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## Cold War Two

By William Blum

August 12, 2014

*During Cold War One those of us in the American radical left were often placed in the position where we had to defend the Soviet Union because the US government was using that country as a battering ram against us. Now we sometimes have to defend Russia because it may be the last best hope of stopping TETATW (The Empire That Ate The World). Yes, during Cold War One we knew enough about Stalin, the show trials, and the gulags. But we also knew about US foreign policy.*

E-mail sent to the *Washington Post* July 23, 2014 about the destruction of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17:

*Dear Editor,*

*Your July 22 editorial was headed: “Russia’s barbarism. The West needs a strategy to contain the world’s newest rogue state.”*

*Pretty strong language. Vicious, even. Not one word of hard evidence in the editorial to back it up. Then, the next day, the Associated Press reported:*

Senior U.S. intelligence officials said Tuesday that Russia was responsible for ‘creating the conditions’ that led to the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, but they offered no

evidence of direct Russian government involvement. ... the U.S. had no direct evidence that the missile used to shoot down the passenger jet came from Russia.

*Where were these words in the Post? You people are behaving like a rogue newspaper.*

– *William Blum*

I don't have to tell you whether the *Post* printed my letter. I've been reading the paper for 25 years – six years during Vietnam (1964-1970) and the last 19 years (1995-2014) – usually spending about three hours each day reading it very carefully. And I can say that when it comes to US foreign policy the newspaper is worse now than I can remember it ever was during those 25 years. It's reached the point where, as one example, I don't take at face value a word the *Post* has to say about Ukraine. Same with the State Department, which makes one accusation after another about Russian military actions in Eastern Ukraine without presenting any kind of satellite imagery or other visual or documentary evidence; or they present something that's wholly inconclusive and/or unsourced or citing "social media"; what we're left with is often no more than just an accusation. Do they have something to hide?

The State Department's Public Affairs spokespersons making these presentations exhibit little regard or respect for the reporters asking challenging questions. It takes my thoughts back to the Vietnam era and Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, the man most responsible for "giving, controlling and managing the war news from Vietnam". One day in July 1965, Sylvester told American journalists that they had a patriotic duty to disseminate only information that made the United States look good. When one of the reporters exclaimed: "Surely, Arthur, you don't expect the American press to be handmaidens of government," Sylvester replied: "That's exactly what I expect," adding: "Look, if you think any American official is going to tell you the truth, then you're stupid. Did you hear that? – stupid."

Such frankness might be welcomed today as a breath of fresh air compared to the painful-to-observe double-talk of a State Department spokesperson.

My personal breath of fresh air in recent years has been the television station RT (formerly Russia Today). On a daily basis many progressives from around the world (myself included occasionally) are interviewed and out of their mouths come facts and analyses that are rarely heard on CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, NPR, PBS, Fox News, BBC, etc. The words of these progressives heard on RT are typically labeled by the mainstream media as "Russian propaganda", whereas I, after a long lifetime of American propaganda, can only think: "Of course. What else are they going to call it?"

As for Russia being responsible for "creating the conditions" that led to the shooting down of Flight 17, we should keep in mind that the current series of events in Ukraine was sparked in February when a US-supported coup overthrew the democratically-elected government and replaced it with one that was more receptive to the market-fundamentalism dictates of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the European Union. Were it not for the coup there would have been no eastern rebellion to put down and no dangerous war zone for Flight 17 to be flying over in the first place.

The new regime has had another charming feature: a number of outspoken neo-Nazis in high and low positions, a circumstance embarrassing enough for the US government and mainstream media to turn it into a virtual non-event. US Senator John McCain met and posed for photos with the leader of the neo-Nazi Svoboda Party, Oleh Tyahnybok (photos easily found on the Internet). Ukraine – whose ties to Naziism go back to World War Two when their homegrown fascists supported Germany and opposed the Soviet Union – is on track to becoming the newest part of the US-NATO military encirclement of Russia and possibly the home of the region’s newest missile base, target Moscow.

It is indeed possible that Flight 17 was shot down by the pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine in the mistaken belief that it was the Ukrainian air force returning to carry out another attack. But other explanations are suggested in a series of questions posed by Russia to the the Secretary-General of the UN General Assembly, accompanied by radar information, satellite images, and other technical displays:

“Why was a military aircraft flying in a civil aviation airway at almost the same time and the same altitude as a civilian passenger aircraft? We would like to have this question answered.”

“Earlier, Ukrainian officials stated that on the day of the accident no Ukrainian military aircraft were flying in that area. As you can see, that is not true.”

“We also have a question for our American colleagues. According to a statement by American officials, the United States has satellite images which show that the missile aimed at the Malaysian aircraft was launched by the militants. But no one has seen these images.”

There is also this intriguing speculation, which ties in to the first Russian question above. A published analysis by a retired Lufthansa pilot points out that Flight 17 looked similar in its tricolor design to that of Russian President Putin’s plane, whose plane with him on board was at the same time “near” Flight 17. In aviation circles “near” would be considered to be anywhere between 150 to 200 miles. Could Putin’s plane have been the real target?

