

Behind the "Economic" Hit-Man's Cloak

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DV - Lila Rajiva - The first problem with the book is all the parts that are obviously false and filled with the kind of fuzzy clap-trap that the silliest of the anti-corporate globalizers like to spout. In some of his economic analyses, Perkins doesn't sound remotely like an economist - even a bad one. The second problem with the book is - all the parts that are obviously true.

http://www.johnperkins.org/Copy%20of%20confessions_hitman_lo_resweb.jpg

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[The Shape-Shifting Of A Hitman](#)

Lila Rajiva

[Dissident Voice](#)

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In August 1981, my bag was packed for my fifth visit to Panama when the news came to me over the telephone of the death of General Omar Torrijos Herrera, my friend and host. The small plane in which he was flying to a house that he owned at Coclesito in the mountains of Panama had crashed, and there were no survivors. A few days later, the voice of his security guard, Sergeant Chuchu, alias Jose de Jesus Martinez, ex-professor of Marxist philosophy at Panama University, professor of mathematics and a poet, told me, "There was a bomb in that plane. I know there was a bomb in that plane, but I can't tell you why over the telephone." [1]

In 1971, at the age of 26, John Perkins became what he called an economic hit man (EHM) for a secretive international consulting firm called Chas. T. Main, Inc. His job was to produce research to justify World Bank loans of billions of dollars to poor countries for public projects like dams and electrification. He was to produce economic forecasts for them of up to 20-25 years that were so exuberant that they would convince the governments to take the loans.

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Straight out of the Peace Corps in Ecuador, Perkins was dazzled by the money, prestige, and James Bond aura his new life offered. Soon, he became a master of producing outrageous forecasts that brought in massive contracts for construction and engineering to Main and other US companies, like Bechtel, Halliburton and Brown and Root. Perkins's work didn't end with just enriching his firm, though. He claims he was also actively involved in schemes to bankrupt countries so that they would forever present easy targets for their first world creditors when the creditors were in need of military bases, access to resources, or votes in the UN. If the leaders of the targeted countries displayed too independent a style of thinking, the EHM was replaced by a more sinister figure -- the jackal. The jackal simply eliminated the troublemaker. The jackals were the CIA-sanctioned thugs who instigate coups, abduct and assassinate. And behind them was the US military.

We have no idea how much of Mr. Perkins mea culpa is true. But if even a quarter of it has a toe-hold in reality, it will shock the average reader. By his account, the US government is running an empire of a size and duplicity unparalleled in world history.

Perkins' first job was in Java, Indonesia, where a glamorous brunette with green eyes, Claudine, who worked as a consultant with Main, gave him the low down on his real function. Indonesia, she tells him, is likely to be the next domino to fall to communism after Vietnam. Indonesia also just happens to be oil rich and Muslim. His job is to make sure that it stays in hock to the international banks and aid organizations who want to lend it money.

"A large part of your job is to encourage world leaders to become part of a vast network that promotes U.S. commercial interest," says she. "In the end, these leaders become ensnared in a web of debt that ensures their loyalty. We can draw on them whenever we desire -- to satisfy our political, economic, or military needs . . ." [2]

Heady stuff for a young man from a frigid Calvinist background in New England. looking for money and adventure. Of course, Perkins is married . . . with problems. And, of course, Claudine has to undertake all this initiation and training, seductively, in her own apartment. And of course, it is done over a bottle of Beaujolais

"Once you're in, you're in for life," says his siren -- somewhat improbably, considering Perkins' various successful career moves since. [3]

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Under the green eyes of big sister, Perkins will write the forecasts that make third world countries borrow billions from the World Bank to undertake mammoth utility projects. The money goes directly to the US contractors who get the lucrative bids; the projects never yield the benefits to the country that they are projected to. But in return for the "loans," the countries are forced to let the US milk their natural resources, environment and infrastructure rapaciously.

What do the EHMs do?

They funnel money from the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and other foreign "aid" organizations into the coffers of huge corporations and the pockets of a few wealthy families who control the planet's natural resources. Their tools include fraudulent financial reports, rigged elections, payoffs, extortion, sex, and murder. They play a game as old as empire, but one that has taken on new and terrifying dimensions during this time of globalization.

It was not uncommon for us to seduce wives of oil company executives because that was a way of gaining information and learning things about their husbands.

Our EHM then runs into a long-time Main forecaster, Howard Parker, whose conscience is still twitching. He refuses to pony up the inflated figures on Indonesia's future energy needs that Main wants. Naturally, Perkins's mentor, a Cary Grant double who will later become Main's president, gets rid of Parker and promotes the more docile Perkins. Then it's on to Panama. There, surrounded by graffiti announcing that Death for Freedom Is the Way to Christ, Perkins chats with the populist dictator Omar Torrijos. Torrijos, who wants to get the Japanese to build another Panama Canal, claims he needs bodyguards to protect him from the wrath of the Norte Americanos. Why? Perkins finds the answer in a desert in Iran, where a young radical introduces him to a victim of the Shah's CIA trained Savak police. He is seated in the dark, in a wheelchair. Perkins catches the outline of the man's face in profile -- his nose has been cut off.

