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# Pox Americana: Seeking Asylum from a Deteriorating Democracy

BARRETT BROWN

*"Many times before now we have told you what we were likely to suffer from Athens, and on each occasion, instead of taking to heart what we were telling you, you chose to suspect our motives and to consider that we were speaking only about our own grievances."*

Corinthian delegate to assembly of Greek city states, eve of Peloponnesian War

**At some point** during my first political asylum interview in late 2021, the UK government representative asked if I'd "ever advocated violence". I conceded that I'd supported the 1990 war against Iraq when I was nine, largely because my older brother was fighting in it, but that I had since firmly repudiated the radical Anglo-American militarism in which I was raised. The interviewer interrupted to tell me that this sort of thing didn't count and he would just put down "No."

"No" is, of course, the desired answer to the underlying question itself, which if honestly phrased would run something along the lines of, "Have you ever advocated violence outside of the many contexts in which the British state and its allies have perpetuated that violence?"

But even this more truthful and thus less palatable phrasing doesn't quite cover the extent of the *de facto* double standard that is now in play among the English-speaking powers, and which is now playing a key role in their ongoing collapse. Anyone may define violence – or any concept at all – with as much or as little honesty as one likes. But wherever the rule of law is weak, the only definition that matters is one employed by the police and wherever it finds itself empowered to act as referee between activists on the right and left. Add in the fact that police bodies in the West have historically been right-wing in outlook and one begins to understand why the deteriorating Weimar Republic was so vulnerable to a right-wing takeover; one need simply compare the fate of the left-wing revolutionaries responsible for the Bavarian Socialist Republic (summary execution by right-wing gangs) to that of the right-wing revolutionaries who attempted the Beer Hall Putsch.

It is in this context that we must evaluate the last decade of revelations involving US police departments being caught working with avowed neo-Nazi groups against the Black Lives Matter movement and other leftist phenomena, especially given the absence of any comparable incidents in the reverse. This is not to draw a direct comparison between the two eras. For one thing, the US has no equivalent to the Bavarian Socialist Republic, which in Weimar Germany provided the right with a useful pretext for extralegal violence against its enemies for years afterwards. And so, the modern American right has had to work much harder to portray its own escalating campaign of violence and political nihilism as a necessary means of protecting the nation from internal threats.

But then the police needed little convincing. Thus, it was that a peaceful BLM protest in front of the US Capitol building in June of 2020 was met by a massive and highly aggressive police response – and why a far-right rally in the same location was met with so little just a few months later on January 6th, 2021.

Taken together, this explains why so many attendees of this second rally were retired and active-duty police and military personnel. It explains why so many in the crowd were comfortable bringing weapons and explosives. It explains why, in the hours to follow, hundreds of them proved both able and willing to force their way into the chambers of the US Congress after killing or wounding the few police officers who stood in their way. And it explains why in the months leading up to the attack on the Capitol, the relevant authorities nonetheless remained focused on those of us known for investigating and exposing the very same far-right gangs that would go on to orchestrate and carry out the failed coup. Thus, it was that throughout 2021, as both the FBI and Metropolitan Police targeted me and my closest associates with surveillance, arrest, and attempted deportation in the course of a protracted operation drawing on the resources of two countries, they received considerable assistance and direction from one of the most prominent leaders of the same far-right network that planned and executed the January 6th siege.

On the morning of May 17th, 2021, I was idly staring out the window of the London canal boat that had come to serve me as home and headquarters when I first spotted the spotters. My partner had also clocked them as suspicious when she'd left the boat a few minutes prior to visit her ailing mother on the south coast. But both of us had let our guard down in the weeks that had passed since the publication of a Sunday Times article in which it was noted that my very presence in Britain constituted an "embarrassment for Priti Patel", the hardline Conservative Home Minister who'd presided over a considerable crackdown on civil liberties and immigrants alike.

So, I was actually surprised when a squad of Metropolitan Police arrived shortly after her departure to board our boat, seize my files, and book me into a London jail to be interviewed on the subject of whether I might be conspiring to incite the British people to rise up and kill the nation's police officers. Still, the Met cops and I became fast friends – not because they



Sylvia Mann & Barrett Brown, courtesy of the Author

knew the charge to be nonsense, although they did, but because I'm somewhat more charming and polite than most of the radicals London police have occasion to arrest. This may explain the unusual deference I was shown on the way to the lockup, which extended to them actually removing my restraints contrary to normal protocol.

"Why is this man not cuffed?" demanded the station chief as I was led up to the desk. The arresting officers mumbled something in response that failed to convince the chief or even me. Then they meekly offered to put me back in handcuffs.

