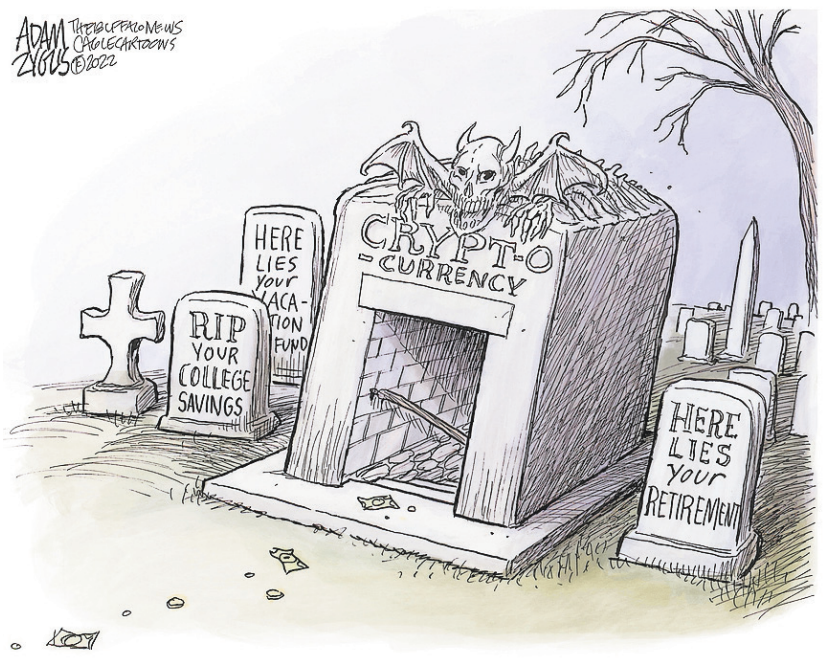
Opinion

Adam Zyglis | Cagle Cartoons



Bob Englehart | Cagle Cartoons

Beyond the razor wire is a connected planet

ROBERT KOEHLER

OK, he's a politician — Doug Ducey, the exiting governor of Arizona, who recently began erecting "hundreds of double-stacked shipping containers topped by razor wire" along Arizona's eastern border with Mexico, including through the Coronado National Forest. Is this not his right: to blather, lie and give his constituents an enemy? And what keeps us safer from that enemy than a wall, especially one topped with razor wire?

No matter the wall doesn't really keep desperate, fleeing migrants out. It keeps out ocelots and jaguars, bighorn sheep and spotted owls. It keeps out, or rather, imperils the life of the western yellow-billed cuckoo. It endangers the survival of seventy-plus plant and animal species. The wall is a monument to racism, according to Daniel Lombroso, director of "American Scar," and what it accomplishes is ecocide.

"The crisis at the border is our government."

The title of the film is not metaphorical. It refers to the fact that mountaintops were blown off to build the wall. The "scar" is the slash blown and bulldozed through mountain ranges in order to build the preposterous and cruel wall. Someday the wall will come down, but its "mark will last forever," all for the purpose of turning an abstract concept — national territory — into something allegedly "real."

Hurray for nationalism! Its essence is to divide "us" from "them." We could not have nations on Planet Earth unless we believed the planet was full of people who are not us and who can thus be dehumanized, not only when we're waging war but whenever we want. The existence of "them" is at the core of the national psyche — people who do not belong here and whose lives don't matter. Racial and ethnic differences help maintain the illusion, especially the latter part of it: that their lives don't matter.

And the reason it's so crucial to believe this is that the world is far from perfect. People migrate for many reasons, often with utter desperation: their homeland being is ravaged by war, authoritarianism, poverty, starvation, all of which is now intensified by the presence of climate change, especially in the Global South. Indeed, more migrants than ever are attempting to cross the U.S. southern border.

JOHN MOORE | Getty Images/TNS)

An aerial view show shipping containers that bridge previous gaps in the U.S.-Mexico border wall in Yuma, Arizona.

I want to live in a country — in a world — that sees beyond razor wire as the answer, indeed, that embraces understanding and connection as the only way forward. Oh God. We know this. Why is it so politically marginalized?

As we look beyond our fear of "them," as we look at the world with clarity and directness, it becomes clear that we must address its difficulties with more than kindness. Climate change is consuming the planet! It endangers every last one of us, and all of us — but especially the richest of us (who are, ironically, the ones least affected by climate change right now) — bear responsibility for it. Attention, ex-Gov. Ducey: Climate change does not recognize national borders.

Are there role models out there — role models for humanity's evolution? Maybe so. Let us cross the ocean and visit the continent of Africa, where climate change is demanding human sanity, both nationally and trans-nationally, to restore diversity in the continent's ecosystems. Welcome to the Great Green Wall, described as "the first wall designed to bring people together rather than keep them apart."

The Great Green Wall, envisioned and financed by some 20 international organizations, including the African Union, the World Bank and the U.N., is a "wall" of biodiversity that is nine miles wide and 4,831 miles long, running across the Sahel region of Northern Africa, just south of the Sahara Desert. It runs across 11 countries — Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Senegal — who "have joined to combat land degradation and restore native plant life to the landscape," according to National Geographic.

The Great Green Wall is a wall of native trees and plants — millions of them — planted by hundreds of thousands of local residents. And the leaders of these eleven countries are working together to deal with land degradation. And the benefits are both local and global — a concept apparently not yet understood by leaders in the Global North.

Robert Koehler is author of the book "Courage Grows Strong at the Wound." Visit his website at commonwonders.com or listen to him at Voices of Peace radio.

© 2022 Tribune Content Agency

Tampa's urban core is rebuilding with Encore and West River Tampa

JAMES CLOAR

Two thriving new communities have now sprung from blighted housing that segregated lower-income people, created pockets of poverty and spurred unhealthy environments in Tampa's urban core: Encore and West River Tampa.

