

Obama Still Withholds Syria Evidence

Exclusive: President Obama has sidetracked the rush to war with Syria, agreeing to pursue a diplomatic plan involving Syria surrendering its chemical weapons. But the U.S. government still hides its supposedly conclusive evidence that the Assad regime was guilty of the Aug. 21 chemical attack, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Even people who trust the Obama administration's accusations blaming the Syrian government for the apparent Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack outside Damascus can't explain why these supposed phone intercepts and satellite photos are still being kept secret from the American people.

One intelligence source told me, after President Barack Obama's Tuesday night speech on Syria, that the reason for the unreasonable secrecy should be obvious by now: that the evidence would not withstand scrutiny. He said it is viewed as flimsy even by some of the CIA analysts involved.

So, the "smart play" for the administration has been to withhold the "evidence" and rely on a combination of emotional outrage over the deaths of children and a "group think" that will increasingly treat skeptics as "discredited" and "outside the mainstream." Though this P.R. strategy has largely succeeded as more mainstream journalists and pundits fall into line its downside is that it reeks of the tactics used to enforce conformity over President George W. Bush's case for war against Iraq in 2002-2003.

Indeed, many of the same political and media players who were duped in that bloody fiasco are at the front of the line a decade later, accepting as gospel truth the allegations against Syria that the Obama administration has asserted without evidence. It doesn't seem to matter that the four-page "Government Assessment" of the case against the Syrian government issued on Aug. 30 contained not a single piece of evidence that could be checked independently. It was all "we assess" this and "we assess" that.

The Obama administration then relied on the old tactic of repeating an unproven assertion, knowing that if a charge is declared with sufficient certitude often enough, the weak-minded will simply begin treating it as accepted wisdom. That's especially easy when the target of the accusations has been thoroughly demonized as is the case with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Obama Adds to the Mystery

President Obama continued this process of repetition Tuesday night, telling

Americans what they are supposed to believe, not showing them any real evidence.

“We know the Assad regime was responsible,” the President declared in a prime-time address. “In the days leading up to August 21st, we know that Assad’s chemical weapons personnel prepared for an attack near an area where they mix sarin gas. They distributed gasmasks to their troops. Then they fired rockets from a regime-controlled area into 11 neighborhoods that the regime has been trying to wipe clear of opposition forces.

“Shortly after those rockets landed, the gas spread, and hospitals filled with the dying and the wounded. We know senior figures in Assad’s military machine reviewed the results of the attack.”

Interestingly, Obama omitted one regular feature of the U.S. government’s litany of allegations, the supposed intercepted phone call of a “senior official” caught admitting that the Syrian government had conducted the attack. This claim was included in the “Government Assessment” and repeated by Secretary of State John Kerry and other U.S. officials.

The “senior” Syrian official was never identified, no direct quotes were used, no context was explained and no transcript was provided, just a paraphrase and the Obama administration’s implicit plea to “trust us.” The mysterious official with his convenient admission of guilt didn’t make the cut into Obama’s speech for some reason.

But Obama did highlight a previously obscure point, that rockets were fired into “11 neighborhoods.” In recent days, some pundits have cited the quantity of neighborhoods allegedly attacked as conclusive proof against the Syrian government because the sheer number of targets would seem to preclude a rebel attack or the possible accidental release of chemical agents by rebel forces.

However, this “slam-dunk” proof is undercut by a footnote contained in a White House-released map of the supposed locations of the attack. The footnote read: “Reports of chemical attacks originating from some locations may reflect the movement of patients exposed in one neighborhood to field hospitals and medical facilities in the surrounding area. They may also reflect confusion and panic triggered by the ongoing artillery and rocket barrage, and reports of chemical use in other neighborhoods.”

In other words, a map attached to the White House’s own “Government Assessment” offers a contradictory explanation to what Obama and others have claimed about the number of neighborhoods that were struck by the alleged chemical attack of Aug. 21: victims from one location could have rushed to clinics in other neighborhoods, creating the impression of a more widespread attack than actually

occurred.

Obama's other assertions also continue to beg a series of questions regarding why no verifiable evidence has been presented to the American people three weeks after the Aug. 21 incident. These questions include: How does the U.S. government know about the Syrian military's alleged chemical-attack preparations? Does the U.S. have satellite photos of troop movements, gas masks being worn, and the rockets being fired on Aug. 21? Are there communication intercepts on these topics?

If Syrian officials "reviewed results of the attack," as Obama claims, what were they saying? Were they shocked by what happened or were they pleased? Why did Obama, a precise practitioner of the English language, choose the vague word "reviewed"?

Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Secretary Kerry declared that the "Assad regime prepared for this attack, issued instructions to prepare for this attack, warned its own forces to use gas masks." He added that the U.S. intelligence included "physical evidence of where the rockets came from and when." If so, what was that "physical evidence"? If the U.S. possesses satellite photographs or other hard proof, none has been revealed publicly.

Even Defenders Are Confused

In an article first published at Counterpunch on Tuesday (and re-posted at Consortiumnews.com), former CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman endorsed the Obama administration's case against the Syrian government. But Goodman later acknowledged to me in an e-mail that he had not seen the evidence himself. Still, he said he had done "due diligence" and was convinced the evidence was real.

Yet, even as he accepted the allegations against the Syrian government as true, Goodman was puzzled by the refusal of the Obama administration to disclose its evidence. In his commentary, he wrote:

"The distortion of evidence of Iraqi WMD a decade ago has made it difficult to convince the American public, let alone a skeptical international audience, of the need to respond to Syria's use of chemical weapons. As a result, the Obama administration must ignore the usual safeguards regarding intelligence sources and methods, and provide the intelligence that is not only convincing but beyond any reasonable doubt.