"Well, they're off now anyway," the chief concluded at last.

A more striking example of the UK's relatively slapdash approach to policing occurred shortly afterwards, when the lead arresting officer told the desk clerk, within my earshot, that the FBI had requested my extradition and that this was being handled through entirely unofficial channels. Presumably it hadn't occurred to the cop that this was the sort of intel that his American counterparts are exceedingly careful to keep secret; one can hardly blame him for assuming it was too late for me to do anything about it.

My partner, the London-born activist and editor Sylvia Mann, had long ago made me memorize several phrases and names to be intoned in case of assorted emergencies. Now I spoke the phrase, "ITN Solicitors". Sitting in a police interview room a few hours later with an ITN lawyer supervising via conference call, I replied to several dozen questions with another sacred intonation: "No comment".

This isn't to say that no information was exchanged. Prior to the interview proper, Officer Lee and I had a friendly chat about my past with the activist contingent of Anonymous, and especially that portion of the movement that worked out of the legendary Anonops internet relay chat server that served from 2010 to 2012 as the staging ground for such things as the Tunisian revolution, which itself brought at least one Anonops participant, Slim Amanou, to power in the provisional government that replaced the Ben Ali regime; the hacking raids on black ops intel firms like HBGary, Palantir, and Stratfor that disrupted several state-orchestrated conspiracies against journalists and labor unions; and the extraordinary legal defense efforts conducted on behalf of those of us who would be identified as key movement participants and prosecuted accordingly. Everything I told him had long been public in the form of documentaries and so forth, but he seemed to enjoy hearing about it, and I certainly enjoyed the opportunity to draw him out further in an effort to prompt any further accidental slips regarding the exact nature of the FBI's role in these proceedings. To Officer Lee's credit, he gave away nothing of use, but then I'm not much of an interrogator.

Eventually I was returned to my cell. The ceiling was adorned with the modern British state equivalent of the Sistine Chapel's Last Judgment: a painted proclamation stating, "If you can read this, we have your DNA".

The Met granted me bail later that night, which didn't really matter since the Home Office had already ordered my continued detention. Someone from the immigration branch, I learned, was coming to interview me in the morning.

"What happens after I talk to immigration?" I asked another senior station official when he opened the door slot to advise me of my rights (including several that turned out not to exist).

"After that they'll come and take you to a secure facility while you wait for extradition to the US, I reckon."

Like the Met officer with the FBI backchannel, the station official knew the score. In contrast, Home Office Immigration Officer Luke Spencer was still in the dark when he arrived the next morning for what appeared to assume would be a routine and perfectly lawful immigration interview. "It's very likely under the circumstances that you'll be given vow [bond], since you're only a few days past your visa expiration. That means you'd be released

today and then required to report to our office at a later date while your immigration status is reviewed." He just had to call his boss to confirm, Spencer said as the cell door closed between us, and would return in a few moments.

By the time he returned an hour later, his demeanor had shifted. I was handed a series of documents through the horizontal door slot wherein was set forth the Home Office's official position: that I was "likely to abscond if granted immigration bail"; that my "removal from the UK is imminent;" and that I had "failed to give satisfactory or reliable answers to an Immigration Officer's enquiries", as this immigration officer's boss had no doubt just explained to him over the phone. Spencer concluded by noting that the transport unit would arrive to take me to the immigrant removal center in a few hours, then closed the hatch. Upon examining the documents further, I noticed that Spencer had claimed on the form that my six month visa had expired in April, rather than just a week prior on May 8th as was actually the case. I would cite this as another instance of official oppression, but in fairness it's also quite possible that one of the Home Office's functionaries, chosen at random, was simply unable to count to six.

My personal Home Office escort and I arrived at the Immigrant Removal Center outside of Gatwick around 1 am that same evening. The facility was nearly identical to the generic prison units found in both the US and UK, such that I felt right at home. One difference was that each inmate or detainee or undesirable alien or whatever I'd suddenly become is given an old Nokia cell phone and a fresh SIM card with which to arrange one's affairs. This meant I could finally get word to Sylvia that I was facing imminent deportation to the United States; I would have done so two days prior upon arriving at the jail, but the Met had disallowed me a phone call contrary to law, which was unusual enough that a station official actually registered concern over the situation in an internal memo. As with the other embarrassing documents that would emerge in the months to follow, none of this was supposed to see the light of day, including the limited portions that would normally be made available to the defendant in a criminal case. The plan - later shown to have been coordinated by elements of the FBI, UK Home Office, Metropolitan Police, and several less official bodies - had been to arrest me for a crime and then deport me directly into the custody of the FBI; there were no actual plans to prosecute me in the UK, which was just as well given how many other unfortunate documents would emerge in any court setting.

