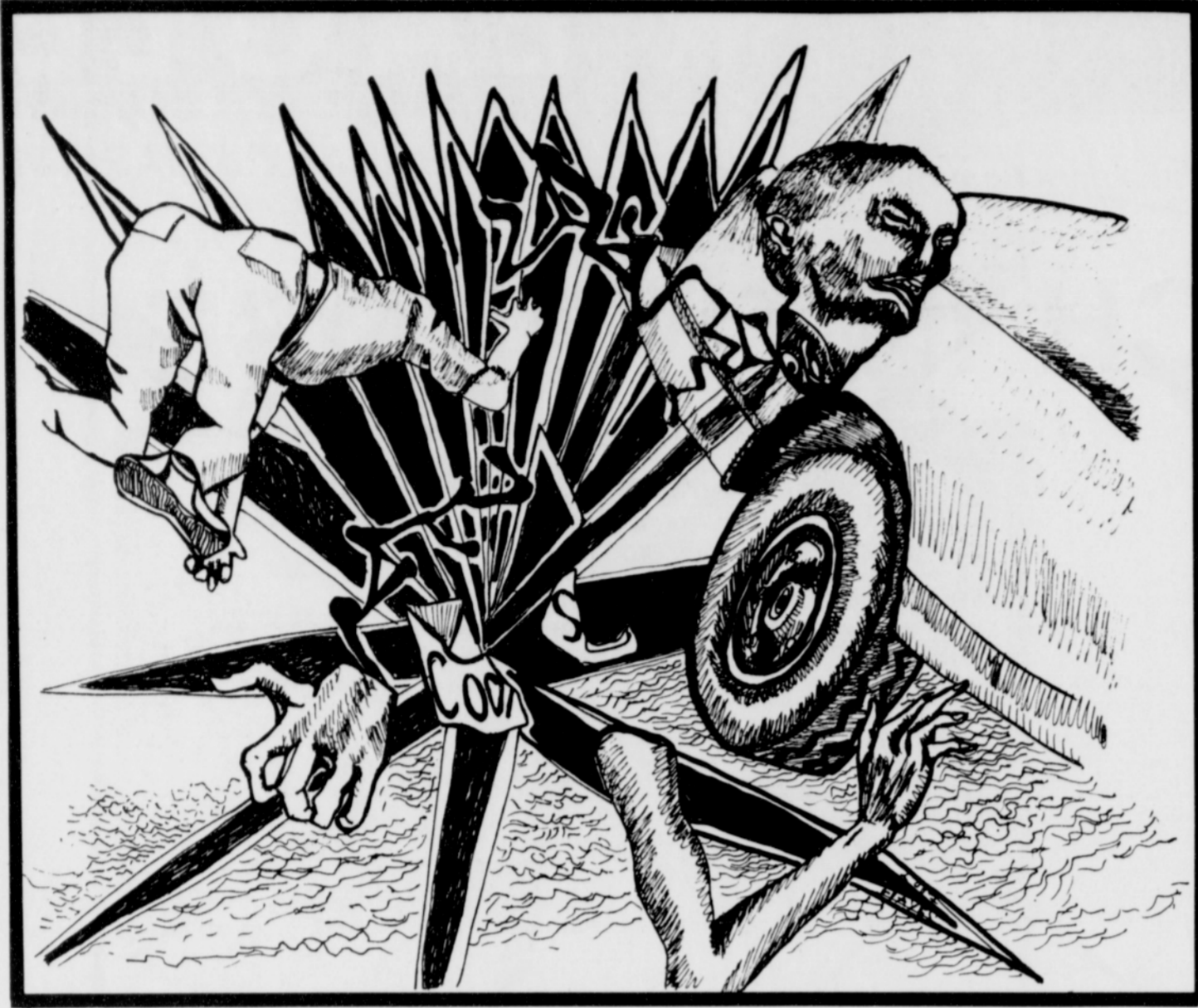


# LIFE WHERE 9/11 IS 24/7



## SUPPOSE OUR FAR WEST WAS LIKE THE MIDDLE EAST

BY CHARLES A. HILLESTAD

Can the average American fully comprehend what it is like to live through something like the Balkan ethnic cleansings of a few years ago, the Lebanon eruptions every decade or so, or Iraq almost anytime? I doubt it.

