

# US elections: The barbari



ROGER COHEN

*Surveying the American scene in the run-up to the midterm elections early next month, it is hard to escape that word: desperation*

I have been reading J M Coetzee's novel "Waiting for the Barbarians." It concerns a magistrate, a servant of Empire, stationed on a remote frontier, who watches with mounting indignation as fear of barbarian encroachment is used to justify a brutal and self-defeating imperial campaign of violence and torture. It is a portrait of an ageing man, stung by his conscience, bewildered by his times.

In one passage, Coetzee writes: "Every year the lake-water grows a little more salty. There is a simple explanation — never mind what it is. The barbarians know this fact. At this very moment they are saying to themselves, 'Be patient, one of these days their crops will start withering from the salt, they will not be able to feed themselves, they will have to go.' That is what they are thinking. That they will outlast us."

Barbarians come in different guises. Coetzee's novel turns in part on the fact that the barbaric presence in his pages is the Empire, not the Empire's imagined enemies. It is of the nature of declining powers to imagine

foes, to flail, to produce zealots, to embark on doomed wars, to flex the atrophying muscles of dominance. It is of the nature of life that imagined enemies, once provoked, turn into real ones.

On horseback, ragged mirages in the dust, Coetzee's barbarians do not really need to do anything. Hardly more than chimera, they suck the Empire into their labyrinth. This is because the Empire is dying, just as the magistrate is dying. He is an ageing libertine with an agile mind and a love of knowledge — a speck, as he sees with unforgiving insistence, on history's tide. This is a novel about the desperation of mortality.

Surveying the American scene in the run-up to the midterm elections early next month, it is hard to escape that word: desperation. This time the barbarians are not shabby. They are well groomed, well heeled, loud-mouthed; and they never heard a chord, or read a phrase, or saw a sensuous line on a canvas that caused them to pause in wonder.

These barbarians chose their moment well. The Empire-lite has not known a victory in far-flung wars in all the 17 years since it was attacked. The millions who served at distant, tedious frontiers were scarcely recognised on their return. They trudged their trauma home in sullen silence.

They watched, these unacknowledged servants of the im-



perial Republic, as certainties evaporated and precariousness spread and words lost meaning and money rode roughshod over sacrifice. The mood in the

Empire was restive, ripe for a self-declared saviour ready to deploy the language of violence and identify scapegoats. In due course, along came

the barbarian saviour, marching across the ramparts, through the gates of the capital, and declaring the rapt crowd to be the largest in recorded history. He had been

## What the Brazilian dictatorship did to

*The death of my father sheds light on what Brazil's future may*



MARCELO PAIVA

Jair Bolsonaro, an ultra-right wing populist, was elected president on Oct 28. As I processed this new reality, I looked out my window and watched the celebratory fireworks illuminate the night sky. In the distance, I made out one of Bolsonaro's supporters holding up a sign that said, "Ustra Lives."

It was a chilling reminder of our past. From 1970 to 1974, Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra was the head of the DOI-CODI, the intelligence agency responsible for stamping out critics during military rule. He oversaw the torture of political dissidents while they were detained by the secret police.

Bolsonaro's rise has been driven by people's anger and disillusionment, stemming from a huge multiyear corruption probe that has upended the country, a homicide rate that is sky high and a flailing economy. It didn't matter to many that his inflammatory

rhetoric denigrated women, as well as gay, black and indigenous people, or that he spoke fondly of torture and dictatorships. Indeed, an estimated 43 per cent of the population is in favour of the military intervening in government affairs. I think Brazilians have forgotten what it means to be ruled at gunpoint.

My father was a congressman for the State of São Paulo and a socialist. The military junta revoked his mandate after the 1964 coup d'état, and he went back to work as a civil engineer. I was 11 when he was arrested, along with my mother and my sister. It was a sunny morning in January in Rio de Janeiro in 1971, and we were getting ready to go to Leblon beach, which was across the street from our house. Suddenly, six armed men dressed in plain clothes entered through the back door into the kitchen, pointing machine guns. Outside, more men surrounded the house.

The government had intercepted letters and documents from leftist organisations that were sent to my father from dissidents in Chile. They thought he had a role in organising the distribution of mail and information for exiles in Brazil and out of the

country. On that day in 1971, my parents were in their swimsuits when the armed men burst into the kitchen. They took my father upstairs so he could get dressed while we all sat on the couch in the living room. He was told that the agents waiting outside were going to take him so that he could give his testimony. We never saw him again.

The six men stayed with us for the next 24 hours. Then they took my mother, Eunice, and my sister Eliana, who was 15 years old at the time, to the DOI-CODI facility in Rio de Janeiro, inside the Army headquarters on Barão de Mesquita Street. My other sisters, Ana Lucia, 13, and Beatriz, 10, and I were left behind alone.

My sister and my mother were harassed and intimidated. They sat hooded for 24 hours, without food or water. A speaker was blaring "Jesus Cristo," a song by Roberto Carlos, over the screams of a man being tortured — most likely my father. My sister was released the next day. But my mother spent 12 days in a dark cell, wearing the same clothes she had on the day she was arrested. She was awakened at night by screaming guards, who would force her to look through



The author with his father (a file picture).