But the chief problem with these sorts of conspiracies is that it's difficult to anticipate exactly how wide to cast the net, as involving too many parties amplifies the likelihood of critical leaks. Though the FBI needed the Met and its intelligence unit to locate me and perform the actual arrest, there was no reason for the arresting officers themselves to have been told of the bureau's clandestine involvement and ultimate intentions, and indeed, I wouldn't have taken the steps I did next had I not overheard the relevant circumstance back at the station.

On the other hand, involving too few parties can lead to critical gaps in an otherwise air-tight conspiracy. Although key portions of the Home Office were sufficiently involved to have falsified the records in such a manner as to allow for my transfer to the deportation facility, no one thought to tell a certain other key branch of the very same agency that it, too, would need to suspend the rule of law if the plan were to succeed. And so, when the ITN law firm's political asylum team filed an emergency motion for me to be released from custody on the grounds that my prior imprisonment by the United States had been recognized by outfits like Reporters Without Borders as politically motivated retaliation for my work exposing illicit intelligence community operations, the section of the Home Office that handles such things made a huge mistake: it followed UK law. By the time the first media reports of my no-longer-secret arrest began to appear, I was already back on the canal boat with Sylvia.

I now had a legal right to remain in the UK pending the completion of the asylum review process. Naturally this has been overseen by the same Home Office that had illicitly ordered my deportation - and headed by the same reactionary Home Secretary that the Sunday Times had mocked just a few weeks prior over her failure to keep me out of the country. Meanwhile, The Crown Prosecution Service still had the option of charging me with criminal offenses carrying prison time that could have potentially made me ineligible for asylum altogether. Indeed, the chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation, London's main officer union, was rather insistent that this be done, and had in fact worked quite hard on a memorandum in support of the contention that I'd caused police officers to fear for their lives.

The scene of my latest alleged crime had been a mass demonstration outside of Parliament in which thousands of attendees had protested against legislation giving police the ability to arrest any and all future protesters on the grounds of believing (or claiming to believe) that observers might find the protest upsetting. Though I don't attend protests as a general rule, I'd

tagged along with Sylvia and some of her obnoxious squatter friends, and when asked to assist in holding a banner with the word "Cops" written on it, I agreed on the grounds that I could still hold the bottle of rum someone had just passed to me. Meanwhile another set of people held a separate banner reading "Kill", allowing the press to get some picturesque footage of the helpful reminder that "Cops Kill." Then we were briefly rearranged by the radical chic artist such that the two banners now read "Kill Cops" with me now in the middle, before being switched again to the original position. At some point it occurred to me that I had thus briefly been posed with an obnoxiously performative slogan and was briefly embarrassed lest anyone think I had suddenly taken up a cartoonish London brand of activism or, worse, art. But it didn't occur to me that anyone had committed a crime.

Unfortunately for the police union chairman, Kenneth Marsh, it hadn't occurred to anyone else either, including the dozens of cops who were present. This was a problem because the statute he eventually settled on required (1) someone present to have "feared for their life" or at least be willing to lie about this after the fact, and (2) reasonable certainty as to this having been my intent. Both of these requirements were ruled out by the extensive footage available. So, he settled again, this time on a lesser statute about having caused "alarm and distress". But the memo he wrote was phrased in such a way that actually implicated Marsh himself in that crime rather than me due to his claim that any cop who saw a photograph of the banner or even heard of it would naturally suffer alarm and distress coupled with the fact that he himself had distributed the picture via the police union Twitter account with the intent that other cops see it and become aware of it. So, Marsh had to write a new memo, presumably with guidance from CPS, this time with more careful wording.

The case was made more difficult still when the prosecution accidentally sent my lawyers an untitled and undated CPS\Met internal memo wherein they admit that materials they'd reviewed of interviews I'd conducted in the days after the protest further gave the impression that I'd had no "intent". Under the same section - the one headlined "Weaknesses" - the authors also admit that the arresting officer had perjured himself by signing a sworn affidavit that he'd read me my rights upon arrest as required by law when the body cam footage shows this to have been false. Indeed, the cop had been lectured on this failure by an intake officer at the station, also on body cam, not long before he wrote the report, such that a defense on the grounds of forgetfulness would have been less than viable.



Another “weakness” listed was the inclusion in the same affidavit of a reference to the two “covert officers” who’d summoned the uniformed patrolmen after locating me on the boat; apparently such officers aren’t supposed to be mentioned in print. This might explain the otherwise odd fact that a second, entirely different sworn affidavit had been issued days after my arrest by a different officer, this time with an alternate narrative in which the group of low-ranking street cops just happened to “discover” me on the boat all by themselves. To be clear, none of this raised any real risk of anyone involved being charged with perjury, a charge that is almost never leveled at police in either the US or UK. CPS dropped the most serious of the two charges immediately prior to the court date, and so it didn’t matter all that much when a judge found me guilty. I was fined a thousand British pounds.