I'm not talking about the *temporary* disasters like Katrina or even man made ones like the World Trade Center, bad though they were. I am talking about trying to imagine something that grinds on for years on end where depression and desperation has largely obliterated even hope of change.

The problem is that in our lack of imagination, we can end up causing such events or ignoring them. Worse, despite our fortuitous circumstances, resources and geography, we may not be totally immune to such madness ourselves. As the polarization of elections, the abandonment of compromise, the demonization of opponents and the apparent growing belief over the past 20 years that the end justifies any means is starting to suggest, we could "balkanize" ourselves.

For the last 50 years, relatively few Americans have ever experienced anything like 9/11 firsthand. A few million or so were close enough to ground zero in New York to smell and hear it as it happened. A few thousand in Oklahoma City lived sufficiently near to the federal building to have their windows blown out when Timothy McVey decided to show how Americans can be good at terrorism too. A few hundred were in the Colorado and Oregon high schools when kids went on random shooting sprees. A few dozen have been unfortunate enough to witness bombings of abortion clinics or hear the supersonic crack of a serial sniper's bullet. Terrifying terrorism events each and every one, but in this country at least, they are noteworthy for their rarity in both time and distance.

Granted, they were life disrupting events as well as life ending for some. They scared and scarred TV spectators far and near as well as the unwilling participants. At the same time, for the most part, other than the lost loved ones and the traumatic stress syndrome, "everything" was not changed. For the most part, any change was only a few days or weeks or months in duration except for comparatively minor aspects of daily life such as taking off shoes in airport lines. The anguish no doubt is still there undiminished for many, but not all, not even for all those present at the scene when it happened. Frankly, an observer from another planet would be hard-pressed to see much physical difference in the daily conduct of life on our West Coast before and after those events. People still go to the malls, stand in line at movies, attend concerts, open their front doors to total strangers and do not have bomb shelters or buried supplies.

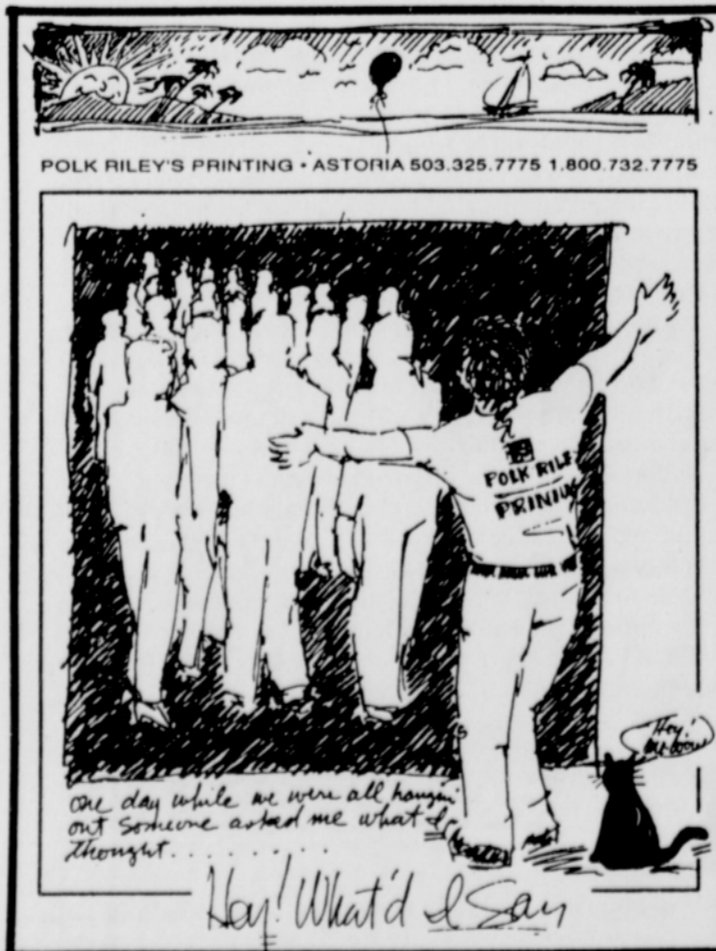
If you count in the ghettos of L.A. and other big cities where gangs and drive-by shootings are more frequent, there is some permanent change in how locals wake up each morning. In those more permanently risky places, many do wonder whether they will be lucky enough to survive the day. Nevertheless, most folks don't live in ghettos. The blood and bandages, the debris and dead children are far away.

