

Why Activists Fail. The Importance of Telling the Truth

By [Robert J. Burrowes](#)

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Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Despite enormous ongoing effort over more than a thousand years, during and since the formation and shaping of the modern world, and as the number of issues being contested has steadily increased, activists of many types have made insufficient progress on key issues, particularly in relation to ending violence and war (and the threat of nuclear war), stopping the exploitation of many peoples and halting the endless assaults on Earth's biosphere.

Of course, in order for those of us who identify as activists to have any prospect of success in these and other endeavors, we need to understand how the world works and to develop an interrelated set of nonviolent strategies that are being effectively implemented to address each of the key aspects of this crisis.

This is because there is a great deal wrong with how the human world functions and a staggering amount that needs to be done if we are to fix it and preserve the planetary biosphere in doing so, particularly given that the primary threats are now so serious that human extinction is likely to occur within a few years. See ['Human Extinction by 2026? A Last Ditch Strategy to Fight for Human Survival'](#).

Of course, if human governance systems, ranging from international organizations like the United Nations and its various agencies to national, provincial and local governments functioned effectively, then we might expect these agencies, which theoretically function on our behalf, to have addressed these problems a long time ago. Or to do so now.

However, for reasons that are readily identifiable, these agencies have little power and routinely malfunction (from the viewpoints of ordinary people and the planetary biosphere).

So let me start by briefly explaining how the world works and then elaborating a few key points about strategy so that you can choose, if you wish (and, problematically, assuming there is still time), to play a more active and effective role, in one or more ways, in the struggle to make our world one of peace, justice and sustainability.

How the World Works: A Brief History

The formal human governance systems on Earth – that is, governments and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations – are controlled by the global elite which is invisible to, and hence not considered by, most people including activists. This, of course, is how the elite wants it and one can still readily find accounts that ask if the elite (by whatever name it is given) actually exists and even ascribe it a mystical quality. If the idea is not simply written off as a 'conspiracy theory'.

Well the global elite exists and its membership can be readily identified. But let me start by briefly outlining how the global elite acquired its extraordinary control over world affairs.

Following the Neolithic revolution 12,000 years ago, agriculture allowed human settlement to supersede the hunter-gatherer economy. However, while the Neolithic revolution occurred spontaneously in several parts of the world, some of the Neolithic societies that emerged in Asia, Europe, Central America and South America resorted to increasing degrees of social control in order to achieve a variety of social and economic outcomes, including increased efficiency in food production.

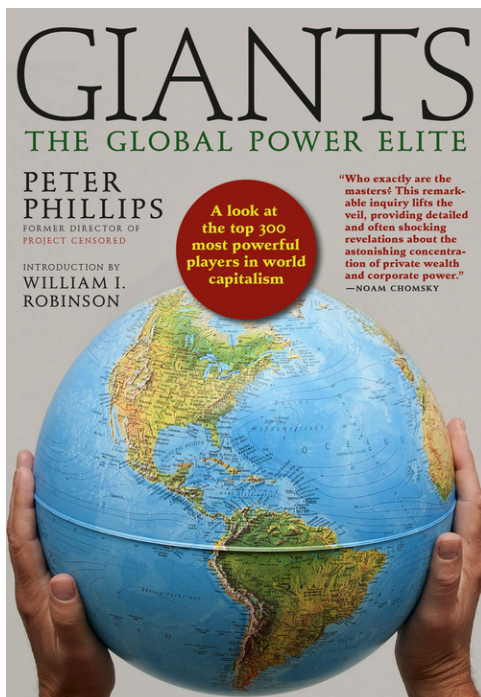
Civilizations emerged just over 5,000 years ago and, utilizing this higher degree of social control, were characterized by towns or cities, efficient food production allowing a large minority of the community to be engaged in more specialized activities, a centralized bureaucracy and the practice of skilled warfare. See [‘A Critique of Human Society since the Neolithic Revolution’](#).

With the emergence of civilization, elites of a local nature (such as the Pharaohs of Egypt), elites with imperial reach (including Roman emperors), elites of a religious nature (such as Popes and officials of the Vatican), elites of an economic character (particularly the City of London Corporation) and elites of a ‘national’ type (especially the monarchies of Europe) progressively emerged, essentially to manage the administration associated with maintaining and expanding their realms (political, financial and/or religious).