There is as well other serious and plausible questioning of the official story of Russia and/or Ukrainian anti-Kiev militias being responsible for the shootdown. Is Flight 17 going to become the next JFK Assassination, PanAm 103, or 9-11 conspiracy theory that lingers forever? Will the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the Syrian chemical weapons be joined by the Russian anti-aircraft missile? Stay tuned.

### **Will they EVER leave Cuba alone? No.**

The latest exposed plot to overthrow the Cuban government ... Oh, pardon me, I mean the latest exposed plot to bring democracy to Cuba ...

Our dear friends at the Agency For International Development (USAID), having done so well with their covert sub-contractor Alan Gross, now in his fifth year in Cuban custody ... and their “Cuban Twitter” project, known as ZunZuneo, exposed in 2012, aimed at increasing the flow of information amongst the supposedly information-starved Cubans, which drew in subscribers

unaware that the service was paid for by the US government ... and now, the latest exposure, a project which sent about a dozen Venezuelan, Costa Rican and Peruvian young people to Cuba in hopes of stirring up a rebellion; the travelers worked clandestinely, using the cover of health and civic programs, or posing as tourists, going around the island, on a mission to “identify potential social-change actors” to turn into political activists. Can you believe that? Can you believe the magnitude of *naiveté*? Was it a conviction that American exceptionalism would somehow work its magic? Do they think the Cuban people are a bunch of children just waiting for a wise adult to come along and show them what to think and how to behave?

One of these latest USAID contracts was signed only days after Gross was detained, thus indicating little concern for the safety of their employees/agents. As part of the preparation of these individuals, USAID informed them: “Although there is never total certainty, trust that the authorities will not try to harm you physically, only frighten you. Remember that the Cuban government prefers to avoid negative media reports abroad, so a beaten foreigner is not convenient for them.”

It’s most ironic. The US government could not say as much about most of their allies, who frequently make use of physical abuse. Indeed, the statement could not be made in regard to almost any American police force. But it’s this Cuba that doesn’t beat or torture detainees that is the enemy to be reformed and punished without mercy ... 55 years and counting.

### **The United States and torture**

Two of the things that governments tend to cover-up or lie about the most are assassinations and torture, both of which are widely looked upon as exceedingly immoral and unlawful, even uncivilized. Since the end of the Second World War the United States has attempted to assassinate more than 50 foreign leaders and has led the world in torture; not only the torture performed directly by Americans upon foreigners, but providing torture equipment, torture manuals, lists of people to be tortured, and in-person guidance and encouragement by American instructors, particularly in Latin America.

Thus it is somewhat to the credit of President Obama that at his August 1 press conference he declared “We did a whole lot of things that were right, but we tortured *some folks*. We did some things that were contrary to our values.”

And he actually used the word “torture” at that moment, not “enhanced interrogation”, which has been the euphemism of preference the past decade, although two minutes later the president used “extraordinary interrogation techniques”. And “tortured some folks” makes me wince. The man is clearly uncomfortable with the subject.

But all this is minor. Much more important is the fact that for several years Mr. Obama’s supporters have credited him with having put an end to the practice of torture. And they simply have no right to make that claim.

Shortly after Obama’s first inauguration, both he and Leon Panetta, the new Director of the CIA, explicitly stated that “rendition” was not being ended. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported at the

time: “Under executive orders issued by Obama recently, the CIA still has authority to carry out what are known as renditions, secret abductions and transfers of prisoners to countries that cooperate with the United States.”

The English translation of “cooperate” is “torture”. Rendition is simply outsourcing torture. There was no other reason to take prisoners to Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Egypt, Jordan, Kenya, Somalia, Kosovo, or the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, to name some of the known torture centers frequented by the United States. Kosovo and Diego Garcia – both of which house large and very secretive American military bases – if not some of the other locations, may well still be open for torture business. The same for the Guantánamo Base in Cuba.

Moreover, the Executive Order referred to, number 13491, issued January 22, 2009, “Ensuring Lawful Interrogations”, leaves a major loophole. It states repeatedly that humane treatment, including the absence of torture, is applicable only to prisoners detained in an “armed conflict”. Thus, torture by Americans outside an environment of “armed conflict” is not explicitly prohibited. But what about torture within an environment of “counter-terrorism”?

The Executive Order required the CIA to use only the interrogation methods outlined in a revised Army Field Manual. However, using the Army Field Manual as a guide to prisoner treatment and interrogation still allows solitary confinement, perceptual or sensory deprivation, sensory overload, sleep deprivation, the induction of fear and hopelessness, mind-altering drugs, environmental manipulation such as temperature and noise, and stress positions.

After Panetta was questioned by a Senate panel, the *New York Times* wrote that he had “left open the possibility that the agency could seek permission to use interrogation methods more aggressive than the limited menu that President Obama authorized under new rules ... Mr. Panetta also said the agency would continue the Bush administration practice of ‘rendition’ – picking terrorism suspects off the street and sending them to a third country. But he said the agency would refuse to deliver a suspect into the hands of a country known for torture or other actions ‘that violate our human values’.”

