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### ANOTHER OPINION

# The west dithers as carnage grows in Myanmar

Five months after its military seized power to prevent the seating of a new, democratically elected parliament, Myanmar is steadily sliding toward failed state status. Nearly 900 people have been killed in clashes between the military and civilians, much of the economy remains paralyzed by boycotts and a civil disobedience movement, and COVID-19 infections are spiking. Meanwhile, armed conflict is spreading from the far reaches of the country, where minority ethnic groups have long battled the Tatmadaw, as the military is known, to the center of the country, where the Bamar majority is concentrated.

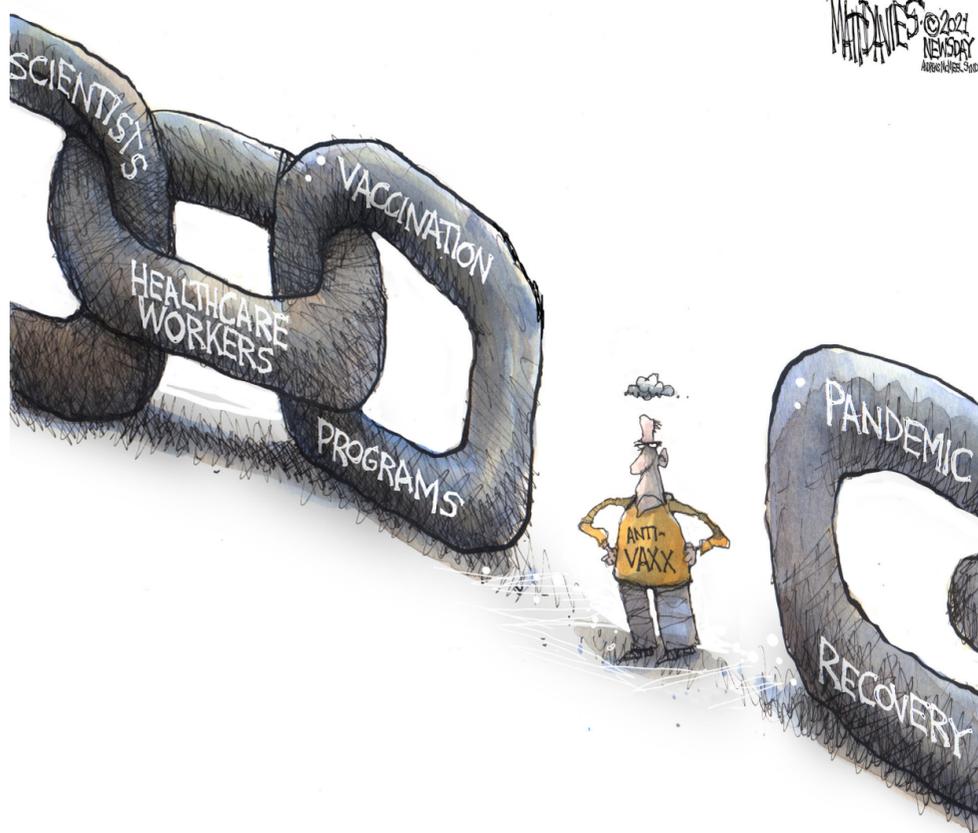
In numerous towns and villages, civilians armed with hunting rifles or smuggled weapons have formed self-defense units, and thousands of activists from the cities have trained in jungles with the ethnic militias. Local officials appointed by the military are being assassinated, including more than two dozen last month, and there have been hundreds of bombings of police stations, banks and government offices. The Tatmadaw's response has been brutally disproportionate: Villages where self-defense militias have formed have been attacked with artillery and helicopter gunships, then burned to the ground. In the northwest Sagaing region, 41 civilians, including a number of children, were reported killed last Friday when troops assaulted several villages.

In a dramatic departure from its past doctrine of nonviolence, the opposition leadership, which has formed a national unity government, has endorsed violent self-defense and announced the creation of a People's Defense Force. It has declared the Tatmadaw a terrorist organization and set the aim of disbanding it and creating a new federal force including the ethnic groups. That is a change that Myanmar, also known as Burma, probably needs to consolidate democracy and end the domination of the country by the Bamar. But it is also enormously difficult to accomplish. The 350,000-strong Tatmadaw vastly outnumbers opposition forces, which remain scattered, poorly armed or divided by ethnic differences. The nascent self-defense units generally support the national unity government but are not under its command and control. They lack the large military defections and help from outside powers that allowed Syria's rebels to launch a full-scale civil war.

That the opposition has embraced such a radical and risky course reflects profound frustration at the failure of the outside world to act decisively against the coup. While the United States and European Union have adopted some sanctions, China and Russia have blocked action by the U.N. Security Council, and the response of Asian countries, including India and Japan, has been weak. There are steps the West could take to substantially raise the pressure, including blocking the nearly \$500 million in annual revenue the regime receives for natural gas exports. But EU member France has resisted that step; the French company Total is a partner in the gas production. The Biden administration could probably block the flow of funds unilaterally, since they are denominated in dollars, but that would contravene its policy of working in concert with European allies.

The result is a diplomatic stalemate — and the continuing descent of a country of 54 million people toward bloody anarchy.

— *The Washington Post*



## Talking about those we've lost helps keep the memory of them alive

Last week on deadline I stood up from my laptop, called the dog and drove out to the cemetery a few miles from here.

I walked there among the headstones, trying to stay in the shade and away from the blistering July sun. I came across the grave of a family who opted for a bench for a headstone, and took advantage of its cool surface to lie back and look into the trees.

Over at the far end of the graveyard, in the "new" part, my sister and my daughter talked while my girl bopped around the stones. We were all waiting for a man we didn't know, waiting to show him something we've had 15 years to get used to: the grave of someone we love very much.

