

How Reagan Enforced US Hypocrisy

Exclusive: The mainstream U.S. news media has so fully bought into the U.S. government's narrative on Ukraine that almost no one sees the layers of hypocrisy, an achievement in "group think" that dates back to Ronald Reagan's war against "moral equivalence," writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Official Washington's hearty disdain for anyone who cites U.S. hypocrisy toward the Ukraine crisis can be traced back to a propaganda strategy hatched by the Reagan administration in 1984, dismissing any comparisons between U.S. and Soviet behavior as unacceptable expressions of "moral equivalence."

This "moral equivalence" concern stemmed, in part, from the prior decade's disclosures of U.S. government misconduct – the Vietnam War, CIA-sponsored coups and other intelligence abuses at home and abroad. In that climate of heightened skepticism, U.S. journalists felt it was their job to show some skepticism and hold U.S. officials accountable for their behavior.

For President Ronald Reagan, that meant journalists taking note of his administration's support for terrorism by the Contra rebels in Nicaragua and for death-squad-tainted governments slaughtering civilians in countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador.

So, to counter this P.R. problem, Reagan administration officials developed a propaganda "theme" that, in effect, asserted that the U.S. government should not be held to the same human rights standards as the Soviet government because the United States was morally superior to the Soviet Union.

According to documents recently released by the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, the Reagan administration established a "Moral Equivalence Working Group" in 1984 reporting to Walter Raymond Jr., who had been a top psychological warfare specialist at the CIA before being moved to Reagan's National Security Council where he oversaw a wide-ranging program of domestic and foreign propaganda.

Though the working group's core complaint was something of a straw man, since it would be hard to find anyone who equated the U.S. and USSR, the Reagan administration made clear that anyone who continued to apply common moral standards to the two governments would be accused of "moral equivalence."

This framing proved effective in tarring U.S. journalists and human rights activists as, in essence, Soviet apologists. The "theme" was most famously

expressed by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick at the Republican National Convention in 1984 when she decried anyone who would “blame America first.”

Link to the Present

As an Associated Press reporter, I encountered this “moral equivalence” attack line when I questioned State Department officials about their hypocrisy in applying strict human rights standards to Nicaragua’s Sandinista government while excusing far more serious abuses by the Contras and other U.S. allies in Central America.

Neocon intellectual Robert Kagan, who then was a senior official in the State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America, warned me that I was edging dangerously close to the line on “moral equivalence.”

Ironically, Kagan’s wife, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, is now at the forefront of U.S. support for the Ukrainian coup, which relied on neo-Nazi militias to overthrow a democratically elected president, though the official U.S. narrative is that this was a “democratic” uprising. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons and the Ukraine Coup.”](#)]

Over the past three decades, the argument against “moral equivalence” has changed little, though it has morphed into what is now more commonly described as American “exceptionalism,” the new trump card against anyone who suggests that the U.S. government should abide by international law and be held to common human rights standards.

Today, if you make the case that universal rules should apply to the United States, you are accused of not embracing America as an “exceptional” country. As a result, very few mainstream observers in Official Washington even blink now at the U.S. government taking contradictory positions on issues such as intervening in other countries.

Invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are “justified” as are drone strikes and aerial bombardments of countries from Pakistan to Yemen to Somalia to Libya. It’s also okay to threaten to bomb Syria and Iran.

Supporting the overthrow of sovereign governments is also fine for the United States but not for anyone else. Just during the Obama administration, the U.S. government has backed coups in Honduras, Libya and now Ukraine. U.S.-endorsed secessions are okay, too, as with oil-rich South Sudan from Sudan.

Yet, when the geopolitical shoe is on the other foot when Russia objects to the violent overthrow of Ukraine’s duly-elected President Viktor Yanukovich and, as

a result, supports a secession referendum by Crimea on whether its citizens want to join the Russian Federation Official Washington cries out in moral outrage.

Suddenly, we see mainstream American journalists searching for some clause in Ukraine's constitution that prohibits secession, though these journalists had no problem with the violation of the same constitution's procedures for impeaching a president, rules ignored by the coup regime with barely a peep from U.S. news outlets.

Framing the Debate

This ever-shifting moral playing field was defined by the Reagan administration's propagandists in the mid-1980s, coincidentally in the iconic year 1984, according to documents at the Reagan Library. I found in Raymond's files a "concept paper" for a conference to address "moral equivalence," attached to a memo dated Sept. 4, 1984. The paper read:

"The Moral Equivalence Working Group has for some time been examining ways to counter the common (and for US, very damaging) concept of the 'moral equivalence of the superpowers,' i.e., the notion that there is no moral distinction to be made between the US and the USSR, particularly in the areas of foreign and military policy. Moral equivalence is a particularly insidious problem because it permeates almost every level of public discourse both at home and abroad."

