

### By Gary G. Kohls

<http://consortiumnews.com/2014/02/06/a-rare-indictment-of-us-atrocities/>

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Playwright Harold Pinter. (Photo credit: Huntington Theatre Company)

Since World War II, the U.S. government has routinely sidestepped blame for the slaughters that have accompanied American foreign policy. One of the few high-profile condemnations occurred when playwright Harold Pinter accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, as Gary G. Kohls recalls.

British playwright Harold Pinter won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005. For me, his [acceptance speech](#) was an important glimpse into – and sort of a summary of — the innumerable documentable U.S. war crimes that were facilitated by the multinational corporations, national security apparatus and political and military leaders that shaped American foreign policy since World War II.

True patriots must be honest about the dishonorable, dark side of their own nations. In the case of the United States – and its willing accomplice, his own Great Britain – Pinter (who died in 2008) saw that reality clearly.

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There are obvious parallels between Pinter's powerful speech and Martin Luther King Jr.'s courageous [speech](#) of April 4, 1967, almost four decades earlier. Both indicted American foreign policy, but – while King focused on the Vietnam bloodbath then being waged by President Lyndon Johnson – Pinter concentrated on the slaughters in Central America under President Ronald Reagan and on the Iraq War, which was launched by President George W. Bush with the smooth-talking help of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

In Pinter's Nobel speech, after reflecting on some of his own plays – and their often ambiguous grasp of what is real and what is not – the playwright declared that in the realm of history and politics, “As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?”

Pinter continued, “Before I come back to the present I would like to look at the recent past, by which I mean United States foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. I believe it is obligatory upon us to subject this period to at least some kind of even limited scrutiny, which is all that time will allow here.

“Everyone knows what happened in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe during the post-war period: the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought. All this has been fully documented and verified. ...

“My contention here is that the U.S. crimes in the same period have only been superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged, let alone recognized as crimes at all. I believe this must be addressed and that the truth has considerable bearing on where the world stands now.

“Although constrained, to a certain extent, by the existence of the Soviet Union, the United States' actions throughout the world made it clear that it had concluded it had carte blanche to do what it liked.

“Direct invasion of a sovereign state has never in fact been America's favored method. In the main, it has preferred what it has described as 'low intensity conflict.' Low intensity conflict means that thousands of people die but slower than if you dropped a bomb on them in one fell swoop.

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“It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populace has been subdued – or beaten to death – the same thing – and your own friends, the military and the great corporations, sit comfortably in power, you go before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed.”

### The Nicaraguan Slaughter

Recalling a particularly egregious case under President Ronald Reagan, Pinter said: “The tragedy of Nicaragua was a highly significant case. I choose to offer it here as a potent example of America’s view of its role in the world, both then and now. I was present at a meeting at the U.S. embassy in London in the late 1980s. The United States Congress was about to decide whether to give more money to the Contras in their campaign against the state of Nicaragua.

“I was a member of a delegation speaking on behalf of Nicaragua but the most important member of this delegation was a Father John Metcalf. The leader of the U.S. body was Raymond Seitz (then number two to the ambassador, later ambassador himself).

“Father Metcalf said: ‘Sir, I am in charge of a parish in the north of Nicaragua. My parishioners built a school, a health center, a cultural center. We have lived in peace. A few months ago a Contra force attacked the parish. They destroyed everything: the school, the health center, the cultural center. They raped nurses and teachers, slaughtered doctors, in the most brutal manner. They behaved like savages. Please demand that the U.S. government withdraw its support from this shocking terrorist activity.’

“Raymond Seitz had a very good reputation as a rational, responsible and highly sophisticated man. He was greatly respected in diplomatic circles. He listened, paused and then spoke with some gravity. ‘Father,’ he said, ‘let me tell you something. In war, innocent people always suffer.’ There was a frozen silence. We stared at him. He did not flinch.

“‘Innocent people, indeed, always suffer.’ Finally somebody said: ‘But in this case “innocent people” were the victims of a gruesome atrocity subsidized by your government, one among many. If Congress allows the Contras more money further atrocities of this kind will take place. Is this not the case? Is your government not therefore guilty of supporting acts of murder and destruction upon the citizens of a sovereign state?’

