

The State of the Union, 2024, and an Interlude: The Soprano of Odessa

This piece comes in two parts. Before we get to the second part, a few words about president Biden's State of the Union address: at least it was better than nothing, and to some extent, he may have improved his chances for November. The speech was far more vigorous and far less gooey than many anticipated, he did a good job of showing how and why Trump would be far worse, he stopped the GOP hecklers in their tracks, and the domestic agenda he offered was admirable. However, when it comes to foreign policy, he's still stuck in full Cold War military-industrial mode, which means that despite good intentions, guns will come before bread and the nuclear arms race will continue apace, as it currently does in our country. The humanitarian pier Biden proposed for Gaza leaves Netanyahu off the hook, free to do what he pleases both in Gaza and on the West Bank while America's weapons keep coming. And while Biden is not into family separation, he's taken much of the GOP's immigration program as his own. As usual, he's trying to have it both ways at once. That's not going to go down well this election year with Arab-Americans or with a large part of the labor movement, or large numbers of young people and African-Americans. Added to the mess are recent reports that global temperatures have risen to 1.77C above pre-industrial levels, which leave the Paris Climate Accord in tatters.

So even now, the flood of ugly news can get so strong that it stops analysis cold. At least it does for this writer, so let's try a story instead.

Back in 1999, my wife and I went on a trip to chase a solar eclipse in the Black Sea, and we visited many splendid places. One of our stops along the way was Odessa. As we toured its residential neighborhoods, I noticed that its once elegant apartment buildings and townhouses were still intact, but in grimy and dilapidated condition. Even in the summer sunlight, they looked sad and dreary, and I couldn't help wondering if the lives within were equally bleak.

Along the waterfront, there's the famous Potemkin staircase. Since I was unlikely to see Odessa again, I was determined to run to the top, and on the first attempt, I almost made it. That was enough to annoy me into a second, successful try. As I ran up the stairs, I heard a hauntingly beautiful soprano voice. Sitting on the top stair was a lady, singing arias. It was plain to anyone listening that she was an operatic professional. It was hot and humid that day, and everyone was perspiring. Her plain gray dress was wrinkled and slightly frayed, and clung to her skin. Close beside her there was a wide, shallow dish with a few small bills and some change in it. The Odessa opera was in its off-season, and this is what she had to do to get her daily bread.

All too little has changed since then, and in all too many places, things are worse. In their tens and scores of thousands, there are stories like our singer's, scattered across the globe. They are why we need ceasefires, not only in Gaza and Ukraine, but also across the entire arc of southwest Asia, and in Myanmar, Sudan, Haiti, and the Congo Democratic Republic. They are why the US government desperately needs to reverse its misuse of our taxes in its discretionary spending and its Pentagon-directed foreign policy.

Instead, too many of our politicians cling to their weaponry and spite.

We don't have to.

Something to think about as we approach Easter and pray for resurrection.