Following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which formally established the nation-state system, national elites, increasingly of an economic nature as capitalism progressively developed and rapidly expanded, consolidated their hold over national societies and, as these elites internationalized their reach in the following centuries, by the second half of the 20th, a truly global elite had consolidated its control over the world.

Awareness of elites in earlier eras has been noted by some authors. For example, in his 1775 book [An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations](#), Adam Smith noted that ‘All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind’.

But the work of C. Wright Mills in his 1956 classic [The Power Elite](#) is the original scholarly effort of the post-World War II era to document the nature of this elite, how it functions and why it had total control over US national society. Of course, despite scholarship of this nature, which has been added to routinely ever since, most people still believe the elite-sponsored delusion that international organizations, such as the United Nations, and national governments actually have some significant say in world affairs.



To jump to the present then, for the best recent account of how the global elite manifests today, see the book by Professor Peter Phillips titled [Giants: The Global Power Elite](#). In this book, Phillips identifies the world's top seventeen asset management firms, such as BlackRock and J.P Morgan Chase, that collectively manage more than \$US41.1 trillion in a self-invested network of interlocking capital that spans the globe. The seventeen Giants operate in nearly every country in the world and are 'the central institutions of the financial capital that powers the global economic system'. They invest in anything considered profitable, ranging from 'agricultural lands on which indigenous farmers are replaced by power elite investors' to public assets (such as energy and water utilities), to fossil fuels, nuclear power and war.

More precisely, Phillips identifies the 199 individual directors of the seventeen global financial Giants and the importance of those transnational institutions that serve a unifying function – including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, G20, G7, [World Trade Organization](#) (WTO), [World Economic Forum](#) (WEF), Trilateral Commission, [Bilderberg Group](#), Bank for International Settlements and [Council on Foreign Relations](#) – and particularly two very important global elite policy-planning organizations: the [Group of Thirty](#) (which has 32 members) and the extended executive committee of the [Trilateral Commission](#) (which has 55 members).

And Phillips carefully explains why and how the global elite defends its power, profits and privilege against rebellion by the 'unruly exploited masses': 'the Global Power Elite uses NATO and the US military empire for its worldwide security. This is part of an expanding strategy of US military domination around the world, whereby the US/ NATO military empire, advised by the power elite's [Atlantic Council](#), operates in service to the Transnational Corporate Class for the protection of international capital everywhere in the world'.

'The US military empire stands on hundreds of years of colonial exploitation and continues to support repressive, exploitative governments that cooperate with global capital's imperial agenda. Governments that accept external capital investment, whereby a small segment of a country's elite benefits, do so knowing that capital inevitably requires a return on investment that entails using up resources and people for economic gain. The whole system

continues wealth concentration for elites and expanded wretched inequality for the masses....

‘Understanding permanent war as an economic relief valve for surplus capital is a vital part of comprehending capitalism in the world today. War provides investment opportunity for the Giants and Transnational Corporate Class elites and a guaranteed return on capital. War also serves a repressive function of keeping the suffering masses of humanity afraid and compliant.’

If you would like to read other books which also give a clear sense of elites and their agents operating beyond the law to the extraordinary detriment of humanity and the Earth, then I strongly recommend William Blum’s classic [*Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*](#) and Paul L. Williams’ eye-opening account of [*Operation Gladio: The Unholy Alliance between the Vatican, the CIA and the Mafia*](#).

In plain language then: The global elite manages human governance systems for its benefit with no concern for ordinary people – who are considered unworthy – or the planetary biosphere. And the most important function that international agencies and governments perform, from the elite perspective, is that they *appear* to have control over certain jurisdictions and matters so that relevant constituencies focus their efforts, for example, on ‘changing government policy’ or changing the party in government. By having activist effort focused on lobbying governments or changing the party in government, this effort is absorbed and dissipated; hence, nothing of consequence changes because the elite has significant control over all major political processes, parties and their policies.

