

KING OF DOGS
(ANDREW EDWARDS)

April 5, 2024

When Americans think of apocalyptic futures, we usually think of the apocalypse itself, whatever that might be. We have a morbid fascination with its totalizing effect, whether asteroid strike, zombie plague or nuclear war. The truth is, however, that the worse the situation in which a man finds himself, the less he cares about the big picture, the grand sweep of things. His focus becomes narrow, granular, centered on overcoming immediate challenges and satisfying immediate needs, within his own moral framework. This reality is portrayed well in *King of Dogs*, a novel of the near future, set in and around Moab, Utah in a disintegrating United States.

The year is unspecified, but it is not far off. America has become Brazil-ified, only worse, with much of the population immiserated while a small elite lives in armed enclaves. Central government control has largely evaporated, in the usual pattern of collapsing empires, where the center is simply ignored by the periphery. Instead, shadowy oligarchs, whose actions retain a veneer of governmental authority, pillage the nation, even more openly than today, including through the use of private armies. The result is “uncertainty, social disintegration, and low-intensity guerilla war,” driven by cartels, migration, elite factional fighting, and ever-more-desperate attempts at value extraction by the powerful trying to maintain their position. There is no complete collapse, just every day everything is a little worse than the day before. Propaganda, naturally, is still ubiquitous and “the old patriotic platitudes regarding democracy, opportunity and individual freedom wore on in every media.” The homeless and drifters are everywhere encamped; goods are hard to come by; personal security for the average person is fragile. In other words, this is a recognizable version of tomorrow, not so very different from today. You can see it from where you sit, chilling with Netflix, if you squint and look to windward.

To be sure, there are many possible futures for America, and this is only one. *King of Dogs*, while compelling, is a bleak book with a dim view of human nature, pessimistic about future America. If I were a betting man, I would bet that the future for America, or rather for the

peoples who have long lived in the lands now known as America, is bright, even though there are very rocky times immediately ahead. The key question for America, I think, is whether and when there will be open conflict between Americans. In *King of Dogs*, there aren't really warring ideological sides, and political divisions, of the sort on which we focus nowadays as the Left ramps up its plans for massive violence if their acquisition of yet more power is frustrated, do not appear. There is no civil war; rather, the violence is portrayed as much more like, say, the recent Congolese wars, where extraction drives conflict among factions. What is depicted is, in fact, a kinetic variation of what the Regime does right now—force its will upon a mostly passive and disorganized population.

The protagonist (it is hard to call him a hero, exactly) is one Grayson, a man left without an overriding purpose after his infant son died and his wife left him. In his story, there is far more duty than redemption, though no nihilism at all. Grayson journeys to Moab at the request of his dead mentor, a military man who taught him a great deal about surviving in environments made hostile by other men or by the elements (though Grayson himself has never been a soldier). In Moab lives his dead mentor's brother and his pregnant wife, whom Grayson has been asked to shield from danger. The entire book, more or less, is his efforts to do so, and to take the brother and his family back to Oregon, after the child is born.

The problem for the people of Moab is that despite its isolation, the town controls the water supply of points south (the Colorado River runs through it). This leads to a full-scale assault by oligarch-hired mercenaries to take control of the town, presumably to use the water for gain, though the specifics are never laid out. "Full-scale" here means indistinguishable from a modern, well-equipped army, complete with some air power and most other assets of war (although, since this book was published in 2019, drones only make a small appearance; the military world has changed a lot in five years, as we see from the Russo-Ukraine War).

The assault is tightly-planned and executed, and includes as its first act destruction of local militias and Indian tribes identified as a threat, together with targeted attacks against any individual seen as a potential threat to the new overlords, who have done their research for several

months. The goal is not to destroy the town, but to control it. No doubt much of this is standard operating procedure, and would be recognizable, to some degree, to an American veteran of our Middle Eastern wars. (I don't know if the author, Andrew Edwards, has a military background, but it would not be surprising.) Throughout, the descriptions of events, and even more the exquisitely-rendered descriptions of landscapes, are slightly hallucinogenic, lending the book a unique, yet still readable, feel.

