

Kurt Vonnegut versus the !&#*!@

Kurt Vonnegut gave us a pamphlet in 1982 which is still much sought after in the peace movement. It is called Fates Worse Than Death (available from Spokesman Books). Here, he answers Joel Bleifuss's questions about the war on Iraq. With grateful acknowledgements to In These Times magazine.

In November 2002, Kurt Vonnegut turned 80. He published his first novel, *Player Piano*, in 1952 at the age of 29. Since then he has written 13 others, including *Slaughterhouse Five*, pre-eminent among anti-war novels of the 20th century.

Vonnegut is an American socialist in the tradition of Eugene Victor Debs, a fellow Hoosier whom he likes to quote: 'As long as there is a lower class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free.'

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You have lived through World War Two, Korea, Vietnam, the Reagan wars, Desert Storm, the Balkan wars and now this coming war in Iraq. What has changed, and what has remained the same?

One thing which has not changed is that none of us, no matter what continent or island or ice cap, asked to be born in the first place, and that even somebody as old as I am, which is 80, only just got here. There were already all these games going on when I got here. ... An apt motto for any polity anywhere, to put on its state seal or currency or whatever, might be this quotation from the late baseball manager Casey Stengel, who was addressing a team of losing professional athletes: 'Can't anybody here play this game?'

My daughter Lily, for an example close to home, who has just turned 20, finds herself—as does George W. Bush, himself a kid—an heir to a shockingly recent history of human slavery, to an Aids epidemic and to nuclear submarines slumbering on the floors of fjords in Iceland and elsewhere, crews prepared at a moment's notice to turn industrial quantities of men, women and children into radioactive soot and bonemeal by means of rockets and H-bomb warheads. And to the choice between liberalism or conservatism and on and on.

What is radically new in 2003 is that my daughter, along with our president and Saddam Hussein and on and on, has inherited

technologies whose by-products, whether in war or peace, are rapidly destroying the whole planet as a breathable, drinkable system for supporting life of any kind. Human beings, past and present, have trashed the joint.

Based on what you've read and seen in the media, what is not being said in the mainstream press about President Bush's policies and the impending war in Iraq?

That they are nonsense.

My feeling from talking to readers and friends is that many people are beginning to despair. Do you think that we've lost reason to hope?

I myself feel that our country, for whose Constitution I fought in a just war, might as well have been invaded by Martians and body snatchers. Sometimes I wish it had been. What has happened, though, is that it has been taken over by means of the sleaziest, low-comedy, Keystone Cops-style *coup d'état* imaginable. And those now in charge of the federal government are upper-crust C-students who know no history or geography, plus not-so-closeted white supremacists, aka 'Christians,' and plus, most frighteningly, psychopathic personalities, or 'PPs.'

To say somebody is a PP is to make a perfectly respectable medical diagnosis, like saying he or she has appendicitis or athlete's foot. The classic medical text on PPs is *The Mask of Sanity* by Dr. Hervey Cleckley. Read it! PPs are presentable, they know full well the suffering their actions may cause others, but they do not care. They cannot care because they are nuts. They have a screw loose!

And what syndrome better describes so many executives at Enron and WorldCom and on and on, who have enriched themselves while ruining their employees and investors and country, and who still feel as pure as the driven snow, no matter what anybody may say to or about them? And so many of these heartless PPs now hold big jobs in our federal government, as though they were leaders instead of sick.

What has allowed so many PPs to rise so high in corporations, and now in government, is that they are so decisive. Unlike normal people, they are never filled with doubts, for the simple reason that they cannot care what happens next. Simply can't. Do this! Do that! Mobilise the reserves! Privatise the public schools! Attack Iraq! Cut health care! Tap everybody's telephone! Cut taxes on the rich! Build a trillion-dollar missile shield! Fuck *habeas corpus* and the Sierra Club and *In These Times*, and kiss my ass!

How have you gotten involved in the anti-war movement? And how would you compare the movement against a war in Iraq with the anti-war movement of the Vietnam era?

When it became obvious what a dumb and cruel and spiritually and financially and militarily ruinous mistake our war in Vietnam was, every artist worth a damn in this country, every serious writer, painter, stand-up comedian, musician, actor and actress, you name it, came out against the thing. We formed what might be described as a laser beam of protest, with everybody aimed in the same direction, focused and intense. This weapon proved to have the power of a banana-cream

pie three feet in diameter when dropped from a stepladder five-feet high.

