

The Innocent Bystander:

Hit squads tilt world power

It was a dark chill evening in the winter of 1989. I was taking a shortcut through an alley in Washington's Embassy Row when a sinister figure loomed up before me.

Could it be... Yes! Carlos the Rascal! I recognized the international master of disguise immediately for he quickly changed from a short, chunky Appalachian woodcutter to a tall, lean Gimbel's toaster salesman before my eyes.

With a deft movement, he fanned a pack of documents and held them out. "Pick a passport," he said cunningly. "Pick any passport."

"You can't fool me, Carlos," I said. "What brings you and your Phynkian hit squad to Washington?"

"You haven't read the papers?" he demanded. "Your President Muckcross has seen fit to double your import duties on variegated gerbils."

I was stunned. Was our president mad? The Rattdom of Phynkia (population 183) produced only two commodities: rocks and variegated gerbils. Its hereditary ruler, the Ratt, had but one source of hard currency: the four gerbils he exported to the U.S. each year. Increasing our tariffs could ruin him.

"Yes," said Carlos, who as now wearing a morning coat and striped trousers, "I personally delivered a diplomatic note to your secretary of state this afternoon. It said that if the tariff was not withdrawn, the Rattdom of Phynkia was prepared to declare (here, he paused for effect) hit squad!"

I shuddered. Once hit squad had been declared, there would be no turning back. The conflict would not be resolved until our hit squad took care of the Ratt or his hit squad. . . . No, the consequences were too awful to contemplate.

A decade earlier, of course, such a confrontation would have meant war. But that was before Colonel Moammr Khadafy won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1982.

While other nations, including the U.S., were believed to have employed hit squads in the past, it was Khadafy who showed the world how effectively they could be used. The very rumor that he had dispatched one to this country panicked Washington far more than the mere threat of a thermonuclear war. Overnight, Khadafy's arid little nation of three million souls became the equal of the American goliath.

The lesson was not lost on other small



by ART HOPPE

countries. None was so small that it could not manage to put together a six-man hit squad to take care of foreign affairs and a vigilant bodyguard to provide for the national leader's defense.

And thus the small countries could no longer be pushed around by the superpowers. Indeed, one of the mightiest nations on earth was now the Republic of Artgum, whose fanatic hit squad, the Artgum Erasers, was feared in capitals around the globe.

Armies were naturally disbanded. With a hit squad, who needed an army? For as war was once the logical extension of politics, as von Clausewitz suggested, the logical extension of politics was now the hit squad.

So nuclear weapons were anachronisms, battleships a joke and tanks an obscenity. With half a trillion dollars saved each year on armaments, peace and prosperity ran amok.

Of course it wasn't all peaches and cream. I glanced hesitantly at Carlos, who was by now a railroad engineer.