Comes the oil crisis of the 1970s, and the now savvy Perkins is given the task of finding out how to channel Saudi oil dollars back into the US. The answer is simple -- outsource Saudi infrastructure to the US. Americans who are upset about losing jobs to Bangalore and Manila should console themselves with this episode in their country's history. Aided by Perkins and Main, the US Treasury Department draws up a plan to bring modernity to Saudi Arabia, but it needs the help of the Saudi government and Perkins is given the job of convincing one Saudi

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prince -- Prince W -- whose weakness is blondes. Perkins procures "Sally," a woman whose husband enjoys his own infidelities. The wages of pimping are hidden in expense accounts with posh Boston restaurants.

Through such titillating details do we learn of the swathe of plunder that the US has cut through the world -- from Iran in the 1950s to Iraq in 2003 and of what happens to leaders who object. In Panama, Omar Torrijos is killed and Manuel Noriega is arrested and imprisoned. In Ecuador, Jaime Rold?s dies in a helicopter crash.

Then, at last, our hit-man's somewhat supine conscience kicks him in the ankle, but only to lead him back later, one last time, into the mire. This time, he is an expert witness for the nuclear energy industry . . . at the same firm. One of his new jobs is to justify the Seabrook nuclear power plant to the New Hampshire Public Service Commission as the best and most economic choice to generate electricity in the state.

"Unfortunately," he writes "the longer I studied the issue, the more I began to doubt the validity of my own arguments. I personally became uncomfortable with the position I was expected to take -- was paid to take -- under oath in what amounted to a court of law."

It is after this last stint that he decides to quit. He enters his final incarnation -- as a New Age guru. From prevaricating power plant purveyor to shape-shifting shaman might seem a bit of a hop, but the enterprising business major is equal to it. Soon, he is shuttling between home and the Amazon on trips intended to raise the consciousness of alienated gringos about indigenous cultures and the effects of globalization on them. His new career spawns several pre-Confessions tomes: Shapeshifting: Shamanic Techniques for Global and Personal Transformation; Spirit of the Shuar: Wisdom from the Last Unconquered People of the Amazon; The Stress Free Habit: Powerful Techniques for Health and Longevity from the Andes, Yucatan, and Far East; and Psychonavigation: Techniques for Travel Beyond Time.

We will let his blurb do the explaining: "John Perkins relates his encounters with the Bugis of Indonesia, the Shuar of the Amazon, the Quechua of the Andes, and other psychonavigators around the world. He explains how the people of these tribal cultures navigate to a physical destination or to a source of inner wisdom by means of visions and dream wanderings. Learn to attract the inner guidance you seek."

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Dreams are important, Perkins says, because they enable the dreamer to visualize a different future, and then shape-shift to fit it. This shape-shifting varies: It can be cellular -- which involves actual physical transformation, such as aging, or turning into a jaguar. It can be institutional -- as when democracy emerged in the world. And it can be personal -- as when one starts a new career, as Perkins did.

The bouncer at the New World Order club wakes up and smells the Ginseng. As New Age guru, the former hit man now urges people to put corporations to better use rather than simply attack them. We don't need to get rid of Nike, he says. We just need to get Nike shoes on everyone. A McDonalds in every slum. Tom Friedman would feel right at home.

* * * * *

It's all so inclusive . . . so warm and so very fuzzy we could easily not feel the hairs stand up on the back of our necks. But they do. We will explain why.

But first, we will explain why not.

It's not that we find Perkins' account outrageous, unbelievable or even implausible. In fact, we read the book at a sitting, feeling a bit of a let down. Mossadegh, Arbenz, Allende . . . the deposition of this smorgasbord of leaders by the CIA has never been seriously questioned . . . not even by the CIA. It's all a matter not just of public record, but of PhD dissertations. Such stuff as stodgy careers at The Nation are made of.

So why does Perkins need all the Mata Hari trappings? Aha, says one suspicious critic, the man has just canvassed progressive opinion and tailored a book that perfectly plays to every anti-corporate globalist gallery and pulls at every Che-stricken heartstring, even to the point of dealing with media ownership -- a concern right at the top for progressives, but an odd one for a truth-averse hit man.

And he may have a point. Perkins might talk the social consciousness talk but he walks the capitalist walk, with tidy book contracts from such fully paid members of the corporatocracy as Penguin books. From selling overpriced construction projects he's simply gone on to selling social awareness. From limitless markets to "limitless potential."