Of course, I should add that the elite is smart enough to make it look like something has changed occasionally, perhaps by allowing a small concession after years of effort (invariably on a ‘social’ issue, such as gay marriage, that doesn’t adversely impact their power, profits and privilege), so that most activist effort remains focused on governments and international governmental agencies. The elite also allows a ‘genuinely progressive’ candidate to emerge regularly so that activists are again suckered into putting effort into electoral outcomes rather than building movements for broad-based social transformation based on grassroots organizing.

In managing their already vast and endlessly accumulating wealth the global elite siphons a staggering amount of financial resources out of the global economy every day and channels these resources through secretive tax havens to evade tax. Globally, \$US10billion of wealth produced by the labor of ordinary people is ‘lost’ each week in this way and more than 10% of global financial wealth (which doesn’t include non-financial wealth ranging from racehorses and yachts to artworks and gold bars) is now hidden in these secrecy jurisdictions. See [‘Elite Banking at Your Expense: How Secretive Tax Havens are Used to Steal Your Money’](#).

A small proportion (but nevertheless significant amount) of elite wealth is used to create and manage the dominant narrative in relation to the state of the world by financing production of this narrative, generated by elite think tanks, and then distributed through education systems, the entertainment industry and the corporate media. In short, we are bombarded with elite propaganda, given names such as ‘education’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘news’, that hopelessly distorts popular perception of what is taking place.

So why does all of the above happen?

In essence: global elite control of formal human governance systems for its own benefit is an outcome of the global elite's insanity, as well as the insanity of those who serve it. 'So what is sanity?' you might ask.

Sanity is defined as the capacity to consider a set of circumstances, to carefully analyze the evidence pertaining to those circumstances, to identify the cause of any conflict or problem, and to respond appropriately and strategically, both emotionally and intellectually, to that conflict or problem with the intention of resolving it, preferably at a higher level of need satisfaction for all parties (including those of the Earth and all of its living creatures). For a fuller explanation, see ['The Global Elite is Insane Revisited'](#) with a lot more detail in ['Why Violence?'](#) and ['Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice'](#). In brief, individuals who are not incredibly psychologically damaged, do not behave as described above.

In essence then, while the description of how the world works offered above is accurate, it is driven by an insane elite – endlessly and compulsively accumulating profit, power and privilege at the expense of ordinary people and the biosphere – and the insanity of those who serve the elite, such as virtually all politicians and businesspeople, bankers and accountants, judges and lawyers, academics and corporate media personnel.

Hence, struggles for peace, justice, sustainability and liberation (from military occupation, dictatorship, genocidal assault, coups and invasions), by various means (including those which are nonviolent), fail far too often. But not just because of the enormous power of the global elite. They fail because activists do not understand how the world works, including how the elite exercises its power and, in the case of those who use nonviolent action explicitly, they fail when activists do not understand the psychology, politics and strategy of nonviolent struggle. And while these subjects are not complicated, they do require time to learn.

To reiterate then, the answer to the question 'Why do activists fail?' is this: Virtually all activists do not understand strategy and so they do not campaign strategically. This means that anything done – whether a decision in a meeting, a phone call or email, an action or event planned and executed – simply fails to have the impact it could have. Let me elaborate this explanation using just three basic components (out of twelve) of sound nonviolent strategy.

Before doing so I should emphasize that I am talking about those who identify as 'activists'. I am not talking about lobbyists (or those who use activism in the service of lobbying). Moreover, I am assuming that all activists are using some version of what they understand as 'nonviolent action', whether or not they claim to be doing so or even realize they are, simply because no other tradition of activism offers the comprehensive strategic guidance that the literature on nonviolence offers.

So what should activists do so that their efforts have strategic impact?

Strategic Analysis

The foundation of any sound strategy – particularly if campaigning on major issues such as to end war, to end the climate catastrophe, to halt destruction of the fresh water supply and

the rainforests, to defeat a coup, occupation or invasion nonviolently, to transform the global economy, to bring down the global elite... – is a thorough understanding of the conflict.

This means, most importantly, having a clear sense of the ‘big picture’ (including those overarching structures and actors in far-off places that maintain/perpetrate the local manifestations of violence and exploitation), not just the detail of the issue on which you focus. Fundamentally, this requires an astute understanding of the global power structure. If we do not understand how power works in society, particularly structurally, including in relation to the conflict we seek to resolve, then we cannot plan and implement a strategy that will work. As the historical record tragically demonstrates.