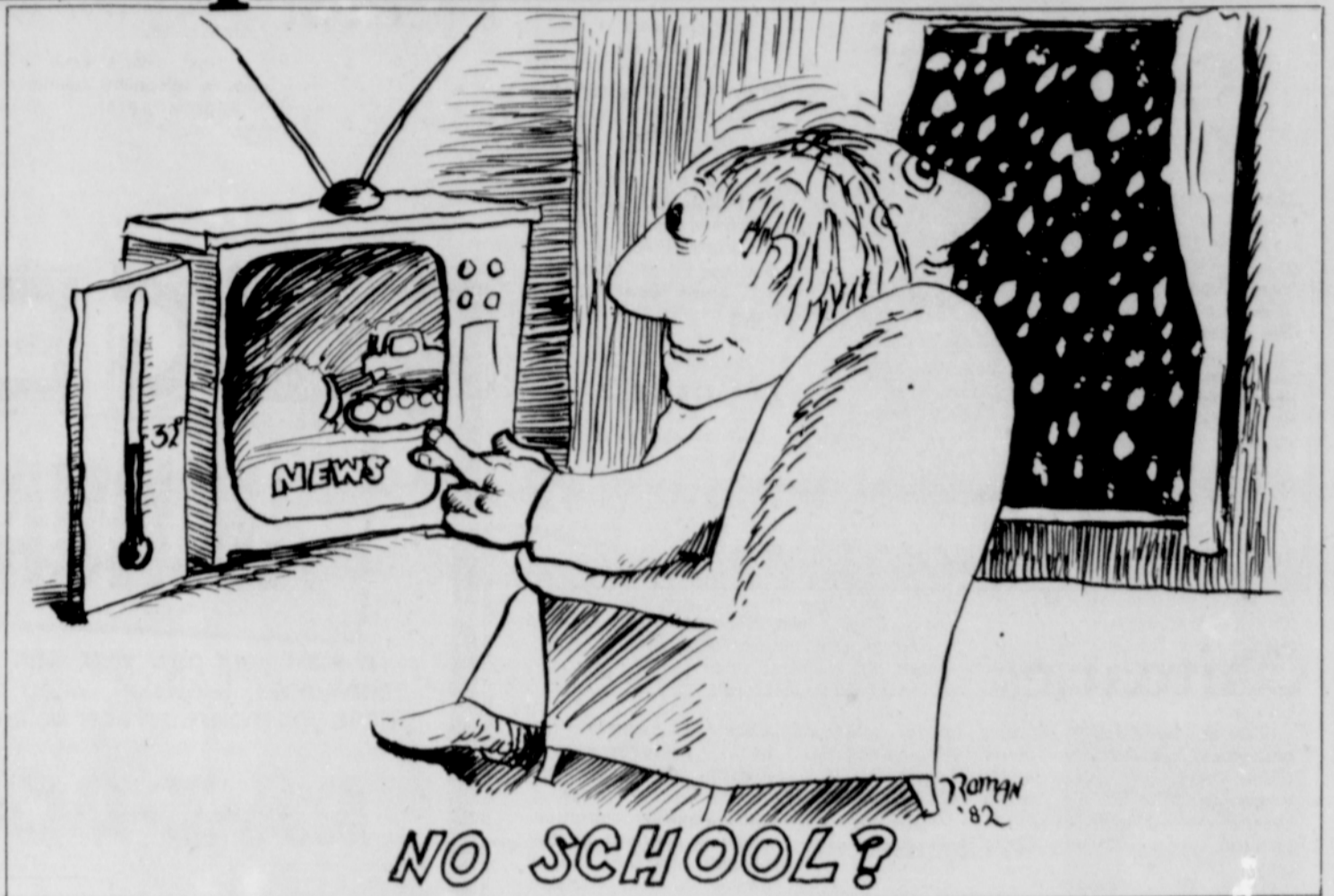
"If . . . If it comes to hit squad," I asked nervously, "what will you do President Muckcross?"

He glared at me with the cold, cruel eyes of a born terrorist. "We will," he said, flipping away his cigarette, "let the air out of his tires."

Poor President Muckcross! Poor national leaders everywhere. How careful they were these days to say only nice things about each other. Yet when it came to hit squad, they were the ones to suffer.

To be sure, since time immemorial, it was they, not we, who extended politics beyond the bounds of propriety. It was they, not we, who stirred up emotions and sent us off to fight and die for them.

So that's another good thing they can say for hit squad: Better them than us.



Letters to the editor:

Public involvement pays big here

All help clean!

I'm writing this note in response to the comments made by Barbara Nutter regarding cleanliness of the local laundramat in Sandy.

For me, the issue isn't whether the building is clean or not, but how an individual can evoke a possible change in any given situation without publicly embarrassing someone. Public chastisement sometimes is the only option available, if private and consistent complaints are ignored. In this case, a simple note to the owner would have been more gracious and tactful. It is always wise to ask yourself how you would like to be treated in the same cir-

umstances?

Judging by the amount of people frequenting this facility, it must be quite difficult to maintain a perfect atmosphere of order, and I seriously doubt anyone is expecting it. As long as the washing machines and dryers work and the place is reasonably free of litter, the owner has fulfilled his obligation to the public. The customer also cannot escape a sense of responsibility for contributing to the problem of disorder.

In other words, clean up your own act, America, and maybe clean living will become a reality.

Linda Fredricksen
Rhododendron

Charity shown

On behalf of the Sandy Kiwanis Club I wish to express our thanks to the many people and organizations that contributed money, food and toys to help us make it possible for more than 140 families in our area to receive Christmas baskets this year.

Thanks to students in Sandy High and Cedar Ridge Schools who always come through with their canned food drives, the VFW with cash and toys and the Mt. Hood Mudders who are always available to help deliver the baskets to the more remote areas.

A special thanks also to Pete Sulzbach for many hours spent in the organization and to Al and Helen Lamke for the repair and

storage of many of the toys.

This is a community-wide effort that is repaid by the thanks of basket recipients.

Darrel Dempster, president
Sandy Kiwanis Club

Mail speeded

With the Christmas mailing season now behind us, the entire staff of the Sandy Post Office wishes to express our appreciation for the excellent cooperation we received from your newspaper in helping us urge the public to shop and mail early during the last several weeks.

Thanks to your effort and the excellent cooperation of our residents, we were able to handle the holiday mail volume without any dif-

ficulty. Allow me to mention, too, that our success was due also to the dedication of our postal employees who worked long hours to make sure all mail was delivered in time for Christmas.

