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# System of a Down: Bring Your Own Bombs

Madison Dawson · Wednesday, March 2nd, 2016

Madison Dawson is this week's feature on "Tomorrow's Voices Today", the new series curated by poet and educator Mike Sonksen.

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## System of a Down: Bring Your Own Bomb

2005 in the United States was a year of many tumultuous events. It's the year mostly associated with the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, George W. Bush starting his dreaded second term as the 43rd President of the United States, the video-sharing website YouTube was founded, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* both released new movies, and the music charts were being flooded with Mariah Carey, Green Day, and Gwen Stefani.

But unbeknownst to most, taking the underground music scene by storm in 2005 was an Armenian band, System of a Down. Hailing from the streets of LA, System of a Down members, Serj Tankian, Daron Malakian, Shavo Odadjian, and John Dolmayan, formed their band in 1994 in Glendale, California. The band is most noted for their innovative sound, consisting of powerful guitar riffs, political commentary and outright rejection of popular culture. With these combinations, System of a Down have been able to produce memorable rock tunes for the past 15 years. It's no surprise that when their album *Mezmerize* was released in 2005, it took the music world by storm, particularly one of their singles off that album, "B.Y.O.B.". "B.Y.OB." captures the hypnotizing effects the U.S. government projects onto its citizens through allusions and imagery. System of a Down paint a clear picture that the U.S. government uses hypnotizing tactics to defer American citizens from becoming outraged at their actions and intervention.

The imagery that "B.Y.O.B." articulates to its listeners is that of war, injustice, and cruelty. From the opening lines, the song begins to criticize American politicians and their government. "Why do they always send the poor?" The writer of the song, Serj Tankian, chose to begin the song with a thought-provoking question. In doing so, the question immediately enables the listener to grasp onto the concept that Tankian is trying to convey, which is of the barbarism that American politicians and their government are enacting on the poor by always assembling them to be the ones to fight the American wars, such as the ones that occurred in Iraq and Afghanistan. This concept is further solidified in the following lines with "Barbarism by barbaras/with pointed heels". When one thinks of the word barbarian, they will almost always immediately envision a soulless man, with no capacity in his heart to care for others but himself and his own survival. Tankian describes American politicians as being barbarous entities that enact barbarism to project extreme brutality that the government will use to inflict pain and suffering upon its own citizens

and foreign nations alike. The singer/songwriter further explains that "…with pointed heels" the U.S. government will use these metaphorical weapons to instill fear and dependency into the hearts of its American citizens and foreign nations. These "pointed heels" allude to America's desire to try to maintain a dignity-filled persona, while trekking across its own people and foreign nations with muddy, oiled, blood soaked boots, crushing underneath them the spirit and will in the hearts of many. The "pointed heels" also serve as a depiction of the U.S. government's greediness for materialistic items that will further feed its unsatisfied hunger for capitalism that will fund their wars.

An American citizen will rarely ever question their government, all in fear of the capability and power it possesses which can ultimately be used against its citizens. In the following lines of their song, System of a Down state that the government "[March] forward hypocritic and hypnotic computers". By Tankian using the word "marching," it is apparent that he is trying to convey to the listeners that the government is only a body of strict rules, a uniformed system that only moves forward, not looking back for anyone or anything. Tankian follows up the word "marching" with "hypocritic and hypnotic computers" to further enhance his idea that the American government is only a game-maker, with the nation being a mere game and its citizens the pawns in this said game, and thus insignificant in the grand scheme of things. This game was created with only the government's well-being in mind, so that the government is meant to prevail in the end, not the citizens.

Ironically enough, "[they] depend on [the citizens] protection/ Yet [they] feed [them] lies from the tablecloth". Tankian explores the idea that the government makes themselves appear to be equals to the citizens through his reference to "the tablecloth." Through imagery, listeners are able to depict themselves as citizens sitting at a dinner table across from their government. In doing so, the government creates the illusion that the citizens sit at one head of the table and the government at the other, therefore equals. Tankian however argues that the exact opposite is true because the government is only attempting to make its citizens feel as though they have a say in their own government, so that the citizens continue to fight their wars that they create.

[embedvideo id="zUzd9KyIDrM" website="youtube"]

In response to the Iraq War that occurred earlier in 2003, System of a Down made a bold statement in response to George W. Bush's and the American government's wrongdoings in 2005, with the creation of "B.Y.O.B.". In the chorus, they sing "Everybody's going to the party, have a real good time/ Dancing in the desert, blowing up the sunshine." This "party" is in fact no party at all, but instead, it's the moment that U.S. forces were deployed to fight in Iraq by the government. Tankian refers to the war in Iraq as a party because that is what it is for the American government. The government must take great pride and joy in being able to send American troops to fight their war. Tankian states that Americans were "blowing up the sunshine," referring to how the troops, while in Iraq, caused more harm and evil.

Near the end of the song, the lines "Why don't presidents fight the war/Why do they always send the poor" are repeated numerous times. The repetition of these two lines allows the listener to come to the conclusion that the singers are trying to grasp onto some sort of understanding for why these sadistic things are being done by a country's government that is so heavily sought after and praised for. It's fact that the U.S. presidents are in full control of the Army and Navy, therefore having the power to deploy troops any time he'd find it deemable. But the wretched truth is that these presidents will never actually come in encounter with first hand experience of their own traumatization that they have caused.

System of a Down are notorious for their heavy sounding guitars, pounding bass riffs, electrifying drum hits, and fast changing tempo changes that happen so often, they're impossible to count. This style doesn't go unannounced in "B.Y.O.B.", where Serj Tankian purposely makes the lyrics sound

as obscene sounding as possible by elongating most words to indirectly explain how it’s obscene he has to point out the American government in the first place. It’s satirical how Tankian exaggerates the words and the rest of the System of a Down members exaggerate their guitar riffs, but this method is necessary to prove their point. Surprisingly, the chorus takes on an aura of fun and lightheartedness of a tone, despite the pressing matters that are being discussed in the lyrics.

### *Why don’t presidents fight the war/ Why do they always send the poor*

As the lines become repeated more often, Tankian begins to scream the words, fed up by the abuse the citizens of America and foreign nations have endured from the U.S. government. With “B.Y.O.B.”, System of a Down urged Americans to become more knowledgeable of their own government, so as to protect future generations to come from having to receive and endure the same abuse that has been occurring in America for two centuries.

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