Suppose we were not so lucky. You have all seen the destruction in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel. It's all over TV. Even if you don't watch the news, it's on the front pages of newspapers and the covers of magazines. You have even seen it, or what it looks like, on the big screen. Hollywood is pretty good at picturing the trauma. *But*, have any of us who were born here in idyllic Oregon and never went ourselves where the bullets and bombs were flying ever *really* thought about it except in the abstract?

Now is the time. The events-pictures on nightly news, may have been unspeakable acts, but we do need to speak about them. So, here is a mental exercise: think about the unthinkable in concrete terms, *real* concrete. Imagine what is happening "over there" occupying instead the very concrete laid down in your own U.S. Post Office zip code. Forget for the moment what Hollywood star is sleeping with whom. Picture what is happening in the Middle East happening to you and yours where you could see outside your front door.

For instance, imagine if you were afraid to go to the ironically titled Safeway for food because someone may detonate a bomb next to you in the checkout line. Imagine your nearest Target in the target sights of a military jet. Still want to shop there? Do you want to play "Russian Roulette" every time you step through revolving doors at the market?

Imagine armed guards frisking you at the doorways of Albertson's which would now be windowless, boarded up and have huge concrete barriers out front so that no truck bomber can crash through the glass entries. Even if you are able to shop without interference, there might not be any food because of blockades or bombed-out roads and airports or fearful farmers not working the fields or hoarding by suppliers. Imagine the mighty Fred Meyer grocery chain with endless rows upon rows of empty shelves. Imagine the blemished or even rotting apples. Imagine the moldy rutabaga never making it to the dumpster. Imagine harvesting dandelion leaves from your lawn because you need them in your salad. Imagine a growling of the stomach that seldom stops. Imagine those pictures of children with ribs



showing were yours. If there is edible food on the shelves, black market war profiteers could make it so expensive you couldn't afford it.

Imagine your dollars being worth little anyway. Imagine sorting through your possessions to see what you can barter or sell to put food on the table. Sorry, the Bank of America ATMs don't work anymore. Snipers might have the boxes in their cross-hairs.

You can't even go to church on the weekend to pray it will all stop. The bell tower on that cute little church is an obvious aiming point by others who don't like your particular choice of religion. Bingo. Or, once you get to church, you may discover your priest or pastor was killed. Hey, once zealots start believing they have the only true religion and are the only ones worthy of being saved, it becomes much easier to contemplate eliminating the "menace" of other sects by eliminating their practitioners.

Or worse yet, you might hear your own preacher in his finery preaching about how the (Catholics)(Lutherans)(Mormons) (insert whatever congregation is down the lane) are plotting against you and how they are going to Hell anyway. Praise your version of the Lord and pass the ammunition with the collection plate, so to speak. Sort of "Do unto others before they do unto you." Besides, there is always the excuse available that "They started it first."

Some in the Middle East are interpreting the Koran wording to allow bombing of others. And a distressing percentage of them seem to be trained "ordained" religious leaders. What's that you say? You believe only the leaders of Muslim religion variants ever say such horrific things or encourage or justify killings. You don't think "our" Christian churches would ever be a party to such "un-Christian" behavior as killing "heretics." Read some history books and wonder if Joan of Arc or Oliver Cromwell or Richard the Lionhearted, Christians all, would agree. We have well known and apparently admired TV evangelists who advocate assassinations; and I will bet they were standing near a copy of the Ten Commandments when they said it, and probably clutching a Bible too.