“Seitz was imperturbable. ‘I don’t agree that the facts as presented support your assertions,’ he said. As we were leaving the Embassy a U.S. aide told me that he enjoyed my plays. I did not reply. I should remind you that at the time President Reagan made the following statement: ‘The Contras are the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers.’

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“The United States supported the brutal Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua for over 40 years. The Nicaraguan people, led by the Sandinistas, overthrew this regime in 1979, a breathtaking popular revolution. The Sandinistas weren’t perfect. They possessed their fair share of arrogance and their political philosophy contained a number of contradictory elements. But they were intelligent, rational and civilized. They set out to establish a stable, decent, pluralistic society.

“The death penalty was abolished. Hundreds of thousands of poverty-stricken peasants were brought back from the dead. Over 100,000 families were given title to land. Two thousand schools were built. A quite remarkable literacy campaign reduced illiteracy in the country to less than one seventh. Free education was established and a free health service. Infant mortality was reduced by a third. Polio was eradicated.”

### Denouncing ‘Subversion’

Pinter continued, “The United States denounced these achievements as Marxist/Leninist subversion. In the view of the U.S. government, a dangerous example was being set. If Nicaragua was allowed to establish basic norms of social and economic justice, if it was allowed to raise the standards of health care and education and achieve social unity and national self-respect, neighboring countries would ask the same questions and do the same things. There was of course at the time fierce resistance to the status quo in El Salvador.

“I spoke earlier about ‘a tapestry of lies’ which surrounds us. President Reagan commonly described Nicaragua as a ‘totalitarian dungeon.’ This was taken generally by the media, and certainly by the British government, as accurate and fair comment. But there was in fact no record of death squads under the Sandinista government. There was no record of torture. There was no record of systematic or official military brutality.

“No priests were ever murdered in Nicaragua. There were in fact three priests in the government, two Jesuits and a Maryknoll missionary. The totalitarian dungeons were actually next door, in El Salvador and Guatemala. The United States had brought down the democratically elected government of Guatemala in 1954 and it is estimated that over 200,000 people had been victims of successive military dictatorships.

“Six of the most distinguished Jesuits in the world were viciously murdered at the Central American University in San Salvador in 1989 by a battalion of the Atlacatl regiment trained at Fort Benning, Georgia, USA. That extremely brave man Archbishop Romero was assassinated while saying mass. It is estimated that 75,000 people died.

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“Why were they killed? They were killed because they believed a better life was possible and should be achieved. That belief immediately qualified them as communists. They died because they dared to question the status quo, the endless plateau of poverty, disease, degradation and oppression, which had been their birthright.

“The United States finally brought down the Sandinista government. It took some years and considerable resistance but relentless economic persecution and 30,000 dead finally undermined the spirit of the Nicaraguan people. They were exhausted and poverty stricken once again. The casinos moved back into the country. Free health and free education were over. Big business returned with a vengeance. ‘Democracy’ had prevailed.

“But this ‘policy’ was by no means restricted to Central America. It was conducted throughout the world. It was never-ending. And it is as if it never happened.

“United States supported and in many cases engendered every right-wing military dictatorship in the world after the end of the Second World War. I refer to Indonesia, Greece, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Haiti, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, and, of course, Chile. The horror the United States inflicted upon Chile in 1973 can never be purged and can never be forgiven.”

### **A Memory Hole**

Referring to the extraordinary ability of the U.S. government and the U.S. media to whitewash these bloody realities, Pinter said: “Hundreds of thousands of deaths took place throughout these countries. Did they take place? And are they in all cases attributable to U.S. foreign policy? The answer is yes they did take place and they are attributable to American foreign policy. But you wouldn’t know it.

“It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn’t happening. It didn’t matter. It was of no interest. The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them.

“You have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good. It’s a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis.

“I put to you that the United States is without doubt the greatest show on the road. Brutal, indifferent, scornful and ruthless it may be but it is also very clever. As a salesman it is out on its own and its most saleable

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commodity is self love. It's a winner. Listen to all American presidents on television say the words, 'the American people,' as in the sentence, 'I say to the American people it is time to pray and to defend the rights of the American people and I ask the American people to trust their president in the action he is about to take on behalf of the American people.'

