

President for Three Days: How I Spent My Fifteen Minutes of Fame

Written by

Wednesday, 15 February 2006 09:55 - Last Updated Wednesday, 15 February 2006 09:55

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Anti-Empire Report - William Blum - "If I were the president, I could stop terrorist attacks against the United States in a few days. Permanently. I would first apologize -- very publicly and very sincerely -- to all the widows and the orphans, the impoverished and the tortured, and all the many millions of other victims of American imperialism. I would then announce that America's global interventions -- including the awful bombings -- have come to an end. And I would inform Israel that it is no longer the 51st state of the union but -- oddly enough -- a foreign country. - William Blum as quoted by "Osama bin Laden" from 'Rogue State'

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[How I spent my 15 minutes of fame](#)

William Blum

The Anti-Empire Report

February 14, 2006

02/15/06 "ICH" -- -- In case you don't know, on January 19 the latest audiotape from Osama bin Laden was released and in it he declared: "If you [Americans] are sincere in your desire for peace and security, we have answered you. And if Bush decides to carry on with his lies and oppression, then it would be useful for you to read the book 'Rogue State', which states in its introduction ... " He then goes on to quote the opening of a paragraph I wrote (which appears actually in the Foreword of the British edition only, that was later translated to Arabic), which in full reads:

"If I were the president, I could stop terrorist attacks against the United States in a few days. Permanently. I would first apologize -- very publicly and very sincerely -- to all the widows and the orphans, the impoverished and the tortured, and all the many millions of other victims of American imperialism. I would then announce that America's global interventions -- including the awful bombings -- have come to an end. And I would inform Israel that it is no longer the 51st state of the union but -- oddly enough -- a foreign country. I would then reduce the military budget by at least 90% and use the savings to pay reparations to the victims and repair the damage from the many American bombings and invasions. There would be more than enough money. Do you know what one year of the US military budget is equal to? One year. It's equal to more than \$20,000 per hour for every hour since Jesus Christ was born.

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"That's what I'd do on my first three days in the White House. On the fourth day, I'd be assassinated."

Within hours I was swamped by the media and soon appeared on many of the leading TV shows, dozens of radio programs, with long profiles in the Washington Post, Salon.com and elsewhere. In the previous ten years the Post had declined to print a single one of my letters, most of which had pointed out errors in their foreign news coverage. Now my photo was on page one.

Much of the media wanted me to say that I was repulsed by bin Laden's "endorsement". I did not say I was repulsed because I was not. After a couple of days of interviews I got my reply together and it usually went something like this:

"There are two elements involved here: On the one hand, I totally despise any kind of religious fundamentalism and the societies spawned by such, like the Taliban in Afghanistan. On the other hand, I'm a member of a movement which has the very ambitious goal of slowing down, if not stopping, the American Empire, to keep it from continuing to go round the world doing things like bombings, invasions, overthrowing governments, and torture. To have any success, we need to reach the American people with our message. And to reach the American people we need to have access to the mass media. What has just happened has given me the opportunity to reach millions of people I would otherwise never reach. Why should I not be glad about that? How could I let such an opportunity go to waste?"

Celebrity -- modern civilization's highest cultural achievement -- is a peculiar phenomenon. It really isn't worth anything unless you do something with it.

The callers into the programs I was on, and sometimes the host, in addition to numerous emails, repeated two main arguments against me. (1) Where else but in the United States could I have the freedom to say what I was saying on national media?

Besides their profound ignorance in not knowing of scores of countries with at least equal freedom of speech (particularly since September 11), what they are saying in effect is that I should be so grateful for my freedom of speech that I should show my gratitude by not exercising that freedom. If they're not saying that, they're not saying anything.

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(2) America has always done marvelous things for the world, from the Marshall Plan and defeating communism and the Taliban to rebuilding destroyed countries and freeing Iraq.

I have dealt with these myths and misconceptions previously; like sub-atomic particles, they behave differently when observed. For example, in last month's report I pointed out in detail that "destroyed countries" were usually destroyed by American bombs; and America did not rebuild them. As to the Taliban, the United States overthrew a secular, women's-rights government in Afghanistan, which led to the Taliban coming to power; so the US can hardly be honored for ousting the Taliban a decade later, replacing it with an American occupation, an American puppet president, assorted warlords, and women chained.

