

# Puttin' the Pressure on Putin

**Exclusive:** The Obama administration continues to compound the diplomatic mess around former NSA contractor Edward Snowden. The latest blunder was announcing that the U.S. wouldn't torture or execute Snowden, a reminder to the world how far Official Washington has strayed from civilized behavior, notes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

The main question now on the fate of truth-teller Edward Snowden is whether Russian President Vladimir Putin will see any benefit in helping stop the United States from further embarrassing itself as it prances around the globe acting like a "pitiful, helpless giant." That image was coined by President Richard Nixon, who insisted that the giant of America would merit those adjectives if it did not prevail in South Vietnam.

It is no secret that Putin is chuckling as Attorney General Eric Holder and other empty-shirts-cum-corporate-law-office-silk-ties assisted ably by White House spokesperson Jay Carney proceed willy-nilly to transform the Snowden case from a red-faced diplomatic embarrassment for the United States into a huge geopolitical black eye before the rest of the world.

Reminding the planet how out of step the United States has been from most of the civilized world, Holder offered a written promise to the Russians on July 9 (and released on Friday) that Snowden would neither be tortured nor put to death for disclosing secrets about how the National Security Agency has been spying on Americans and pretty much everybody else on Earth.

Holder assured the Russian Justice Minister that the U.S. "would not seek the death penalty for Mr. Snowden should he return to the United States." Holder also saw fit to reassure his Russian counterpart that, "Mr. Snowden will not be tortured. Torture is unlawful in the United States." Wow, that's a relief!

The United States is so refined in its views on human rights that it won't torture or execute a whistleblower. Of course, that only reminded everyone that the United States is one of the few advanced societies that still puts lots of people to death and was caught just last decade torturing detainees at CIA "black sites," not to mention the brutal treatment of other prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

And, there was the humiliating treatment afforded another American whistleblower, Private Bradley Manning, whose forced nudity and long periods in

solitary confinement during eight months of confinement at the Marine base at Quantico, Virginia, just outside of Washington D.C. prompted international accusations of torture.

Holder's strange promise may have been designed to undercut Snowden's bid for asylum, but it also reminded the world of America's abysmal behavior on human rights. And, even if the United States promises not to torture someone, government lawyers have shown how they can play games with the definition of the term or just outright lie. Holder's reputation for veracity is just a thin notch above that of National Intelligence Director James Clapper, who admits he has chosen to testify under oath to the "least untruthful" things.

Perhaps no one has told Holder how shockingly out of step with other civilized nations the U.S. finds itself on the issue of capital punishment. Just calling attention to that is a diplomatic gaffe of some proportion. The global trend toward abolition of the death penalty is unmistakable and increasing. The United States even is the outlier on this issue when compared to "brutal" Russia. In Russia, there has been a moratorium on executions since 1996, although it is still technically lawful.

The European Union holds a strong and principled position against the death penalty, and the abolition of capital punishment is a pre-condition for entry into the Union. The U.S. enjoys the dubious distinction of joining a list with China, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia as the leaders in executing people.

### **Closing the Barn Door Too Late**

Holder's high-profile push to get the Russians to hand over Snowden damages the United States in other ways, too, such as reminding the world how the U.S. government has violated the privacy rights of people everywhere, including in allied countries. There is a reasonable argument to be made that the smartest U.S. move would be to simply leave Snowden alone.

Depending on your perspective, Edward Snowden has already done his damage or, in my view, accomplished his patriotic duty of truth-telling demonstrating with documents how the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have trashed the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Moreover, Snowden apparently had the foresight to handle his revelations in such way that, to the degree there are still more genies about to be let out of the bottle, it will be near impossible to stuff them back in. Indeed, he has said as much, in indicating how easily he can accede to Putin's condition that he does "no further harm" to the U.S. Snowden has even been specific in acknowledging that he cannot prevent journalist Glenn Greenwald and others from publishing

more of the material he made available.

So why the hue and cry from Washington? While the Obama White House has utterly failed to honor Obama's earlier promises to run a transparent administration, there is one area in which it has been as transparent as Saran Wrap. And that is its fixation with pursuing whistleblowers "to the full extent of the law" ... and then some.

The administration has been transparently vindictive, revengeful and determined to exact retribution on "leakers" as a warning to others whose consciences might trouble them enough to reveal war crimes, as Bradley Manning did, or crass violations of our rights as citizens, as Edward Snowden did.

But the recent thrashing around – demanding and cajoling Putin to turn over Snowden – has further made the United States look petulant and inept. Meanwhile, Putin has demonstrated a much more deft touch in handling this delicate international incident.

After making it clear that "we do not extradite," Putin has had the good sense to put some distance between himself and the Snowden affair. As Secretary of State John Kerry bemoaned (from Saudi Arabia, of all places) about "standards of behavior between sovereign nations," and (of all things) "respect for the rule of law," Putin said the issue is simple:

"Should such people [as Snowden] be extradited to be jailed, or not? In any case, I would prefer not to deal with such issues, because this is just the same as shaving a piglet too much noise but too little hair."