But it also requires our analysis to include a reasonable understanding of how key issues (such as war, destruction of the climate and environment, and exploitation of women, working people and indigenous peoples) intersect and reinforce each other. If we do not understand something of these relationships then we cannot plan strategy that takes these relationships into account and thus adequately account for all variables driving a conflict. Again, as the historical record painfully demonstrates.

So, for example, the failure of most climate and environmental activists to adequately consider the role of war (and military activity and violence generally) in destroying the climate and environment means that a primary driver of these two conflicts is barely mentioned let alone discussed and then actually tackled strategically – ideally by working in tandem with antiwar activists – by activists working to end the climate catastrophe and defend the environment as a whole.

But this failure to consider the ‘big picture’ is also the reason why most climate activists are focused on switching (from fossils fuels and nuclear power) to renewable energy and miss the fundamental point that we are destroying the entire global environment – including the fresh water, rainforests and oceans – and unless we dramatically reduce, by about 80%, our consumption in all key areas involving both energy and resources of every kind – water, household energy, transport fuels, metals, meat, paper and plastic – and immediately cease driving, flying and eating meat for starters, we have no chance of averting human extinction. See [‘Will humans be extinct by 2026?’](#) and [‘Climate-Change Summary and Update’](#).

Which is also why simple, structured approaches to this reduction of consumption, while dramatically expanding our individual and community self-reliance so that all environmental concerns are effectively addressed, must be part of any effective strategy to address the climate/environment catastrophe. See [‘The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth’](#).

In one simple sentence: We cannot save the climate without saving the rainforests too, and ending war.

Having written all of the above, it is important to acknowledge that there are plenty of fine sources of accurate information on specific issues produced by independent think tanks and activist scholars and researchers. For example, you will find plenty of information about weapons corporations and weapons expenditure (still rising) on the website of the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) and the climate movement produces some rigorous research, with the latest report meticulously documenting that bank financing of fossil fuels is still rising despite the Paris climate ‘agreement’ in 2015. See [‘Banking on](#)

Strategic Focus

If we do not thoroughly analyze the conflict, it is impossible to identify the appropriate strategic focus for action and to then plan tactics that address that focus. This inevitably means that we are essentially guessing what to do, not knowing in advance, as we should, that the action we take will have strategic impact.

Moreover, guessing what action to take, usually on the basis of what is familiar or what feels good – perhaps because we get out with a bunch of ‘good people’ – virtually inevitably leads to poor choices like organizing a large demonstration. Demonstrations are notoriously ineffective, as world history’s largest demonstration on 15 February 2003 – involving demonstrations in more than 600 cities around the world, involving up to 30,000,000 people, against the imminent US-led war on Iraq – see [‘The World Says No to War: Demonstrations against the War on Iraq’](#) – illustrated yet again. Single actions and numbers are not determinative; strategy is determinative. Obviously, large demonstrations could be effective, if they were strategically focused – never on governments though – but only a rare activist understands this with the recent worldwide ‘School Strike 4 Climate Action’ demonstrations on 15 March and the ‘Hands off Venezuela’ demonstrations on 16 March graphically illustrating this lack of understanding and thus wasting opportunities to make a strategic difference.

Let me explain this notion of strategic focus with a simple example, and then invite you to consider it in a little more detail.

Given the critical role that airline flights, travel by car and eating meat, for example, play in destroying the climate and, in the case of the first two, driving US-led wars for control of fossil fuels, imagine if all of those students attending the School Strike 4 Climate rallies had used the day to sign a personal pledge – the Earth Pledge? – which read something like this:

Out of love for the Earth and all of its inhabitants, and my respect for their needs, from this day onwards I pledge that:

1. *I will not travel by plane*
2. *I will not travel by car*
3. *I will not eat meat and fish*
4. *I will only eat organically/biodynamically grown food*
5. *I will minimize the amount of fresh water I use*
6. *I will not buy rainforest timber*
7. *I will not buy or use single-use plastic, such as bags, bottles, containers, cups and straws*
8. *I will not use banks that provide any service to corporations involved in fossil fuels, nuclear power and/or weapons*
9. *I will not get news from the corporate media (mainstream newspapers, television, radio, Facebook...)*
10. *I will make the effort to learn a skill, such as food gardening or sewing, that makes me more self-reliant*
11. *I will gently encourage my family and friends to consider signing this pledge.*

Imagine if at all future climate rallies, participants were given the opportunity to sign such a

pledge.