But try to explain all these fine points in the minute or so one has on radio or TV. However, I think I somehow managed to squeeze in a lot of information and thoughts new to the American psyche.

Some hosts and many callers were clearly pained to hear me say that anti-American terrorists are retaliating against the harm done to their countries by US foreign policy, and are not just evil, mindless, madmen from another planet.[1] Many of them assumed, with lots of certainty and no good reason at all, that I was a supporter of the Democratic Party and they proceeded to attack Bill Clinton. When I pointed out that I was no fan at all of the Democrats or Clinton, they were usually confused into silence for a few moments before seamlessly jumping to some other piece of nonsense. They do not know that an entire alternative world exists above and beyond the Republicans and Democrats.

Just recently we have been hearing and reading comments in the American media about how hopelessly backward and violent were those Muslims protesting the Danish cartoons, carrying signs calling for the beheading of those that insult Islam. But a caller to a radio program I was on said I "should be taken care of", and one of the hundreds of nasty emails I received began: "Death to you and your family."

One of my personal favorite moments: On an AM radio program in Pennsylvania, discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

The host (with anguish in her voice): "What has Israel ever done to the Palestinians?"

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Me: "Have you been in a coma the past 20 years?"

This is a question I could ask many of those who interrogated me the past few weeks. Actually, 60 years would be more appropriate.

Elections my teacher never told me about

Americans are all taught from childhood on of the significance and sanctity of free elections: You can't have the thing called "democracy" without the thing called "free elections". And when you have the thing called free elections it's virtually synonymous with having the thing called democracy. And who were we taught was the greatest champion of free elections anywhere in the world? Why, our very same teacher, God's country, the good ol' US of A.

But what was God's country actually doing all those years we were absorbing and swearing by this message? God's country was actually interfering in free elections in every corner of the known world; seriously so.

The latest example is the recent elections in Palestine, where the US Agency for International Development (AID) poured in some two million dollars (a huge amount in that impoverished area) to try to tilt the election to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its political wing, Fatah, and prevent the radical Islamic group Hamas from taking power. The money was spent on various social programs and events to increase the popularity of the PA; the projects bore no evidence of US involvement and did not fall within the definitions of traditional development work. In addition, the United States funded many newspaper advertisements publicizing these projects in the name of the PA, with no mention of AID.

"Public outreach is integrated into the design of each project to highlight the role of the P.A. in meeting citizens needs," said a progress report on the projects. "The plan is to have events running every day of the coming week, beginning 13 January, such that there is a constant stream of announcements and public outreach about positive happenings all over Palestinian areas in the critical week before the elections."

Under the rules of the Palestinian election system, campaigns and candidates were prohibited from accepting money from foreign sources.[2] American law explicitly forbids the same in US elections.

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Since Hamas won the election, the United States has made it clear that it does not recognize the election as any kind of victory for democracy and that it has no intention of having normal diplomatic relations with the Hamas government. (Israel has adopted a similar attitude, but it should not be forgotten that Israel funded and supported the emergence of Hamas in Gaza during its early days, hoping that it would challenge the Palestine Liberation Organization as well as Palestinian leftist elements.)

By my count, there have been more than 30 instances of gross Washington interference in foreign elections since the end of World War II -- from Italy in 1948 and the Philippines and Lebanon in the 1950s, to Nicaragua, Bolivia and Slovakia in the 2000s -- most of them carried out in an even more flagrant manner than the Palestinian example.[3] Some of the techniques employed have been used in the United States itself as our electoral system, once the object of much national and international pride, has slid inexorably from "one person, one vote", to "one dollar, one vote".