"We need to know more about the intercepted communications that allowed the United States to track three days of activity by chemical weapons personnel near

an area used to mix chemical weapons. We have identified the area publicly so there is no reason to withhold information that would be dispositive.

“Finally, since the Obama administration has an intercept ‘involving a senior official intimately familiar with the offensive,’ according to the U.S. assessment, that confirms the use of chemical weapons and his concern with UN discovery of evidence, the tape itself should be played. Surely, in view of what we have just learned about the intercept capabilities of the National Security Agency, no one in Syria (or anywhere else for that matter) will be shocked to learn that the United States monitors high-level communications in a zone of interest.”

Yet, this evidence, which Goodman and others believe exists and would represent “dispositive” proof against the Syrian government, continues to be kept secret. Instead, the Obama administration relies on the technique of endless repetition of unproven claims and the release of some heartrending videos of victims, a tug at emotions but not evidence of whodunit.

So, why? Why not release the evidence? Goodman is undoubtedly correct that there is no overriding intelligence reason for the administration’s “evidence” to be withheld. Everyone knows the United States has spy satellites and technical means to intercept phone calls. So, why is this evidence still being withheld from the public?

The most obvious answer, as the intelligence source told me Tuesday night, is that the certainty of the administration’s case would crumble if independent analysts got a look at it. Thus, it makes public relations sense for the Obama administration to hide the evidence and simply deride anyone who dares question the rush to judgment on the Syrian government’s guilt.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

A Desperate Fight for the Middle Class

Between a Congress dominated by Tea Party extremists and a Supreme Court

controlled by corporate partisans, hopes for addressing America's worsening income inequality are dim. But union leader Richard Trumka says the fight is more crucial than ever, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

"It's time to turn America right side up!" AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka exhorted those in attendance at the labor alliance's quadrennial convention in Los Angeles on Monday. Time, he said in his keynote address, to change the ratio of power, to put the 99 percent in charge rather than let the richest one percent dominate government, politics and society.

"Since 2009, the pay of America's corporate CEOs has gone up nearly 40 percent," Trumka noted. "Imagine for a second what kind of country we would live in if ordinary people's incomes had increased like CEO's. Almost no one would live in poverty."

Trumka recognized that the number of Americans in unions continues to decline although the AFL-CIO is "13 million strong – we are today, as we have been since the time of Abraham Lincoln, the biggest, strongest, best organized force for economic justice in America."

But, Trumka continued, "We are a small part of the 150 million Americans who work for a living. We cannot win economic justice only for ourselves, for union members alone. It would not be right and it's not possible. All working people will rise together, or we will keep falling together."

To that end, and in perhaps the most radical restructuring of labor since the AFL and CIO merged almost 60 years ago, the convention endorsed the expansion of the AFL-CIO's membership to include non-traditional labor organizations, including non-profits organizing low-wage workers.

As described by AFL-CIO senior writer Kenneth Quinnell, "The AFL-CIO is going to expand existing forms of participation in the labor movement and create new forms of membership that are available to any workers not already covered by a collective bargaining agreement or who are not members of unions or represented by unions."

Monday was the first full day of the AFL-CIO convention. The Syrian crisis prevented President Obama from making a scheduled appearance (he sent brief videotaped remarks instead) but Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts, despite Syria-related intelligence briefings and negotiations, was able to move her planned Monday address to Sunday afternoon at the convention's opening half-day. It was a barn-burning call to arms.

“When important decisions are made in Washington, too often, working families are ignored,” she said. “From tax policy to retirement security, the voices of hard-working people get drowned out by powerful industries and well-financed front groups. Those with power fight to take care of themselves and to feed at the trough for themselves, even when it comes at the expense of working families getting a fair shot at a better future.”

Warren bluntly condemned the government sequester as “stupid” and sharply criticized the Supreme Court. “According to a recent study,” she said, “the five conservative justices currently sitting on the Supreme Court are in the top ten most pro-corporate justices in a half century – and Justices Alito and Roberts are numbers one and two – the most anti-consumer in this entire time.

“The Chamber of Commerce is now a major player in the Supreme Court, and its win rate has risen to 70 percent of all cases it supports. Follow this pro-corporate trend to its logical conclusion, and sooner or later you’ll end up with a Supreme Court that functions as a wholly owned subsidiary of big business.”

She concluded: “Our agenda is America’s agenda. The American people know that the system is rigged against them and they want us to level the playing field. That’s our mandate! I’ve already fought and lost my share of battles in Washington, and I’ve been around long enough to know that Washington is a tough place. Real reform isn’t easy. But I also know this: If we don’t fight, we can’t win. But if we fight, we win.”

Before the convention began Sunday afternoon, the morning was devoted to a short conference on inclusion and diversity, important to a labor coalition for too long criticized as “pale, male and stale.” Today, women and minorities play a prominent role in organized labor, although when it comes to age it was pointed out that reportedly only seven percent of union members are under 35.

The older among us at the convention are half-jokingly described as “seasoned,” so a highlight of the morning was the appearance of civil rights hero the Rev. James Lawson, soon to be a seasoned 85. He trained many of the movement’s leaders, including John Lewis, in the techniques of non-violent civil disobedience.

At the conference, he condemned what he called the “spiritual wickedness of plantation capitalism. Seven of ten people in the world work at or below a poverty level that is simply another name for slavery.”

Serving up two aphorisms relevant to all in attendance at this year’s convention, Rev. Lawson pointed to the words of the Greek philosopher Thucydides, who when asked when justice would come to ancient Athens, said it

would come when the uninjured were as outraged as the injured. And the Methodist pastor cited Proverbs 29:18 – where there is no vision, the people perish.

Moyers & Company senior writer Michael Winship is president of the Writers Guild of America, East, and is attending the AFL-CIO convention as a delegate.