"It's a scintillating stratagem. Language is actually employed to keep thought at bay. The words 'the American people' provide a truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance. You don't need to think. Just lie back on the cushion. The cushion may be suffocating your intelligence and your critical faculties but it's very comfortable. This does not apply of course to the 40 million people living below the poverty line and the 2 million men and women imprisoned in the vast gulag of prisons, which extends across the US.

"The United States no longer bothers about low intensity conflict. It no longer sees any point in being reticent or even devious. It puts its cards on the table without fear or favor. It quite simply doesn't give a damn about the United Nations, international law or critical dissent, which it regards as impotent and irrelevant. It also has its own bleating little lamb tagging behind it on a lead, the pathetic and supine Great Britain."

### Moral Questions

Given this grim reality, Pinter asked: "What has happened to our moral sensibility? Did we ever have any? What do these words mean? Do they refer to a term very rarely employed these days – conscience? A conscience to do not only with our own acts but to do with our shared responsibility in the acts of others? Is all this dead? Look at Guantanamo Bay. Hundreds of people detained without charge for over three years, with no legal representation or due process, technically detained forever.

"This totally illegitimate structure is maintained in defiance of the Geneva Convention. It is not only tolerated but hardly thought about by what's called the 'international community.' This criminal outrage is being committed by a country, which declares itself to be 'the leader of the free world.' Do we think about the inhabitants of Guantanamo Bay?

"What does the media say about them? They pop up occasionally – a small item on page six. They have been consigned to a no man's land from which indeed they may never return. At present many are on hunger strike, being force-fed, including British residents. No niceties in these force-feeding procedures. No sedative or anesthetic. Just a tube stuck up your nose and into your throat. You vomit blood. This is torture.

"What has the British Foreign Secretary said about this? Nothing. What has the British Prime Minister said about this? Nothing. Why not? Because the United States has said: to criticize our conduct in Guantanamo Bay constitutes an unfriendly act. You're either with us or against us. So Blair shuts up.

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“The invasion of Iraq was a bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of international law. The invasion was an arbitrary military action inspired by a series of lies upon lies and gross manipulation of the media and therefore of the public; an act intended to consolidate American military and economic control of the Middle East masquerading – as a last resort – all other justifications having failed to justify themselves – as liberation.

“A formidable assertion of military force responsible for the death and mutilation of thousands and thousands of innocent people. We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, degradation and death to the Iraqi people and call it ‘bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East.’

“How many people do you have to kill before you qualify to be described as a mass murderer and a war criminal? One hundred thousand? More than enough, I would have thought. Therefore it is just that Bush and Blair be arraigned before the International Criminal Court of Justice. But Bush has been clever. He has not ratified the International Criminal Court of Justice.

“Therefore if any American soldier or for that matter politician finds himself in the dock Bush has warned that he will send in the Marines. But Tony Blair has ratified the Court and is therefore available for prosecution. We can let the Court have his address if they’re interested. It is Number 10, Downing Street, London.

“Death in this context is irrelevant. Both Bush and Blair place death well away on the back burner. At least 100,000 Iraqis were killed by American bombs and missiles before the Iraq insurgency began. These people are of no moment. Their deaths don’t exist. They are blank. They are not even recorded as being dead. ‘We don’t do body counts,’ said the American General Tommy Franks.

“Early in the invasion there was a photograph published on the front page of British newspapers of Tony Blair kissing the cheek of a little Iraqi boy. ‘A grateful child,’ said the caption. A few days later there was a story and photograph, on an inside page, of another four-year-old boy with no arms. His family had been blown up by a missile. He was the only survivor. ‘When do I get my arms back?’ he asked. The story was dropped.

“Well, Tony Blair wasn’t holding him in his arms, nor the body of any other mutilated child, nor the body of any bloody corpse. Blood is dirty. It dirties your shirt and tie when you’re making a sincere speech on television.”

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Pinter concluded his speech with these words: "I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory. If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us – the dignity of man."

*Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired physician who is involved in peace, nonviolence and justice issues and therefore resists fascism, corporatism, militarism, racism and all other movements that are violent and anti-democratic.*