Grayson's goal is to find and extricate his charges, but he runs afoul of the mercenaries. His challenge is that in the months while he was living in Moab, waiting for the child to be born, he was chosen by the mercenaries, or by their civilian bosses, as the "scapegoat"—the man whom they intend to frame, in the popular media which the oligarchs, then as now, control, as the "dangerous insurgent leader" who led a terrorist attack on Moab, such that "extrajudicial forces were required to quell the unrest." What results is a variation on the classic short story "The Most Dangerous Game," where Grayson is hunted, in one extended passage quite literally.

The protagonist's challenge is exacerbated by his finding it is impossible to trust anyone. (Spoilers ahead.) By the end of the book, he has killed nearly everyone with whom he had dealings, all of whom betrayed him. All those with whom he interacts are very bad people—not just cowardly and treacherous, but often involved in various forms of degraded perversion. I think this is an overly negative view of people, but who is to say how our society would behave in a chaotic future, given that Americans in America have never been tested, at least not for 150 years? Worse, the man, woman, and child for whom he did and risked all this are also dead, long dead, killed by the mercenaries, though he had not realized it. (I said this was a bleak book.)

Why does Grayson do all this, at extreme risk and cost? Simply because he promised. "A promise is a type of challenge to the darkness of the world. A promise is a source of light that burns in eternity if made good while those broken are inverted, swallowed in the expanding nothingness." This, the culture and way of honor and duty, is a very ancient way of looking at the world, one that seems absent from our present age. But, again in wagering mode, I bet it will make a return.

While there is plenty of action, *King of Dogs* is more a book of introspection than anything else. Grayson spends a lot of time pondering,

in essence, the meaning of his existence. The book is therefore prone to frequent philosophical asides, which sounds like it would be annoying, but it's not. A subtle thread of particular interest to me is that of Eastern Orthodoxy. The protagonist is Orthodox, though it is never announced or discussed. It merely shows through in little passages that his faith is important to him. When his mentor is dying of cancer, "Grayson dragged him to the Russian Orthodox church with its blue and gold onion domes, where the women were more beautiful for the scarves over their hair and where the theology had no holes." And when his mentor is dead, the hospital priest says, "Saint Maximus taught that those who refuse to face their suffering know not what benefit it brings for the next world. This will not be a problem for you, I suspect."

Sometimes, Grayson focuses with the Jesus Prayer, especially when tempted to do, or about to do, something that might get him sideways with Christ—which is often. When he does such things, although all could be accurately cast as meting out justice, he "prays that God approves," though he realizes He very well may not. "To kill is a sin, yes. And atonement followed by repentance is the true way to face the inevitability of your sins." "And as to the question of whether I'll be granted the requisite time to properly atone for killing you or anyone else that I'm going to kill—that's a judicial, divine grey area which while gravely serious is ultimately one of acceptable risk." Grayson's view is that "God would forgive if he was wrong. While if he was right, perhaps then God would have mercy."

I'm not sure if his approach is the right one. Many of the modern Orthodox hierarchy, in the same way as most present-day Christian denominations, have adopted a condemnatory view of justice-based killing, even though much of what they criticize, namely killing by the state or by individuals in broadly-viewed self-defense, was formerly viewed by the Orthodox as permissible. The modern view is ahistorical and does not, I suspect, conform to the views of the Fathers of the Church (to whom they never refer when discussing the matter, suggesting either that they fear contradiction or that the Fathers said nothing about such killing because it was self-evidently not a major concern).

Grayson says to one man, "By avoiding mercy—that is, by showing none—you have chosen justice." (He says to another, "You are about to come squarely before your failings as a human man, and they will

unfold through infinity like mirrors upon mirrors. There's no bottom to it and it's too late to ask for a guide." Ouch.) Killing others is far from the worst sin a man can commit, and may be required by duty, to both God and man, though it should never be celebrated. Traditional Orthodox practice was to require soldiers returning from war to confess and perform penance, not because what they had done was necessarily the wrong choice, but in order to recognize that any killing, even necessary killing, is falling short of the ideal mark God desires. It is no doubt relevant, as well, that God would not allow King David, one of Israel's greatest prophets and a saint in all Christian traditions, to build the Temple. "Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an house unto my name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight." But we will come back to these theological questions another day, perhaps.