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But if the book has been a capitalist success, it's been one on its own . . . not because of the corporatocracy, but because of the free market. It was turned down 20 times before it got placed with an obscure San Francisco publisher; there was no advance, no marketing blitz; and, it was ignored by every major paper and magazine in the country. Yet, it's been on the New York Times bestseller list and sold twice as many copies as *Globalization and Its Discontents* -- the oeuvre of Nobel laureate and one-time World Bank chief Joseph Stiglitz. Anti-corporate globalization gurus cited it at their bash at Porto Alegre, and we hear it's even managed to make it to Hugo Chavez's reading list. Soon it will be turned into a film. Doubtless we can look forward to seeing Catherine Zeta-Jones in the role of Claudine.

But, we do not begrudge the book its success. If Perkins has looked steely-eyed at what the public wants and given it to them, and accomplished this without force or fraud, more power to him. And if a life of crime unfits you to be a preacher man, we will have to erase half of history's most persuasive pulpit-pounders, from Saul of Tarsus to Jim Bakker of PTL.

Nor do we grudge Perkins his Damascene conversion. We do not mind -- as some do -- the vignettes of his sexual peccadilloes, his drinking, his bouts of depression and anger, or his convenient conversion from empire-flack to empire-foe, once he's made his million. Even a hit man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's Shambhala for?

And, we also don't doubt the essential truth of what the book says, though we may quibble with the details. True, there's not much hard evidence to hang onto now that EHMs are defunct and Parker and Torrijos are dead. Parsons Corporation, which bought out Main in 1985, claims it no longer has Main's records, so the Sally story can't be verified. And, the Cary Grant double who might know, Bruno Zambotti, isn't talking. Other Main employees claim they don't know what Perkins is about and accuse him of leaving not out of a crisis of conscience but because he "thought he was worth more than he was."

Still, one would pretty much expect that to be the case. Cloak and dagger work is usually done, well, with a cloak and a dagger. Your neighbors don't know. Most often, your wife and kids don't know either. And, people do move on . . . or die.

The US government's media department might call the book a fantasy. But, scanning the page they devote to it, we find it remarkably free of any concrete criticism. The government's defense is simple: The National Security Agency, which Perkins claims recruited him into his clandestine life, is really devoted to cryptography not espionage -- just look what it says on its web page! [4]

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But when we start believing the web page of a country's defense department, dear reader, it will be time for us to trade in our pen and paper for eye shades and a hearing aid. We don't know any spy agency that announces its operations on the door plate. Or posts the curriculum vitae of its alumni on the web. The other criticisms the government hacks make are just as light-weight.. Perkins, they claim, also writes weird books on outr? New Age topics . . . like shamans, and psychic travel. The implication is that Confessions is some kind of peyote-induced raving.

This is even thinner stuff than the NSA bit -- especially since the American government itself is knee deep in the New Age. You didn't know? Dear me, yes. Uncle Sam has been channeling, astral traveling, and bending spoons for quite awhile. As Jon Ronson tells it, it's even in the business of staring into the eyes of goats. Why would it do that? Because, according to ancient yoga texts, a powerful psychic force directed into someone's eyes can kill them.

That would be a lot cheaper than Abrams tanks and Daisy Cutters, we imagine. Naturally, Don Rumsfeld and the cost-cutting brigade at the Pentagon got interested. But the goats were impervious, alas. No, next to the CIA and the Pentagon, we do not believe that Mr. Perkins can come even close to the bizarre. [5]

Then the government delivers the coup de grace. Perkins, they claim is a conspiracy theorist, who is on record claiming that 9-11 was an inside job.

Actually, Perkins doesn't quite say what sort of a job 9-11 was, except that it didn't look obviously like the work of a cave dwelling Saudi on the lam. But even if he were to subscribe to every article of the alternative 9-11 dogma, from remote controlled airlines to missiles hitting the Pentagon, it hardly undermines his case. The government wouldn't do such a thing? No? What about the little matter of Operation Northwoods, put in place by only the post-war's most popular president, Dwight Eisenhower. Northwoods was a plan for the US government to attack and kill its own citizens to provide a rationale for the county to go to war with Cuba. And recently we have learned that the US has had an operation going on in Europe since the end of WW II to knock off European citizens and put the blame on socialists to discredit them politically. Remote controlled airlines? Well, there is that Boeing system meant to foil hijackers. It's been in place in some countries since the early 1990s. As for conspiracy theory, what would you call a group of people getting together to put through a plan to dominate the world? A quilting circle? Dear reader, if you want a conspiracy theory, you don't need Perkins or debates about the temperature at which jet fuel ignites. You need look no farther than the well known, clear as daylight Project for the New American Century, signed by the DC punditry's most high flying mainstream names from Bill Kristol to Francis Fukuyama.