Again, thank you for your help in making this holiday season one of the most successful ever for Sandy.

A.E. Becker
Sandy Postmaster

LETTERS POLICY
The Post asks that all letters to the editor be typed, double-spaced and signed. Deadline is noon, Tuesday. Letters should be accurate, free of libelous remarks and in good taste.

Wall Street report:

Home movie pirates warned

NEW YORK — Pssst: dangerous criminals at work. Their hideout: an innocent-looking home, possibly on your street. Their aliases: Mom, Dad, Sis, Sony. Their tools: blank videotape and video cassette recorder. Their crime: recording — with the shades drawn — a telecast of "Gone With the Wind."

Sound silly to you? With some three million video cassette recorders (VCRs) in the U.S. today, it's beginning to sound silly — or at least hopeless — even to aggrieved movie-makers. Indeed, a bill dropped in the Senate hopper shortly before year-end would courageously exempt the typical American family from criminal prosecution for having a VCR in the home. (Gee, that was close, wasn't it?)

But if you and the kids can now apparently record "Citizen Kane," "Casablanca" and "The African Queen" in safety (even with the shades open to federal inspection), Hollywood is still pushing Washington to levy royalty fees on the producers of recorders and blank tapes who make your little game possible. And in that area, McC Mathias (R, Md.), a ranking member of the Judiciary Committee, already has submitted an amendment that would impose such fees.

It's become a top movie-industry priority for the new year. As Jack J. Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, put it to me, "There is no objection by film-makers for families to tape a program from their TV set in the privacy of their homes. What we do care about, very strongly, is the right of those who create, produce and copyright American entertainment to be compensated for the use of their property by the manufacturers who profit from it."

In pursuit of this effort, Valenti heads a new "Coalition to Preserve the American Copyright" that is attempting to rally both the film and television industries, including their labor forces, to battle Sony and other Japanese VCR manufacturers. The argument is that growing use of VCRs threatens to shrink residual revenue accrued from the showing of movies on commercial and cable TV.

How big is this alleged threat? Well, it's certainly building fast: more than a third of those three million U.S. VCRs were sold in 1981, and industry observers forecast 1984 sales as high as 10 million sets.



by LOUIS RUKSEYER

Two related markets are burgeoning space: (1) domestic sales of blank video cassettes, which range between \$12 and \$19, totaled \$232 million in 1980 (based on nearly 20 million cassettes) and are expected to approximate a billion dollars in 1984 (based on nearly 75 million cassettes), and (2) prerecorded movie cassettes, such as "Annie Hall," "Raging Bull" and "Rocky," are sold or rented by video retailers for prices ranging from \$50 to \$80 for each purchase and a few dollars a day for a rental. (The movie studios earn a royalty fee on an average of \$7 for a cassette sale, but are not compensated by the retailers in the booming rental market.)

How often does an American family perform that dastardly act of recording a movie off the air? All to often, according to Hollywood; Valenti cites a survey reporting that 52.8 percent of VCR owners use their equipment to record films for their entertainment library. (Even more unpatriotically, nearly 84 percent said they "skip" commercials when taping films. Don't these subversives care about the level of deodorant sales in America?)

Hollywood's tangled legal battle against VCRs, charging copyright infringement, is currently heading toward the Supreme Court — though Congress may act first.

The fight takes on overtones of xenophobia since virtually all VCRs and blank cassettes sold in the U.S. are manufactured in Japan, even though many are marketed here under such domestic labels as RCA, GE or Sears. But Valenti points out that other countries, notably West Germany and Austria, already have acted to protect their entertainment industries against uncompensated home recordings. He'd like a law that would establish a royalty fee to be paid by importers and manufacturers of VCRs and tapes, to be distributed annually to copyright owners. Mom and Dad might have to pay a little more for their equipment, but they'd then be able to hit the "record" button in peace. (Phew!)

Personally speaking

Dozen years melt Saigon's images

This new year's eve and yuletide were fun like most others, but I couldn't help remembering a more somber observance a dozen years ago.

The distance and hundred-degree warmth made lovely Vietnam seem so unlike a holiday setting. Periodic "police actions" also reminded cheerful Americans we were close to war.

Those occasions in the nine-to-five war didn't stop us in the "comfort zone" five miles from the combat zone from afternoon volleyball games. The five-foot Vietnam friendlies always won, by the way. Nor did evening fireworks at the edge of Saigon frighten those of us in the security of five-story hotels from slipping downtown for fun times and drinks 'til dawn. Somehow the bombs bursting in air never seemed real to us who watched the colorful display with July Fourth amusement from our wiremesh hotel windows.