If attending church is dangerous, then what about a Regal movie theater for escape? The Rotary Club luncheon perhaps? The Astoria public library to quietly read a magazine? Hanging out on the beach? Forget it. Crowds equal opportunity for the guy (or girl) to punctuate a religious or political statement. You are forced to wonder, for example, if the "beer belly" brooding over there at the end of the bar in the local McMenemy's is really just fat or has a row of dynamite strapped around the waist.

Should you send your children to school? Schools are targeted and so are the principals and teachers for *what* they teach or for even daring to teach — period. Certainly no Friday night football. No basketball tournament. Well, what about home schooling, you say? Okay. What books? Do you have them already? Don't expect UPS to deliver new ones. And, what lessons? Can you personally teach your kids fractions, let alone calculus?

It's not much fun staying at home either. No heat in the winter. Worse, no air-conditioning in the summer, and even Astoria on the coast hit 103 degrees last year. We are fortunate in the Pacific Northwest: temperatures rarely get above 110 even east of the Cascades. At the same time no electricity also means no power from PP&L for the refrigerator to store food, assuming you have any. Of course, no gas from Northwest Natural Gas means little is available to cook it anyway. Does that Coleman Camper in the attic still work? You better hope so. This can be going on not for hours or days, but months and years.

There is probably no water to cook with, at least not clean water, water you can count on without thinking as we do now. That faithful faucet can become now merely an ornament on the sink. Maybe you will still be drinking "mineral water," but you probably won't like the minerals in it, let alone the nasty bugs that are no longer filtered out at the water treatment plant. Those and the pipelines and conduits supplying your water are also targets of opportunity.

Maybe you have a well or a nearby stream. Great, assuming no one else covets it. Your great-grandparents used to dig wells and divert streams. Can you? Of course, that still does not solve the issue of what is *in* the water. Can you test it in any way other than your lower gastrointestinal tract? Boiling is a good idea as you recall from your Boy or Girl Scout Handbook, but you are probably reduced to doing so at a wood fire since the gas and electricity no longer function. Keep in mind, you have to depend on others to keep those utilities working. And they have the same problems you do.

By the way, got an axe or saw and a means to sharpen them if no gas or electricity? That wood doesn't cut itself. It is long hard work, even if you do have cutting tools. There is one bright spot. You would have more free time to do the necessary things you now have to do since you no longer go out for fun.

The toilet is probably not working, not with either the sewer lines being blown up or the sewage treatment plant itself. Easy to destroy. Hard to repair.

So, get used to the stink. And not just how your own body or the communal outhouse or slit trench smells. Wait until you learn what the smell of dead bodies is like after they spend a few weeks crushed under a collapsed building. It's something your nostrils will never forget. Same for the cloying smell of burned bodies. Have you ever seen a dead body, let alone smelled one. How about thousands?

Well, there is always watching "Desperate Housewives" on the telly, right? Wrong. There are desperate housewives aplenty, but not on TV. No KMUN-FM or OPB radio either. Towers get targeted. And what news arrives tends to be propaganda for somebody. Maybe there are some shortwave broadcasts available to those who bought hand-cranked radios before it all went to hell. Another bright spot: at least your arms will have something to do even if you don't.

Probably there is no mail. The post carrier's motto of neither "rain nor shine nor gloom of night" deterring their rounds doesn't seem to contemplate improvised explosive devices (IEDs), nor snipers nor suspicious homeowners. Newspapers? Maybe — if someone still has a working mimeograph machine, that is.

News will be forced to travel at the speed of rumors and will be about as accurate. There are few, if any, reporters showing up in your neighborhood anyway. Reporters these days don't seem to care as much for combat zones as they used to back in Walter Cronkite's days. Maybe it's because they end up dead more often.

No telephones. Sure, your landline always worked even if the power went out. But they don't work if the lines are down or the central station demolished and the repairmen shot. Back to