The last sentence is of course childishly absurd. The countries chosen to receive rendition prisoners were chosen precisely because they were willing and able to torture them.

No official in the Bush and Obama administrations has been punished in any way for torture or other war crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan and the other countries they waged illegal war against. And, it could be added, no American banker has been punished for their indispensable role in the world-wide financial torture they inflicted upon us all beginning in 2008. What a marvelously forgiving land is America. This, however, does not apply to Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, or Chelsea Manning.

In the last days of the Bush White House, Michael Ratner, professor at Columbia Law School and former president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, pointed out:

The only way to prevent this from happening again is to make sure that those who were responsible for the torture program pay the price for it. I don't see how we regain our moral stature by allowing those who were intimately involved in the torture programs to simply walk off the stage and lead lives where they are not held accountable.

I'd like at this point to once again remind my dear readers of the words of the "Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment", which was drafted by the United Nations in 1984, came into force in 1987, and ratified by the United States in 1994. Article 2, section 2 of the Convention states:

"No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture."

Such marvelously clear, unequivocal, and principled language, to set a single standard for a world that makes it increasingly difficult for one to feel proud of humanity.

The Convention Against Torture has been and remains the supreme law of the land. It is a cornerstone of international law and a principle on a par with the prohibition against slavery and genocide.

*"Mr. Snowden will not be tortured. Torture is unlawful in the United States."* – United States Attorney General Eric Holder, July 26, 2013

John Brennan, appointed by President Obama in January 2013 to be Director of the CIA, has defended "rendition" as an "absolutely vital tool"; and stated that torture had produced "life saving" intelligence.

Obama had nominated Brennan for the CIA position in 2008, but there was such an outcry in the human-rights community over Brennan's apparent acceptance of torture, that Brennan withdrew his nomination. Barack Obama evidently learned nothing from this and appointed the man again in 2013.

During Cold War One, a common theme in the rhetoric was that the Soviets tortured people and detained them without cause, extracted phony confessions, and did the unspeakable to detainees who were helpless against the full, heartless weight of the Communist state. As much as any other evil, torture differentiated the bad guys, the Commies, from the good guys, the American people and their government. However imperfect the US system might be – we were all taught – it had civilized standards that the enemy rejected.

**Just because you have a right to do something does not make it right.**

The city of Detroit in recent months has been shutting off the supply of water to city residents who have not paid their water bills. This action affects more than 40% of the customers of the Detroit Water and Sewage Department, bringing great inconvenience and threats to the health and sanitation of between 200 and 300 thousand residents. Protests have of course sprung up in the city, with "Water is a human right!" as a leading theme.

Who can argue with that? Well, neo-conservatives and other true believers in the capitalist system who maintain that if you receive the benefit of a product or service, you pay for it. What could be simpler? What are you, some kind of socialist?

For those of you who have difficulty believing that an American city could be so insensitive, allow me to remind you of some history.

On December 14, 1981 a resolution was proposed in the United Nations General Assembly which declared that “education, work, health care, proper nourishment, national development are human rights”. Notice the “proper nourishment”. The resolution was approved by a vote of 135-1. The United States cast the only “No” vote.

A year later, December 18, 1982, an identical resolution was proposed in the General Assembly. It was approved by a vote of 131-1. The United States cast the only “No” vote.

The following year, December 16, 1983, the resolution was again put forth, a common practice at the United Nations. This time it was approved by a vote of 132-1. There’s no need to tell you who cast the sole “No” vote.

These votes took place under the Reagan administration.

Under the Clinton administration, in 1996, a United Nations-sponsored World Food Summit affirmed the “right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food”. The United States took issue with this, insisting that it does not recognize a “right to food”. Washington instead championed free trade as the key to ending the poverty at the root of hunger, and expressed fears that recognition of a “right to food” could lead to lawsuits from poor nations seeking aid and special trade provisions.

The situation of course did not improve under the administration of George W. Bush. In 2002, in Rome, world leaders at another UN-sponsored World Food Summit again approved a declaration that everyone had the right to “safe and nutritious food”. The United States continued to oppose the clause, again fearing it would leave them open to future legal claims by famine-stricken countries.

I’m waiting for a UN resolution affirming the right to oxygen.

## Notes

1. See various examples at RT.com, such as “Jen Psaki’s most embarrassing fails, most entertaining grillings”, or simply search the site for “Ukraine Jen Psaki”
2. *Congressional Record* (House of Representatives), May 12, 1966, pp. 9977-78, reprint of an article by Morley Safer of CBS News
3. “Letter dated 22 July 2014 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General”, released by the UN 24 July, Document No. A/68/954-S/2014/524

4. “Pre-WWIII German Pilot Shocker, MH17 ‘Not Hit By Missile’”, *Before It’s News*, July 31 2014
5. *Associated Press*, August 4, 2014
6. *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2009
7. *New York Times*, February 6, 2009
8. *Associated Press*, November 17, 2008
9. *Associated Press*, November 26, 2008
10. *Washington Post*, November 18, 1996
11. *Reuters* news agency, June 10, 2002