And imagine if at every demonstration against war, every participant was given the opportunity to sign such a pledge. There is little point yelling (or displaying a sign that reads) 'No war for oil' when you are the one using the oil. Surely, that would be hypocritical, wouldn't it?

If it seems too difficult for now, would you sign the pledge after crossing out one or two items that you might reconsider later?

Perhaps, we can even mark 2 October 2019, the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth, and the International Day of Nonviolence, as a day of world commitment with local ceremonies, small or large, around the world so that people can attend an event to make a public pledge of this nature too.

With the Earth under siege, would you sign such a pledge? What would you need to reorganize about your life to make it manageable?

The point then is this: It is easy to ask someone else to change their behaviour. It is more effective to change your own. And, if we do, we functionally undermine the cause of problems that concern so many of us.

Anyway, somewhat more elaborately, if you want strategic focus in your campaign strategy to end war or the climate catastrophe, for example, check out the two strategic aims and the basic list of strategic goals in ['Campaign Strategic Aims'](#). And for the two strategic aims and the basic list of strategic goals to defend against a range of military threats, see ['Defense Strategic Aims'](#).

This requires, vitally importantly, that the tactic in any given circumstance is thoughtfully crafted to achieve the strategic goal carefully identified as appropriate for this stage of the campaign. See the relationship and distinction between ['The Political Objective and Strategic Goal of Nonviolent Actions'](#).

And for a better understanding of the power of nonviolent action and how to frame it for maximum strategic impact, see also ['Nonviolent Action: Why and How it Works'](#).

Strategic Timeframe

Inadequate analysis, perhaps because you simply believe, without investigation, what the global elite is telling you via its many channels, such as its captive mainstream processes (including education systems and the corporate media), might lead you to work to a wholly unrealistic timeframe.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what is happening with the climate catastrophe. Unquestioningly following the elite-controlled discourse on this issue leads most people, including climate activists, to work to an 'end of century' timeframe or to believe, for example, that we have until 2030 to end our use of coal. And yet even some mainstream sources, such as the UN, are already reporting the catastrophic consequences of having set the utterly inadequate goal of limiting the global temperature increase to 2° (or 1.5°) celsius above the preindustrial norm. See, for example, [‘Global Linkages – A graphic look at the changing Arctic’](#) and [‘3-5°C temperature rise is now “locked-in” for the Arctic’](#).

So it is imperative that activists use their analysis (based on truthful sources) to make a realistic assessment of the timeframe. It might not be convenient to have less time than we think is necessary to precipitate the changes we want but our responsibility as activists includes the need to tell unpalatable truths (which the global elite and its agents will never do).

Fundamentally then, tell the truth. If there is a choice between being popular and telling the truth, I encourage you to always tell the truth. Deluding ourselves that we are doing a fine job and affirming each other for minor gains won't avert human extinction or save those countless lifeforms, human and otherwise, who die each day as a result of our incredibly dysfunctional and violent world. Nor will it help those who are living under occupation, dictatorship or military assault.

Of course, telling the truth will scare many people. But it is still sounder strategy to trust people to hear the truth well, no matter how unpalatable it might be. Besides if we do not tell the truth and trust people, we have no prospect of mobilizing them strategically in the time we have left.

Needless to say, if you are going to tell the truth to others, you need to be courageous enough to perceive it yourself first. And to act on it.

Summary

In the above three sections, I explained the importance of a sound analysis, strategic focus and an appropriate timeframe as well as the importance of telling the truth, in developing and implementing an effective nonviolent strategy. This applies whatever the nature of the struggle: a peace, justice or environmental campaign or a defense or liberation struggle.

But effective strategy requires more than these three components and each of these components must also be soundly understood and rigorously implemented.