And so it is with anti-war protests in the present day. Then as now, TV did not like anti-war protesters, nor any other sort of protesters, unless they rioted. Now, as then, on account of TV, the right of citizens to peaceably assemble, and petition their government for a redress of grievances, ‘ain’t worth a pitcher of warm spit,’ as the saying goes.

As a writer and artist, have you noticed any difference between how the cultural leaders of the past and the cultural leaders of today view their responsibility to society?

Responsibility to which society? To Nazi Germany? To the Stalinist Soviet Union? What about responsibility to humanity in general? And leaders in what particular cultural activity? I guess you mean the fine arts. I hope you mean the fine arts. ... Anybody practising the fine art of composing music, no matter how cynical or greedy or scared, still can’t help serving all humanity. Music makes practically everybody fonder of life than he or she would be without it. Even military bands, although I am a pacifist, always cheer me up.

But that is the power of ear candy. The creation of such a universal confection for the eye, by means of printed poetry or fiction or history or essays or memoirs and so on, isn’t possible. Literature is by definition opinionated. It is bound to provoke the arguments in many quarters, not excluding the hometown or even the family of the author. Any ink-on-paper author can only hope at best to seem responsible to small groups or like-minded people somewhere. He or she might as well have given an interview to the editor of a small-circulation publication.

Maybe we can talk about the responsibilities to their societies of architects and sculptors and painters another time. And I will say this: TV drama, although not yet classified as fine art, has on occasion performed marvellous services for Americans who want us to be less paranoid, to be fairer and more merciful. *M.A.S.H.* and *Law and Order*; to name only two shows, have been stunning masterpieces in that regard.

That said, do you have any ideas for a really scary reality TV show?

‘C students from Yale.’ It would stand your hair on end.

What targets would you consider fair game for a satirist today?

Assholes.

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The interview led to this exchange of letters.

Dear Mr. Vonnegut,

What genuinely motivates Al Qaeda to kill and self-destruct? The president says, ‘They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other,’ which surely is not

what has been learned from the captives being held in Guantanamo, or what he is told in his briefings. Why do the communications industry and our elected politicians allow Bush to get away with such nonsense? And how can there ever be peace, and even trust in our leaders, if the American people aren't told the truth?

Peter Hoyt, Little Deer Island, Maine

Dear Mr. Hoyt,

One wishes that those who have taken over our federal government, and hence the world, by means of a Mickey Mouse *coup d'état*, and who have disconnected all the burglar alarms prescribed by the Constitution, which is to say the House and Senate and the Supreme Court and We the People, were truly Christian. But as William Shakespeare told us long ago, 'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.'

And what remains the best-kept secret from the Second World War, because it is so embarrassing, is that Hitler was a Christian, and that his swastika was a Christian cross made of axes, an apt symbol of a political party for Christians of the working class. And there were simpler, unambiguous crosses on all Hitler's tanks and planes.

Again: one wishes, for the sake of the whole planet, that the people in and around the White House nowadays truly mean it when they say, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,' and that they respect as children of God the losers, the nobodies so loved by Jesus in the Beatitudes, in His Sermon on the Mount: the poor in spirit, they that mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peace makers and so on.

But such is obviously not the case. George W. Bush smirks and gloats unmercifully as he boasts of his readiness to loose more than a hundred cruise missiles, what I call 'Timothy McVeighs,' into the midst of the general population of Iraq, nearly half of whom are children, little boys and girls under the age of 15.

His domestic policies, whose viciousness is peewee in comparison with what he is so eager to do to foreigners who don't look like him and talk like him, who don't have names like his, nonetheless inflict pain on those Americans of the sort enumerated in the Beatitudes, by depriving them of decent health care and education, and of food, shelter and clothing when times are bad. It seems quite possible that his opinion of the American people has been formed while watching the Jerry Springer Show, which is Republican propaganda of the most pernicious kind.

But America was certainly hated all around the world long before this *coup d'état*. And we weren't hated, as George W. Bush would have it, because of our liberty and justice for all. We are hated because our corporations have been the principal deliverers and imposers of new technologies and economic schemes that have wrecked the self-respect, the cultures of men, women and children in so many other societies.

It's that simple. What are we to do when confronted by such hatred? Respond to Code Red and run around like chickens with their heads cut off.

Keep in touch,

Kurt Vonnegut