

# Chaos Monday: Last-er Chance

## Extemp POI

You have thirty minutes to craft a POI with a minimum time of 90 seconds and a maximum time of seven minutes. The POI must include an intro and one of the following articles must be cited in the introduction. You do not have to take the side of the article presented.

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## Extemp POI

Option A:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2023/06/orca-killer-whale-attacking-boats/674438/>

Option B:

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/10/12/joe-biden-is-too-timid-it-is-time-to-legalise-cocaine>

## Option A Plaintext: KILLER WHALES ARE NOT OUR FRIENDS

In recent months, orcas in the waters off the Iberian Peninsula have taken to ramming boats. The animals have already sunk three this year and damaged several more. After one of the latest incidents, in which a catamaran lost both of its rudders, the boat's captain suggested that the assailants have grown stealthier and more efficient: "Looks like they knew exactly what they are doing," he said. Scientists have documented hundreds of orca-boat incidents off the Spanish-Portuguese coast since 2020, but news coverage of these attacks is blowing up right now, thanks in part to a creative new theory about why they're happening: cetacean vengeance. Now that's a story!

"The orcas are doing this on purpose," Alfredo López Fernandez, a biologist at the University of Aveiro in Portugal, told LiveScience last month. "Of course, we don't know the origin or the motivation, but defensive behavior based on trauma, as the origin of all this, gains more strength for us every day." López Fernandez, who co-authored a 2022 paper on human-orca interactions in the Strait of Gibraltar, speculates that a specific female, known to scientists as White Gladis, may have suffered a "critical moment of agony" at the hands of humans, attacked a boat in retaliation, and then taught other whales to do the same.

Whatever the truth of this assertion, White Gladis and her kin have quickly ascended to folk-heroic status on the internet. "What the marine biologists are framing as revenge based on one traumatic experience may be a piece of a larger mobilization towards balance," the poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs tweeted before referring to the killer whales as "revolutionary mother teachers." Media figures and academics are expressing solidarity with their "orca comrades" and support for "orca saboteurs." One widely circulating graphic shows a pod smashing a boat from below, above the words "JOIN THE ORCA UPRISING." (You can even purchase it in sparkly sticker form.) Yet all of this fandom and projection tends to overlook important facts: First, these orcas are likely to be playing with the boats rather than attacking them, and second, if one insists on judging killer whales in human terms, it's plain to see they aren't heroes but sadistic jerks.

The recent incidents, none of which has resulted in any injuries to humans, are simply the result of curiosity, Monika Wieland Shields, the co-director of the Orca Behavior Institute in Washington, told me. A juvenile may have started interacting in this way with boats, she said, and then its habit spread through the local community of killer whales. Such cultural trends have been observed before: In the Pacific Northwest, orcas have been playing with buoys and crab pots for years; in the late 1980s, one group of orcas there famously took to wearing salmon hats. Is ramming boats the new donning fish? Shields believes that theory makes more sense than López Fernandez's appeal to orca trauma. White Gladis shows no physical evidence of injury or trauma, Shields told me, so any "critical moment of agony" is purely speculative. Also, humans have given orcas ample reason to retaliate for hundreds of years. We've invaded their waters, kidnapped their young, and murdered them in droves. And yet, there is not a single documented instance of orcas killing humans in the wild. Why would they react only now?

And though recent events may fit the story of these orcas' being anti-colonial warriors, you can't just anthropomorphize animals selectively. What about all the other "evidence" we have of orcas' cruelty, or even wickedness? Scientists say they hunt and slaughter sharks by the dozen, picking out the liver from each one and leaving the rest of the carcasses to rot uneaten. Orcas kill for sport. They push, drag, and spin around live prey, including sea turtles, seabirds, and sea lions. Some go so far as to risk beaching themselves in order to snag a baby seal—not to consume, but simply to torture it to death. Once you start applying human ethical standards to apex predators, things turn dark fast.

Perhaps #orcauprising was inevitable. Humanity does have, after all, a long history of freighting cetaceans with higher meaning. Moby Dick is, among other things, a symbol of the sublime. The biblical whale—or is it a large fish?—that swallows Jonah is an instrument of divine retribution, a means of punishing the wicked in much the same way some have framed the boat-wrecking orcas. The whale 52 Blue, known as the loneliest whale in the world because she speaks in a frequency inaudible, or at least incomprehensible, to her brethren, has become a canvas for all shades of human sorrow and angst.