Last month he'd contacted me on social media and explained he had been a college classmate of my nephew Zach at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. Zach was cool, he said, the one who always had a wise answer in their crowd of young, passionate artists with big ideas. "He was our James Dean," he said.

A bunch of those classmates drove from various spots to the shore of Lake Erie in late June 2006 after the word spread among them. Zach, handsome and rebellious, was dead like James Dean, too young and surrounded by the dirty glitter of broken auto glass.

His long-ago friend told me that though he attended Zach's funeral, he'd never been to his grave. I offered to meet him on his way down from Michigan, to direct him through the cemetery.



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Zach is buried in an old cemetery, out in the middle of farmland. Five years after he left us, we buried my dad just a few rows away in the "new section" that's expanded so much since then we always remark on it, every time we visit.

"When we put Zach here this was the last row," my sister said. Where are all these people coming from, I say in my head. Surely I would have heard about it if all these people in our community have died, I think, stupidly and not for the first time.

When it doesn't happen in your family, when you're not the one picking out a casket and a burial outfit and standing in the uneven soil of a freshly opened grave, you can't possibly know that sharp knife of stunning, sudden pain. I can chart five years of my life on three rows of that cemetery, from the moment my nephew died and then over to my dad's grave, diagonally placed a bit more to the west. I remember only one milestone between those two — my daughter. At that moment, she was happily and joyfully using her grandfather's headstone as a balancing beam, the shadow of her outstretched arm reaching nearly to Zach's.

She never met one and only has indistinct memories of the other, and yet the traits show up. She's fierce and

brown-eyed, like her Papaw. She's funny and tender like her cousin and has recently appropriated a vintage Army shirt that was once mine that I passed to Zach. It still smelled like him when I took it from his room the day after he died and hung it in my closet. It's her favorite thing to wear.

Zach's friend showed up and I leave the grave marker bench to go meet him. I was hoping being around someone who'd shared art school and youth with Zach, someone who could tell us stories of him, would bring me that faint whiff again of his life. The way I'd pass my closet and every few years and bury my face in that old Army shirt and hope to go back in time through the faint scent of paint and sweat, and remember.

Soon I left for home, citing my deadline and thinking I'd give Zach's mom time alone to chat with his friend, to keep her son alive if just for another hour of hearing his name spoken aloud.

It is so important, I've learned, to freely talk about someone's lost loved one to them. We think it will "bring up a bad memory" to them, as if they do not know they're gone. As if hearing someone else say their name doesn't bring a glimpse of them back to the surface for just a minute more.

In this year of so many unexpected deaths, let's keep that in mind. Remember their loved ones. Share your memories with those they left. Do it for Zach.

*Contract Chronicle-Telegram columnist Rini Jeffers at rinijeffers@gmail.com.*

## The right's attacks on critical race theory are just another culture war

Here you go: I have forgotten more about race than most people have ever known. Apologies if that sounds like brag-gadocio, but there's a point that needs making. I've spent the better part of 40 years researching and writing about the history and dynamics of race in America — and 63 years living them. I know this terrain well.

Yet until maybe six months ago, I had never heard of "critical race theory."

It has since become inescapable, of course — panicked Republicans marching in the streets under signs demanding, "Stop Critical Race Theory Now!" while states like Oklahoma, Texas, Florida and Tennessee rush to pass laws protecting children from its depredations. Nikki Haley believes critical race theory "is going to hold back generations of young people." Author Mark Levin says it's about "destroying the existing society." Tucker Carlson calls it a "poison" that will end civilization as we know it.

One almost expects critical race theory to come lumbering over the horizon like Godzilla, swatting away fighter jets like gnats as grim-faced generals ponder the advisability of using nukes.

And yet — it bears repeating — as recently as January, this avowed expert in racial dynamics had never heard of it. Nor am I the only one. Last week, I surveyed a handful of people like me: African-American journalists with long



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experience in the field of race. Only one claimed detailed prior knowledge of critical race theory. As to the rest?

"Heard the phrase for the first time this year," said one.

"I had heard the term vaguely," said another.

"NEVER," said yet another.

Small wonder. A search of the Nexis database finds that the term "critical race theory" appeared in U.S. newspapers 1,361 times in the 21 years between January 2000 and New Year's Day, 2021. It has appeared 6,000 times in the six months since.

For the record: critical race theory originated over 30 years ago among legal scholars; it holds that race is a social — not a scientific — construct and offers a framework for understanding the role of systemic racism in the law and in legal institutions. It is taught, if at all, in law school — not high school.

So how did it become this sudden four-alarm fire in the house of democracy? The answer is depressingly simple. It is this year's War on Christmas. It's sharia law, gay wedding cake and

New Black Panthers. Which is to say, it is this year's spur by which the white right, more easily stampeded than a herd of cattle by a lightning strike, is prodded to feel resentful, frightened and besieged — and vote accordingly.

There are no words — nice ones, anyway — for the cynicism of those who employ these crude manipulations. Or, for the gullibility and stupidity of those who let them get away with it, who fall for the same tired okey-doke, season after season, year after year, generation after generation.

Harsh words? Yes. But what other words are appropriate to people who, as the planet burns, as the pandemic decimates, as the rich get richer and as the random bullets fly, think their children's greatest threat arises from an obscure academic doctrine?

Today, it's critical race theory. Tomorrow — mark my words — it will be something else, some other pithy term to serve as a repository of all that the white right fears. There are many things for which they should be afraid — life, health, future. But sadly, they fear nothing quite so much as the loss of whiteness and its privileges. As I said, I know this terrain well.

Yet I keep hoping it will surprise me someday.

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