In partnerships with the City of Tampa, Bank of America and The Related Group, the Tampa Housing Authority is creating affordable, walkable and sustainable communities with onsite job opportunities. Leading redevelopment teams to offer modern, master-planned communities and employment hubs, the housing authority is establishing contemporary mixed-use areas that not only double the number of affordable and workforce housing previously there, but exponentially increase hope with close-in job opportunities and residents from all walks of life, incomes, lifestyles and perspectives. Given the rising costs of apartment rentals and for-sale home prices, this intersection of aspiration and inspiration has never held more importance as Tampa grapples with its affordable and attainable housing crisis.

With all 13 lots either developed or under contract, the Encore vision is becoming reality. Located between downtown Tampa and Ybor City, Encore is home to nearly 1,200 mixed-income multi-family units, including two new privately owned market rate apartment buildings. Additionally, just last month, Miami-based LD&D announced plans for a $200 million development of multi-family rental, hotel and retail space at Encore further solidifying the plans to make Encore even more of a desirable live, work and play community. At full build out, Encore will be home to more than 2,000 units of housing, a hotel, offices, retail, a grocery and a museum.

On the other side of the Hillsborough River, redevelopment efforts are also in full swing. While previously offering just 820 units, the 44 acres now known as West River Tampa has 1,011 units completed or under construction, another 545 units scheduled to start in the next 90 days, and at full build-out will feature over 1,700 units, for-sale townhouses, a grocer, a hotel, office building, parks and more.

Most residents pay market rate rent at Encore and West River; qualified lower-income renters also find a home with the use of federal housing vouchers, inspiring many toward homeownership. Near downtown Tampa, Encore and West River communities enjoy proximity to the center city workforce market and our best cultural amenities like the Riverwalk, Art and Children's Museums, and Performing Arts Center as well.

Certainly, more affordable and mixed-use development is still needed near our job centers to create density and reduce people's transportation costs. However, today, we celebrate the grand achievements that are Encore and West River Tampa. We are proud to have made such meaningful contributions in addressing our affordable housing crisis and creating truly mixed use, integrated communities with opportunity. And, most importantly, we stand ready to continue this mission critical work we do every day for Tampa.

James Cloar is chair of the Tampa Housing Authority Board.

What I hear about war crimes from Ukraine

ROBERT BRUCE ADOLPH

Last May, I led a small international team into the area around Bucha in Ukraine, in support of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Bucha was within the invasion corridor used by the Russian Army in their failed attempted march into Kyiv to overthrow and replace the elected government. It was here where I first saw the impact of war crimes committed by Putin's forces.

The local populace — the survivors — were massively psychologically devastated by what they saw and experienced. Two members of my team spoke native-level Ukrainian; one, a woman, acted as our interpreter/translator. Our mission to Ukraine ultimately came to a successful conclusion, but my relationship with this woman did not end. We remained in touch following my departure. She has requested anonymity, and understandably so. She remains in Ukraine with her husband and children.

This brave woman recently sent me an email with an attachment obtained by her husband entitled, "Memories from Hell," which provides indisputable video evidence of Russian soldiers last February ambushing unarmed civilian vehicles with automatic weapons on a roadway for what was described by a local police official, "as if they were on safari." This cruel incident is only one among a growing multitude of barbarities committed by Russian forces at the behest of a man we can easily describe now as a full-fledged war criminal, Vladimir Putin.

Summary executions and mass graves of non-combatants, using civilians as human shields, torture, sexual violence (rape), the taking of hostages, the willful and purposeful destruction of civil infrastructure — including the power grid — targets the civil populace. Without power and heat, the winter cold kills every bit as effectively as bullets and bombs.

The post-World War II conception of civilized conflict under the 1949 Geneva Convention is where uniformed soldiers fight uniformed soldiers for martial supremacy on battlefields, which regrettably sometimes kills or maims civilians. However, civilians are not supposed to be targeted. If it can be proven that they were the intended target, then, it generally qualifies as a war crime. The clear proofs of Russian malfeasance are coming out of Ukraine almost daily. The atrocities perpetrated in Bucha that included mass murder at the beginning of the conflict are reportedly replicated in recently liberated Kherson far to the south and east of the country. What does all this mean?

At the close of World War II, with the defeats of both imperialism and fascism, Japanese and German senior officers were condemned to death by special tribunals for slaughtering civilians and deservedly so. Their mantra was often, "I was only following orders." The judges did not buy it. The guilty were instead held accountable for their wanton brutality.

Tragically, we homo sapiens have not evolved. Russia is proving the terrible truth of it with every day that passes. It is abundantly clear that Putin cares nothing for what some might call "civilized warfighting." His lack of empathy and respect for international humanitarian law has metastasized onto his armed forces, which demonstrate few ethical or moral boundaries.

Will Putin and his key supporters ever occupy the dock at a future special tribunal tasked with doling out punishment for the avalanche of crimes his regime has committed? Although possible, it does seem unlikely, at least while he remains in control in the Kremlin. Still, the law demands that the attempt be made.

Nobody knows what the future holds. Bringing Putin and his henchmen before a duly constituted tribunal is necessary. The Liberian dictator Charles Taylor and the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic never imagined themselves being held accountable for their crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. They were both proven wrong. Let's hope that Putin is ultimately proven wrong too. Those who perpetrated the horrors in Ukraine must be brought to justice, no matter how long it takes.

Robert Bruce Adolph is a former senior Army Special Forces soldier and United Nations security chief, who holds graduate degrees in both international affairs & strategy. He is the author of a recent book, "Surviving the United Nations: The Unexpected Challenge."