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WAR-TORN . . . Kharkiv, Ukraine

CRUNCH TIME IN UKRAINE

ALL eyes are on Gaza. The passions of the young are driven by what is unfolding there.

Ukraine, where the real threat to the future of democracy and a free world lies, is now largely ignored. Russia, emboldened by the diversion Gaza has provided and chest-puffed by the dilly-dallying of America in providing Ukraine with much needed military aid (the US senate finally approved a \$60 billion weapons package this week) is preparing a late spring or early summer offensive across much of the 600-mile front.

The Russian assault must fail. But Ukraine's forces are bedevilled by a shortage of fresh soldiers and missiles and ammo. They have dug new defensive fortifications in the east and the south to stave off a Russian advance. But the tardiness of western aid has put their success in serious jeopardy.

Putin is the world's number one enemy. If he succeeds in his expected offensive, the west will be weaker. The Baltic states, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia could be next in line for Russian forces. Finland and Poland are deeply concerned too.

The European Union has increased spending on tanks, missiles, guns and ammo for the Ukrainian forces, realising that Putin must be held back at all costs.

The fate of Ukraine will be determined by events over the next two to three months. It's there that our focus should be.

TAYLOR IS TORTURE

I, ALONG with those who possess a modicum of self-respect and an appreciation for melody, yawned loudly when Taylor Swift's new album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, caused a great deal of fuss across the globe last week.

The only thing to be said for it – and yes, I listened from start to finish (the worst hour and five minutes of my life) – is that it eventually ended. Each song passed in one ear and out the other without registering much of a response. As bland as a toilet ceiling.

Billions (of pre-teen girls) around the world love Taylor, right, enough to make her a billionaire, so what do I know?

It's a world that is a total mystery to me. And I like it like that.



Haughey's Ireland treated the victims of Stardust as criminals ..sorry is not enough

FIGHT . . . the relatives of Stardust victims



HOW much is a dead child worth? All the money in the world couldn't replace them. Right?

Well, consider this: Back in 1981, in the aftermath of the Stardust blaze that claimed the lives of 48 young people, the state offered their grieving families deeply insulting sums as low as £7,500 compensation.

Which equates to a miserly €43,000 in today's money. For a dead child. Back then, this state viewed the victims of the Stardust tragedy with deliberate contempt. It was a story of the powerful, the monied and the connected versus those who had nothing. And there was only going to be one winner.

The 1980s weren't the utopia the kids of today think it was. Far from it. Especially if you were working class and poor. Dark, miserable times, largely.

Finding work was a practical impossibility. Hundreds of thousands emigrated. Those who stayed behind lived in a land riddled with political corruption, woefully inadequate public services, the all-reaching, malevolent hand of the Catholic church, crippling inflation and grinding poverty.

But they lived their lives as best they could. And eked out a bit of pleasure in the rare moments they weren't scrambling to pay the bills or put food on the table.

The evening out at Stardust on Valentine's night, 1981, was one such occasion for the hardworking poor of Coolock, Edenmore and Artane on Dublin's northside.

The state, led at the time by the two-faced charlatan, Charles J Haughey, looked upon the poorest citizens with contempt.

Haughey, who told the people of Ireland to tighten their belts in 1981, lived an opulent secret life himself.

He wore the finest suits, ate at the best tables, rode a horse and lived in a mansion he never paid for.

It was in keeping with the character

of the man that he went out of his way in the days following the tragedy to bury the memory of the Stardust and its victims.

Within **FOUR** days of the worst disaster in the history of the state, he set up a tribunal of inquiry, which, in its report a year later, lay blame for what happened squarely at the feet of those who died that night.

The tribunal's conclusion, without any evidence, found that arson was the probable cause. Never mind that the club was a death trap, having as it did, carpet tiles on the walls, highly flammable plastic ceilings, locked exits, barred windows and faulty electrics.

That evidence was dismissed in favour of a narrative that blamed the victims themselves.

That insult to those who died, and those left behind, was allowed to stand for 43 years, until last week when the year-long renewed inquests into what happened that Valentine's night delivered the truth – they were unlawfully killed.

Cold comfort after all these years.

The original inquests into the disaster were held for all 48 over five days in March 1982.

The jury was not asked to determine the cause of the fire or the circumstances surrounding the deaths, and the findings were confined to the medical cause of death.

Like the tribunal that reported that same month, the inquests were, to put it mildly, wholly inadequate.

The truth was allowed to die with the victims.

To add insult to injury, the tribu-

nal's finding of probable arson paved the way for the owner of Stardust, the Butterlys, to sue Dublin corporation for criminal damages.

They were awarded the princely sum of £581,000, or roughly €2.3million in today's money. Did you spill your tea?

That same year, 1985, the families of the 48 Stardust victims were presented with take-it-or-leave-it compensation awards. If they signed up to the compensation scheme they couldn't pursue a case in the courts at a later stage – and many were told that if they tried to sue, they would lose everything, including possibly their homes.

Most people received less than £10,000.

Christine Keegan, who lost two of her daughters, Mary and Martina, in the blaze, received £7,500 for each of them. Contemptuous amounts.

Now, after 43 years' fighting to exonerate the dead, the families have received a full state apology. Taoiseach Simon Harris admitted the state failed them.

But that apology is not the end of things. Not by a long shot.

Each and every one of the victims' families deserves proper monetary redress for their suffering.

It's almost impossible to put a figure on how much a dead child is worth.

But the state is swimming in a budget surplus of **€8BILLION** today, so money should be no object.

They deserve the sun, moon and stars for what they were forced to endure for years at the hands of an uncaring state.

Not only that, this piece of history won't rest until a criminal probe brings proper justice and upholds in the courts the inquests' verdict of unlawful killing.



SHRILL . . . Greene, Boebert

END OF LINE FOR CABAL

THE Republican Party in the US has been in the grip of the Trump-inspired Far Right ever since Donald became president in 2016.

A lunatic cabal of crazy people, characters like Marjorie "Trailer Trash" Greene and Lauren "Bobfart" are the shrillest of them all, their minds polluted by wild conspiracy theories, anti-immigrant rhetoric, pro-life tyranny and America First gobbledegook.

Greene, real first name Marjorie Taylor, and Lauren, real last name Boebert, revel in obstructionist tactics in the House of Representatives, where they repeat Trump falsehoods about the "stolen" 2020 Presidential election, herald the rioters who stormed the Capitol building, parrot Russian propaganda about Ukraine and engage in below-the-belt gutter politics.

But their time, and that of Trump, is coming to an end, as Americans realise the future on offer under a second Donald Presidency.

The era of the brain-dead political pygmies has poisoned the US, but it's had its day.



HIT . . . Hot Chocolate

IT'S SEXY TIMES IN SHEFFIELD

I BELIEVE in miracles, Since you came along, Oh Danny Rohl.

Sung to the tune of Hot Chocolate's *You Sexy Thing*, it's been stuck in my head since last Sunday at 2.30pm.

That's when Sheffield Wednesday, my lot, leapt out of the Championship's relegation zone for the **FIRST TIME** since the season started.

With just three points after the first ten games, we were odds on for the drop. We sacked manager Xisco Munoz and brought in a German lad called Danny Rohl.

Over a grinding season, he has dragged the team, game by game, from the certainty of relegation to the hope we might catch up to the second and third last teams to last Sunday, when we beat Blackburn Rovers 3-1.

Out of danger we sit by one point, with two games to go.

Win them and Danny has performed a footballing miracle that has little match.



HIGH HORSE . . . Charles Haughey