Orcas in particular have long been objects of both fear and sympathy, in some cases with an explicitly anti-capitalist tint. The 1993 classic Free Willy centers on a conniving park owner's scheme to profit off of the bond between a child and a young killer whale. And more recently, the 2013 documentary Blackfish chronicles SeaWorld's real-life exploitation of captive orcas. The "orca uprising" narrative fits neatly into this lineage. In our present era of environmental catastrophe, Shields told me, it's appealing to think that nature might fight back, that the villains get their just deserts.

But projection and anthropomorphization are only shortcuts to a shallow sympathy. Orcas really are capable of intense grief; they are also capable of tormenting seal pups as a hobby. They are intelligent, emotionally complex creatures. But they are not us.

## Option B Plaintext: JOE BIDEN IS TOO TIMID. IT IS TIME TO LEGALISE COCAINE

“It makes no sense,” said Joe Biden on October 6th, as he pardoned the 6,000 or so Americans convicted of possessing a small amount of marijuana. Although cannabis is fully legal in 19 American states, at the federal level it is still deemed to be as dangerous as heroin and more so than fentanyl, two drugs that contributed to more than 100,000 Americans dying of opioid overdoses last year. But the president’s admission applies to drug policy more broadly. Prohibition is not working—and that can be seen most strikingly with cocaine, not cannabis.

Since Richard Nixon launched the “war on drugs” half a century ago, the flow of cocaine into the United States has surged. Global production hit a record of 1,982 tonnes in 2020, according to the latest data, though that is likely to be an underestimate. That record high is despite decades of strenuous and costly efforts to cut off the supply. Between 2000 and 2020 the United States ploughed \$10bn into Colombia to suppress production, paying the local armed forces to spray coca plantations with herbicide from the air or to yank up bushes by hand. To no avail: when coca is eradicated on one hillside, it shifts to another.

The worst harm falls on producing and trafficking countries, where drug profits fuel violence. Murder in Colombia is three times more common than in the United States; in Mexico, four times. In some areas, drug gangs are so wealthy and well-armed that they rival the state, giving cops and officials the choice of *\_plata o plomo\_* (silver or lead): be corrupted or be killed. Prohibition also sucks children out of school, as drug gangs favour recruits who are too young to be prosecuted.

Two presidents, Gustavo Petro of Colombia and Pedro Castillo of Peru, are clamouring for change. Mr Petro has suggested steering the police away from coca farmers by decriminalising coca-leaf production and allowing Colombians to consume cocaine safely. These are good ideas, but the cocaine gangs will remain powerful so long as their product is illegal in the rich countries that consume most of it, such as the United States.

Half-measures, such as not prosecuting cocaine users, are not enough. If producing the stuff is still illegal, it will be criminals who produce it, and decriminalisation of consumption will probably increase demand and boost their profits. The real answer is full legalisation, allowing non-criminals to supply a strictly regulated, highly taxed product, just as whisky- and cigarette-makers do. (Advertising it should be banned.)

Legal cocaine would be less dangerous, since legitimate producers would not adulterate it with other white powders and dosage would be clearly labelled, as it is on whisky bottles. Cocaine-related deaths have risen fivefold in America since 2010, mostly because gangs are cutting it with fentanyl, a cheaper and more lethal drug.

Legalisation would defang the gangs. Obviously, some would find other revenues but the loss of cocaine profits would help curb their power to recruit, buy top-end weapons and corrupt officials. This would reduce drug-related violence everywhere, but most of all in the worst-affected region, Latin America.

If cocaine were legal, more people would take it. For some, this will be a choice: snorting a substance they know is unhealthy because it gives them pleasure. But cocaine is addictive. A paucity of research makes it hard to know how it compares with alcohol or tobacco on this score. More study is needed, as are greater efforts to treat addiction. This could be funded (and then some) by the money saved if the “war” were wound down.

In private, many officials understand that prohibition is not working any better than it did in Al Capone’s day. Just now full legalisation seems politically impossible: few politicians want to be called “soft on drugs”. But proponents must keep pressing their case. The benefits—safer cocaine, safer streets and greater political stability in the Americas—far outweigh the costs.