So if becoming more strategic appeals to you, check out either of these websites: [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#) or [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#).

Or, for a quick overall look at the twelve components of nonviolent strategy, check out the [Nonviolent Strategy Wheel](#) on each site, such as this one.

In addition, if you want to focus on parenting children so that they are powerfully able to deal with reality and not get suckered into the widespread addictions of over-consumption and militarism – see [‘Love Denied: The Psychology of Materialism, Violence and War’](#) – or into believing that lobbying governments is the way to precipitate change, then you are welcome to consider making [‘My Promise to Children’](#) and learning the art of nisteling. See [‘Nisteling: The Art of Deep Listening’](#).

Of course, if you have problems reducing your consumption or questioning the efficacy of military violence, then consider addressing the unconscious psychological impediments to this. See [‘Putting Feelings First’](#).

If you like, you can also join the worldwide movement to end all violence by signing the online pledge of [‘The People’s Charter to Create a Nonviolent World’](#).

A Final Word

Some corporate economists are concerned that the global economy is facing a ‘downturn’ and, possibly, even entering a recession. As a result, they are arguing for measures to boost economic growth.

Image on the right is from Direct Relief



The reality, however, is that industrial civilization is already steadily and rapidly breaking down – with an endless sequence of climate and environmental catastrophes now taking place: for one of the latest, see [‘Death toll jumps in Mozambique storm as 15,000 await rescue’](#) – and will collapse completely within a few years. Why? Because the Earth has very little left to give without a staggering amount of regenerative inputs (some of which we can supply but others that require geological time).

But you do not need to believe me.

Consider the evidence for yourself.

If, after reading the lengthy list of documents, scientific and otherwise, cited in the key articles about near-term human extinction mentioned above, you can search out compelling evidence to refute the argument for near-term human extinction that is presented, then I hope you will share this evidence widely so that we can all be relieved that we have more time than an increasing number of courageous scientists are warning at risk to their livelihoods and professional appointments.

But if you cannot refute the evidence cited above or find the evidence that does it to your satisfaction, I invite you to respond thoughtfully and powerfully by taking immediate action to start systematically and substantially reducing your personal consumption while systematically increasing your personal and community self-reliance, in 16 areas, at the same time. Again, see [‘The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth’](#).

I can assure you that if we ‘step down’ the global economy systematically while increasing our self-reliance at a (much) lower level of consumption (which will also demonetize

economic activity), then all of those corporations – such as those producing fossil fuels, mining strategic minerals and destroying rainforests – will cease producing products for which there is no market. They will simply have no financial incentive to do so. And this will functionally and ongoingly undermine the power of the global elite to manipulate us into surrendering our power by lobbying governments and surrendering our labor and resources to buy their products to increase their power and profits. Moreover, elites will have less incentive to start and fight the wars to steal the resources necessary to make the products our over-consumption currently requires.

As you probably realize, it is your own action that gives you credibility (and moral authority) to then encourage others to follow your example, and for you to campaign for others to change their behaviour too. One hundred years ago, Mohandas K. Gandhi – perhaps anticipating the latest UN report: [‘UN Alliance For Sustainable Fashion addresses damage of “fast fashion”’](#) – was reminding us that ‘Earth provides enough to satisfy every person’s needs, but not every person’s greed.’ And he modeled the minimal consumption he asked of others in his own life first. At his death, he owned two outfits of handspun cotton, which he made himself on a spinning wheel, and a pair of sandals.

We do not have to be as frugal as Gandhi but we do need to substantially reduce our consumption and increase our self-reliance if we are to have any chance of preserving a biosphere that will sustain life for viable populations of all species.

Activists need to have the courage to act this out and then spread this message to everyone (particularly in the industrialized world): not waste their time asking elite agents, like governments, to support the switch to renewable energy or stop fighting wars to steal resources.

If we are to fight effectively to preserve the biosphere, we must do it strategically.

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Robert J. Burrowes has a lifetime commitment to understanding and ending human violence. He has done extensive research since 1966 in an effort to understand why human beings are violent and has been a nonviolent activist since 1981. He is the author of [‘Why Violence?’](#) His email address is flametree@riseup.net and his website is [here](#). He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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