So what does *King of Dogs* tell us about our actual future? As I have discussed before, my theory is that if America slides into fragmentation (a safe, but not sure, prediction), the inevitable local organizing device is the Armed Patronage Network, groups designed for defense and, more importantly, to create and administer social order. The curveball that Edwards throws is the presence of foreigners, something I have never really considered. In the scenario here, it is not migrants as such that are the major problem, although obviously the massive migrant invasion currently being imposed on the United States by the Regime is enormously destructive of trust as well as very dangerous to Americans in any social or political disintegration, and complicates the activities of any potential APN. Rather, it is organized military hirelings imported from abroad to serve the interests of the Regime. Mercenaries, of course, are as old as civilization, and as the Russo-Ukraine War has shown, there are always many thousands of men willing to, or even eager to, fight for money. My belief is that the American military would not fight in any meaningful way for the Regime against the American people—but that assumption does not apply to mercenaries, especially if those mercenaries are hired not precisely by the government, but by tentacles of the Regime acting primarily in their private interest.

This would put America into a very bad situation. All civil wars are dreadful, something too many have forgotten, even with recent examples such as the 1990s Balkan Wars. Although violence is sometimes

necessary, it is a terrible thing to break the world; it is almost as terrible to live through the breaking of the world. Even, or especially, splintered low-level violence is extremely unpleasant for normal people, especially because it can continue for a very long time. As one of the characters says, "It's as if we went to sleep in Utah and woke up in Gaza or Yemen or some unholy thing." (And this was written before the current destruction of Gaza, and the abhorning American defeat in Yemen.) The only solution to this type of chaotic fracture is the rise from within, or the imposition from without, of some greater power, combined with, naturally, the physical separation of the warring parties.

I doubt that what is shown here is America's future. I don't think that America could reach the point of seizures of entire towns by mercenaries without having long since Balkanized into overtly warring factions. The author places heavy emphasis on "international, untouchable" organizations, but inserting those into America in the ways depicted here is far from a sure thing. Yet, if the Regime's crimes and sins do lead to the fragmentation of America, one can imagine freelance foreigners coming to pick over the bones, unless they were stopped by organized force. It is easy to surmise that a fractured America would attract limitless opportunists; there is a lot still here for the taking. It would become like much of Africa, a hellhole. In this book, one of the mercenaries, noting his long service in little wars across the globe, is explicit about his motivation in coming to Moab. "But in this case the mighty western man and his Empire have fallen. I am given an opportunity to clean up, to take my piece, so I do."

What can we do about this potential problem? I am not sure, other than to organize and arm while the days grow shorter. In the book, there exist local militias with more organization than the types of militias we have today in America (which, sadly, seem mostly to not be very competent), but they are depicted as easily defeated. Maybe this is true, maybe it is not. I suspect it is less true than as shown here; witness the difficulties the American military had in Iraq, and even more so in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, individual APNs would have significant challenges in this situation; they are unlikely to work well in conditions of organized outside military pressure. On the other hand, APNs are a bridging device, a transition state, to the restoration of a more

centralized authority in conditions of societal fracture; opponents such as mercenaries would likely merely hasten this situation.

More generally, of late we frequently, from both Left and Right, see suggestions that we all feel something bad is coming. (The about-to-be-released movie *Civil War*, depicting exactly what its title says, feeds into this, certainly.) I am unsure if this is meaningful; I suspect this is more a manifestation of America having become, with very good reason, a low-trust society than it is actual insight into the future. Some forget that this feeling of doom was not uncommon in the late 1980s, when I first came of political age (though then it was just the fear of nuclear war in an otherwise extremely optimistic time), and has intermittently appeared since 2008 or so, after the optimism of the 1990s and early 2000s died. Certainly, I'm sure bad things are coming, because history shows that the American project is heading into massive turbulence. I just don't think precisely when and what can be predicted with any degree of accuracy. We merely have to prepare and wait.

Americans are very, very used to thinking that the bad things which happen in most of the rest of the world, or in the uncivilized parts, can't happen here. Suggestions and evidence to the contrary are viscerally shocking, even to the well-informed. To me, for example, it is very weird to think that there are bombs dropping in Lvov, which I visited thirty years ago, a quiet city filled with Habsburg architecture. But there is no end of history, and history is mostly bad things happening. The living creature known as civilization, and even more that creature known as Western civilization, has ultimately proved fragile. What we do with that knowledge, we will see.