### **Will Putin Cave?**

Do the feckless folks running President Barack Obama's foreign policy really think they can force Putin to back down? Can they actually believe they can achieve that by putting into play what they apparently consider a diplomatic "nuclear option"? The thinly veiled threat surfaced ten days ago that Obama will snub Putin by canceling their planned tete-a-tete before the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg in September.

Can they possibly think that by pouting, jibing and stamping their feet, they will frighten Putin into "behaving" as obediently as the malleable Italians, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Austrians did when they forced down Bolivian President Evo Morales's plane for inspection? Morales was en route home from a visit to Russia when someone provided the U.S. with a "tip" that Snowden was hiding on Morales's plane.

I find myself wondering who provided Washington with that great tip, and whether

it is no longer the practice among U.S. intelligence agencies to take rudimentary steps to verify such tips before they let their masters get greasy diplomatic egg all over their faces?

Finally, how many more times does Putin have to say, as he did through his spokesman again Friday that: "Russia has never extradited anyone, and will not extradite [Snowden]."

Months ago, former UK MI5 intelligence officer Annie Machon coined the term "asymmetric extradition law" referring to U.S. policy, which, in the vernacular, might be called "pick-and-choose." While there is no extradition treaty between the U.S. and Russia, there has been one between the U.S. and Italy for 30 years. Yet, Washington has turned a deaf ear to Italy's appeals to extradite convicted kidnapper Robert Seldon Lady, former head of the CIA worker bees in Milan where the CIA mounted an "extraordinary rendition" against the Muslim cleric known as Abu Omar off the streets in 2003. Omar was given over to the tender mercies of Egyptian intelligence interrogators.

In 2005, when Lady got a tip that the Italian police were coming for him, he reportedly fled his villa without destroying sensitive files on the CIA's mission. Italy convicted Lady and 22 other U.S. operatives in absentia and gave them hefty jail sentences. Last December, Italy's justice minister signed a warrant for Lady's arrest. On July 18, Lady was identified and detained in Panama, but slipped away the next day on a plane headed toward the U.S.

Few were surprised that Panama was pressured into joining the servile company of the four U.S.-crony European countries that had already embarrassed themselves as accessories to the Washington's latest Excellent Adventure regarding Evo Morales's plane a fiasco code-named OARR (for Operation Airline Rest Room) after the suspected place where Snowden was believed stowed away.

But when it came to extraditing a convicted kidnapper from Panama to Italy? Puleeze. Great powers don't have to do that kind of thing, treaty or not. Except for Russia, you see. Moscow must surrender Snowden, even absent a U.S.-Russia extradition treaty. And Putin should understand that, no?

It must have been that kind of superpower-think that prompted Jay Carney on July 12 to add insult to injury, as he jibed at the Russian government to "afford human rights organizations the ability to do their work in Russia throughout Russia, not just at the Moscow transit lounge." That kind of comment is sure to endear the White House to the Kremlin.

Vladimir Volokh, head of the Russian Migration Service, seemed to welcome a chance to retaliate in kind. Rubbing in the awkwardness of Snowden's present

status because of actions by Washington, Volokh told the Interfax news agency Friday: "We know that he is Edward Snowden only from his words. The passport he has has been canceled. ... He is under protection in the transit area for his safety. He is an individual being pursued and his life is in danger."

The Russians, and pretty much everyone else, are smart enough to realize that, given Washington's transparent motives, there is nothing to be gained by serving Snowden up to American "justice," such as it has become. Russia is no banana republic, so it beggars belief that President Putin will follow the supine example of Panama. Nor is the fawning example of Italy, France, Spain and Portugal something Putin would wish to emulate.

### **Russian History**

Scholars of Russian history make an important point that is relevant here: it is Russia's deeply embedded inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West. Recite to Vladimir Putin the familiar adage, "Scratch the Russian and find the Tatar," and see what happens.

In short, while Europe was coming out of the Dark Ages into the Renaissance, the Russians were for more than two centuries under the likes of Genghis Khan and his hordes a period the Russians call the "Tatar Yoke." This reality had very serious consequences and is deeply embedded in the Russian consciousness. In a sense, the Russians have been playing catch-up ball ever since.

Their struggle seems never ending, but now and again they reach high ground. L'Affaire Snowden is one of those "nows." Russia occupies the high moral ground, helped immeasurably by the behavior of the Bush and Obama administrations, which have squandered the moral advantage the U.S. used to enjoy.

Worse still, from President Obama's perspective, there is little leverage he can bring to bear on the Russian Bear. If Putin thought Obama was really running things in Washington, he might try to barter Snowden's freedom for some significant concession. But Moscow is not likely to believe Obama could deliver on any such concession, and Russian officials are probably right.

Obama, Holder, Carney and the rest would be well advised not to push any more geopolitical chips onto the table in a risky bet on winning back Snowden. Russia has the better cards on this one, and it is a mark of realism, as well as intelligence, to recognize "when to fold them."

Otherwise, and particularly if Putin keeps seeing the pastel-tie empty suits pontificating on how Russia must do its duty in surrendering Edward Snowden, there is a chance we may see Putin take Snowden to asylum in Latin America on

his own plane, overflying Austria, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Panama en route.

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