Coming soon to a country (or city) near you

On January 13 the United States of America, in its shocking and awesome wisdom, saw fit to fly an unmanned Predator aircraft over a remote village in the sovereign nation of Pakistan and fire a Hellfire missile into a residential compound in an attempt to kill some "bad guys". Several houses were incinerated, 18 people were killed, including an unknown number of "bad guys"; reports since then give every indication that the unknown number is as low as zero, al Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri, the principal target, not being amongst them. Outrage is still being expressed in Pakistan. In the United States the reaction in the Senate typified the American outrage:

"We apologize, but I can't tell you that we wouldn't do the same thing again" said Sen. John McCain of Arizona "It's a regrettable situation, but what else are we supposed to do?" said Sen. Evan Bayh of Indiana. "My information is that this strike was clearly justified by the intelligence," said Sen. Trent Lott of Mississippi.[4]

Similar US attacks using such drones and missiles have angered citizens and political leaders in Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen. It has not been uncommon for the destruction to be so complete that it is impossible to establish who was killed, or even how many people. Amnesty International has lodged complaints with the Bushes following each suspected Predator strike. A UN report in the wake of the 2002 strike in Yemen called it "an alarming precedent

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[and] a clear case of extrajudicial killing" in violation of international laws and treaties.[5]

Can it be imagined that American officials would fire a missile into a house in Paris or London or Ottawa because they suspected that high-ranking al Qaeda members were present there? Even if the US knew of their presence for an absolute fact, and not just speculation as in the Predator cases mentioned above? Well, most likely not, but can we put anything past Swaggering-Superarrogant-Superpower-Cowboys-on-steroids? After all, they've already done it to their own, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On May 13, 1985, a bomb dropped by a police helicopter burned down an entire block, some 60 homes destroyed, 11 dead, including several small children. The police, the mayor's office, and the FBI were all involved in this effort to evict an organization called MOVE from the house they lived in.

The victims were all black of course. So let's rephrase the question. Can it be imagined that American officials would fire a missile into a residential area of Beverly Hills or the upper east side of Manhattan? Stay tuned.

"The struggle of man against tyranny is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Milan Kundera

I'm occasionally taken to task for being so negative about the United States role in the world. Why do you keep looking for all the negative stuff and tear down the positive? I'm asked.

Well, it's a nasty job, but someone has to do it. Besides, for each negative piece I'm paid \$500 by al Qaeda. And the publicity given to my books by Osama ... priceless.

The new documentary film by Eugene Jarecki, ""Why We Fight", which won the Sundance Festival's Grand Jury prize, relates how the pursuit of profit by arms merchants and other US corporations has fueled America's post-World War II wars a lot more than any love of freedom and democracy. The unlikely hero of the film is Dwight Eisenhower, whose famous warning about the dangers of the "military-industrial complex" is the film's principal motif.

Here is Jarecki being interviewed by the Washington Post:

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Post: Why did you make "Why We Fight?"

Jarecki: The simple answer: Eisenhower. He caught me off-guard. He seemed to have so much to say about our contemporary society and our general tilt towards militarism. ... The voices in Washington and the media have become so shrill. ... It seemed important to bring a little gray hair into the mix.

Post: How would you classify your politics? You've been accused of being a lefty.

Jarecki: I'm a radical centrist. ... If Dwight Eisenhower is a lefty, I am too. Then I'll walk with Ike.[6] [ellipses in original]

Isn't it nice that a film portraying the seamier side of the military-industrial complex is receiving such popular attention? And that we are able to look fondly upon an American president? How long has that been? Well, here I go again.

Eisenhower, regardless of what he said as he was leaving the presidency, was hardly an obstacle to American militarism or corporate imperialism. During his eight years in office, the United States intervened in every corner of the world, overthrowing the governments of Iran, Guatemala, Laos, the Congo, and British Guiana, and attempting to do the same in Costa Rica, Syria, Egypt, and Indonesia, as well as laying the military and political groundwork for the coming Indochinese holocaust.

Eisenhower's moralistically overbearing Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, summed up the administration's world outlook thusly: "For us there are two sorts of people in the world: there are those who are Christians and support free enterprise and there are the others." [7]

NOTES

[1] See my essay on this subject at: <http://members.aol.com/essays6/myth.htm>

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[2] Washington Post, January 22 and 24, 2006

[3] Rogue State, chapter 18, includes the text of the US law prohibiting foreign contributions to US elections.

[4] Associated Press, January 15, 2006

[5] Los Angeles Times, January 29, 2006

[6] Washington Post, February 12, 2006, p.N3

[7] Roger Morgan, "The United States and West Germany, 1945-1973" (1974), p.54

William Blum is the author of: Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War 2
Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower
West-Bloc Dissident: A Cold War Memoir. Freeing the World to Death: Essays on the American Empire www.killin
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