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But now we explain why Perkins' book unsettles us:

The first problem with the book is all the parts that are obviously false and filled with the kind of fuzzy clap-trap that the silliest of the anti-corporate globalizers like to spout. In some of his economic analyses, Perkins doesn't sound remotely like an economist -- even a bad one.

The second problem with the book is -- all the parts that are obviously true. The overthrow of Mossadegh, Arbenz, Noriega, and the rest are a matter of history. The US Treasury Department did create a commission called JECOR, under which the Saudis bid out all the construction projects in the country to foreign companies.

As for the motivations of the IMF and the World Bank, Perkins hasn't gone half as far as Jude Wanniski, one-time economic advisor to Ronald Reagan and a senior editor of The Wall Street Journal, who likes to call the IMF-World Bank mafia an "Evil Empire."

Wanniski does not mince words in describing the rationale for World Bank lending. It's to get rid of the paper dollars accumulating in the vaults of private banks like Chase and Citicorp. Once America went off the gold standard in 1971, the paper could only lose value as it inflated. But lend them to foreign countries and the banks could be guaranteed a return . . . as long as you had the IMF -- flush with tax payer dollars -- stepping into the breach to collect the loan. It would force the countries to raise taxes on their people and devalue their currencies as part of the terms of the loan. [6]

So, we have no argument with Perkins on this. The World Bank and other organizations do routinely apply subtle and not so subtle pressure on governments to open up their countries to foreign contractors and privatization. Private companies do inflate their project estimates regularly. Einar Greve, the Norwegian who originally recruited Perkins to Main after his Peace Corps work in Ecuador and who also left the Tucson Electric Power in the thick of insider-trading allegations in 1989, did initially admit that Perkins was telling the truth, "Allowing for some author discretion, basically the story is true." Then he had second thoughts. Perkins, he didn't meet on an airstrip but in a hotel bar; he doesn't know anyone at the NSA . . . and even if he does, they wouldn't talk about it to him. Perkins didn't write to him from Ecuador and never set him up with Claudine. But Greve won't come out and call Perkins a liar either. "I think that John," he says, "really has convinced himself that a lot of this stuff is true." [7]

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We recognize weasel words as well as the next fellow. And we also recognize that Perkins' psychological profile and background would have made him an ideal candidate for recruitment into a clandestine operation. Spy agencies don't usually pick people with unshakeable integrity. Habitual liars with a weakness for liquor, lucre, and loose living are what they want -- they are easier to control. We would have had our doubts about the book if Perkins had confessed to being a celibate, tee-totaling origamist. We think Greve got it right the first time. The story is true.

Our problem with it is that it's not true enough. Why does Perkins wait 33 years to come out with his tale? If his conscience hurt him as an EHM for Main, why did he leave and then go back to lie for the nuclear power industry? Why does he name no names, yet hint that he fears nameless retribution? Perkins points fingers at no one, using secondary material to back his claims most of the time. A Vanity Fair article is the source for his story about the Saudis. Why would the government bother with a book so thinly documented? Undergraduate papers on American foreign policy dig up more evidence every day. And, we wonder why the government didn't try and do a better job trashing the book if it was so dangerous. That makes us think the book might not be dangerous . . . or even subversive at all.

We make no allegations, of course. We know nothing more than what we read in the papers about it. Confessions might be a fabrication from beginning to end . . . or it may be the most authoritative piece of writing since Moses came down from Mt. Sinai. We have no way of knowing. But that is the point. A book about the dirty deeds of empire that is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, does no real damage, and has a conclusion that would gladden the heart of Thomas Friedman, strikes us as one which the powers that be might actually want to cultivate. If we take Perkins at his word, Nike or McDonalds or Pepsi or any of the lumbering giants of the corporate-state don't have to get out of bed with their imperial paramour. They simply have to add a little do-gooding to their balance sheets. All that's needed, says the reformed hit man, is a little shape-shifting for corporations. And really, they don't even have to do that. They just have to put up a web-page saying they do. That should be evidence enough.

Lila Rajiva is a freelance writer in Argentina, and the author of the must-read book, *The Language of Empire: Abu Ghraib and the US Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2005). She can be reached at: lrajiva@hotmail.com .

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ENDNOTES

[1] Getting to Know the Generals, Graham Greene, New York: Pocket Books, p. 1984, p. 11, cited in Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, John Perkins, New York: Plume, January 2006, p. 186.

[2] Perkins, op.cit., pp. 20-1.

[3] Perkins, op.cit., p. 17.

[4] "Confessions -- or Fantasies -- of an Economic Hit Man?" U.S. Department of State, February 2, 2006.

[5] The Men Who Stare at Goats, Jon Ronson, Simon & Schuster, April 5, 2005.

[6] "Confession of an Economic Hit Man," Jude Wanniski, Lew Rockwell, January 25, 2005.

[7] "Economic Hit Man," Maureen Tcacik, Boston Magazine, July 2005.

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