In the end, the United Kingdom will either grant me asylum or return me to the United States to face whatever new charges the FBI is manufacturing this time around. A recording secretly made by the late whistleblower Val Broeksmit of a November 2020 meeting at the FBI’s Los Angeles office confirms that the bureau and its partners on the right are so firmly intent on coming up with something that they actually provide clandestine support with a child endangerment case in exchange for unspecified assistance in making this happen. Broeksmit provided the four-hour tape to the former editor of Vice before his unusual death a few months later; but like so much else in the US and its immediate moral vicinity, it’s chiefly useful as a means of demonstrating how far the police can go and how little it matters when it becomes public.

In this same context, it’s worth recalling the 2019 incident in which armed members of the right-wing Patriot Prayer outfit marched to a brewery favored by the left and launched an attack that left a young woman paralyzed. Marching alongside them was a then-obscure far-right blogger by the name of Andy Ngo. Presenting himself as simply a neutral reporter, Ngo released footage that had been deceptively edited to obscure what actually occurred. His talent for disinformation was so keen that a few months later he succeeded in convincing many of the nation’s major outlets that he was best understood as a victim of antifascist violence when someone threw a milkshake in his face during a speaking engagement, causing a national outcry. By the time other footage and leaked messages emerged demonstrating Ngo’s true role in actual, premeditated political violence, even reporters who’d originally bought his claims had begun to catch on. Still, the narrative

he helped to establish about out-of-control Antifa militants had already taken hold, providing cover for right-wing police departments that wished to continue targeting the left and aiding the right. And this is exactly what most police outfits and the FBI continued to do, thus setting the stage for January 6th 2021. 138 police officers were injured in the course of bringing the Capitol siege under control, 15 of whom were hospitalized, in addition to several who were killed on the scene plus several others who committed suicide in the weeks to follow.

A great deal of space would be needed to summarize what's known so far of Ngo's connections to the groups and individuals who promoted and even carried out the mass violence of January 6th. Suffice to say that he went on to lionize many of those involved. He was also the person who enabled my arrest and near-deportation from the UK when he reached out to Marsh to identify me from the photo his union had posted; he would appear more formally in my court documents as "the informant". Marsh even retweeted one of his posts characterizing me as having a history of violence on the grounds that I once made a joke about raising money for a statue of the late Ashli Babbitt to be used for target practice.

As for who Babbitt is, the Independent once characterized her thusly: "35-year-old Air Force veteran Babbitt was shot dead by police while trying to force her way through a barricaded door protecting members of Congress from a mob of angry rioters that pushed their way into the US Capitol on January 6. Those rioters were infamously heard chanting 'Hang Mike Pence' and some brought along nooses and a Confederate flag, while others constructed a makeshift gallows that looked designed for lynching." Ngo's long-time ally Enrique Tarrío, founder of the Proud Boys gang Ngo publicly associated with in the years before it played a key role in these same events, provided a different view in a post bearing a photograph of the Capitol officer who'd shot her. "This Black man was waiting to execute someone on January 6th. He chose Ashli Babbitt."

Whatever my fate, it will at least be instructive. In the absence of anything resembling the rule of law, this is the most an American dissident can hope for.

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## Barrett Brown

Barrett Brown is a writer and activist. His work has appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *The Guardian*, *The Intercept*, *Huffington Post*, *New York Press*, *Skeptic*, *The Daily Beast*, *Al Jazeera*, and other outlets. In 2009, he founded Project PM (projectpm.wiki), a “distributed think tank” later repurposed to oversee a crowdsourced investigation into private intelligence contractors and little-known surveillance/disinformation methodologies. In 2011 and 2012, he worked with Anonymous on campaigns involving the Tunisian revolution, state misconduct, and other issues. In 2012, Brown was arrested and later sentenced to four years in federal prison on charges stemming from his investigations into HBGary, Stratfor, Palantir, Archimedes, and other firms that would later be implicated in election interference operations in the US and UK. While imprisoned, he won the National Magazine Award and other journalism and writing honours for his column, “The Barrett Brown Review of Arts and Letters and Prison.” Upon his release in late 2016, he established the non-profit Pursuance to develop a platform for mass civic engagement and to promote his doctrine of non-institutional “process democracy.” His third book, *My Glorious Defeats*, is available for pre-order from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.



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