The Navy hotel down the street where we lunched was bombed one otherwise quiet afternoon, but that didn't phase us. A local turncoat Viet Cong drew a pistol on me on a streetcorner ice cream stand one Sunday, but that also seemed unreal.

What seemed real was the Friday I forged my Karmen Gha through a foot of Seattle snow Christmas, 1969, to report for overseas duty. Training in that much snow was bad enough, but orders for Vietnam duty seemed horrid.

Saigon also was recuperating from its Chinese version of new year's celebration—a backstab by northern brothers in a broken truce that nearly turned Saigon over to the enemy. The surprise of the ruthless Tet Offensive left the city of hundred-degree heat strangely cold.

We fresh replacement troops, however, noticed only the strangely barren, quiet streets. I remember wondering aloud where the three million native inhabitants lived. They were huddled in nameless alleyways bet-



by VON BRASCHLER

ween streets, eating rats and drinking from polluted street hydrants.

Vietnam was a beautiful land, despite the war. We Americans, like summer tourists, never felt closer to it than transients who played out "Walter Mitty" frauds to live through our jobs and leave. No American I met there really felt a part of the country or committed to the war cause. The boys in the base camps and fire support bases, however, fought pretty tough to save their own hide. But that was a personal battle for self-preservation.

Not that we didn't make personal friends there, though. But every time you'd befriend a stray dog it would turn up eaten the next day. Every time you'd befriend a native he'd turn up dead or move during the night.

Every day we'd live out our lies as alien Americans trying to feel good about our stay. Almost daily award assemblies for departing soldiers would draw a five-minute unmoved crowd of troops who already had medals or expected medals, which they later stashed with forgotten trinkets in some duffle bags.

At one routine award ceremony I met Washington Post publisher

Katherine Graham's son whose lot overseas was to photograph awarded soldiers for the Army newspaper. Since The Post published Pentagon Papers that soured war sentiment, I wonder how young Graham—now Post publisher—feels about the war today.

The real power on our military compound, aside from the general who advised General Minh next door, was the fellow who carried the coffee pot's clothes pin valve in his pocket. When the 30-cup pot lost its original handle to an overzealous soldier one long day, the clothes pin became the permanent substitute. The Army base and all its interpreters, political advisors, military geniuses and radio communicators ran on the drug of the bean. The guy who never wanted to run dry on those boring 10-hour shifts stole the clothes pin and sole rights to tap the coffee keg.

I remember lots of Walter Mitty unreal scenes like interrogation of ignorant peasants, children and old men who cleared the streets after 10 p.m. curfew with M-16 rifles and a high-speed chase at near ground level after a 30-cup company or 100-200 North Vietnamese Nationals who popped out of the mysterious underground tunnels only to disappear again. I even remember, as though in a dream, seeing one of the first copters to depart for Cambodia—the buffer country we once vowed not to involve in war.

What I most remember, however, was the daily ritual of posting "kills" on a sort of scoreboard for the generals' morning briefing, a catered affair in a pill-box secure compound.

For months I transferred penciled numbers onto a clear plastic board with color-coded grease pencils. Red stood for Communist, of course. It was my clerical task to keep score of how many Americans, NVA, Viet Cong and south Vietnamese friendlies had been killed the day

before. The chart also recorded by color the number of Vietnam provinces currently held by American and friendly troops versus provinces dominated by northern Communists.

The numbers rarely changed, and the green "safe" provinces always equaled or exceeded the number of red Communist provinces. Finally a battle-wise captain from a nearby fire support base set me straight on the fraud.

Since this new year eclipses the 12-year seal on such classified documents I now can assure you that my color-coded daily scoreboard was fixed. When public anti-war sentiment forced the Congress to put a squeeze play on war finances, the military brass apparently were forced to show daily results or abandon the war effort. The ugliness of blanket bombing, Lyndon Johnson's quick victory approach, was taken from their arsenal.

But the truth remains that our allied effort in Vietnam never won and held as much ground as we publicly claimed. The same captain that fed me penciled numbers to compile the daily scoreboard showed me how fewer than half the provinces we claimed as "friendly" should have been marked in red.

But that fact never meant much, because the whole chart was only a bunch of transcribed numbers written in grease pencil by a kid in Saigon.

Like dominoes stacked too close for comfort, Vietnam fell with nearby countries close behind. But that didn't seem real either, since the domino theory sold by defense-minded John Kennedy and Richard Nixon in presidential debates before millions were simply theories heard on an impersonal TV screen.

If Vietnamese allies took our commitment too seriously, they should by now realize that American presidents hold influence only four years. Some are shot down even sooner.