The "concept paper" offers no specific examples of anyone actually engaging in this "moral equivalence," but it insists that the problem is widespread among elites and could be detected when people, for instance, compared the U.S. invasion of Grenada to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The paper reads:

"This is not to suggest that moral equivalence is in fact a majority perception. There is reason to believe that it is primarily an elite problem and that the broad mass of people has a sounder instinct on the inherent moral differences between the US and Soviet systems. However, given the dominance of morally equivalent thinking among elites, particularly in the media and in academia, public resistance to moral equivalence is provided with little informational or intellectual support."

The paper then proposes a high-level conference sponsored by the neoconservative Center for Strategic and International Studies with the goal of analyzing "the Moral Equivalence misconception" and devising ways "to combat the problem" including addressing "intellectual fashion and ways to have an impact on it."

Over the intervening three decades, these U.S. government's propaganda efforts against holding the United States to the same moral standards as other countries have proved remarkably successful, at least within U.S. opinion circles.

It is now common for mainstream journalists to accept the principle of “American exceptionalism” in both implications of the word: that the United States is a wonderfully exceptional nation and that it is exempted from international law.

Indeed, it is rare for anyone in mainstream journalism to assert that the United States should conform to international law, i.e. respecting the sovereign borders of other countries. Yet, the same opinion leaders express outrage when Russia intervenes in Ukraine in the wake of a neo-Nazi-spearheaded coup on Russia’s border.

No longer do mainstream U.S. journalists and academics try to apply the same rules to Washington and Moscow. The “problem” that Reagan’s team detected in the 1980s has been solved. Today, American hypocrisy is the accepted “group think.”

[For more of Consortiumnews.com’s exclusive coverage of the Ukraine crisis, see [“Crimea’s Case for Leaving Ukraine,”](#) [“The ‘We-Hate-Putin’ Group Think”](#); [“Putin or Kerry: Who’s Delusional?”](#); [“America’s Staggering Hypocrisy”](#); [“What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis”](#); [“Ukraine: One ‘Regime Change’ Too Many?”](#); [“A Shadow US Foreign Policy”](#); [“Cheering a ‘Democratic’ Coup in Ukraine”](#); [“Neocons and the Ukraine Coup.”](#)]

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](#).

The West’s ‘War on Democracy’

Across the Western world, there has been a clamping down on meaningful dissent, including secret information that is withheld from the public in the name of national security. And there has been a failure to contest this assault on democracy, writes ex-UK intelligence officer Annie Machon.

By Annie Machon

I regularly revisit the famous Pastor Martin Niemoeller [poem](#) from the Nazi era as his words remain resonant in our post-9/11, “war on terror” world. Over the last week threads of various alarming stories have converged, so here is my

latest update:

First they came for the Muslims, but I was not a Muslim so did not speak up.

Then they came for the whistleblowers, but I was not a whistleblower so did not speak up.

Then they came for the “domestic extremists,” but I was not an activist so did not speak up.

And when they came for me, there was nobody left to speak up for me.

Allow me to explain this current version. Some readers will be well aware of my horror at the global rape of basic human rights in the West’s “war on terror” since 9/11: the kidnappings, the torture, the CIA presidentially-approved weekly assassination lists, the drone bombings, the illegal wars...

All these measures have indeed targeted and terrorized the Muslim community around the world. In the UK I have heard many stories of British Muslims wary of attending a family event such as a wedding of their cousins in Pakistan or wherever, in case they get snatched, tortured or drone bombed.

Now it appears that even British citizens who choose to donate to UK charities offering humanitarian relief in war zones such as Syria can be arrested under counter-terrorism laws.

Moazzam Begg, the director of Cage (the UK NGO campaigning about the community impact of the war on terror) was again seized last week. As I have written before, this is a man who has already experienced the horrors of Bagram airbase and Guantanamo. When he was released he became a campaigner for others in the same plight and set up the Cage campaign which has gained quite some traction over the last few years.

Over a year ago, he visited Syria on a fact-finding mission, investigating those who had been summarily detained and tortured in the conflict. Last December, he had his passport seized on spurious grounds. He wrote about this trip quite openly, and yet now, a year on, has been arrested and charged with “training terrorists and fund raising” in Syria.

This is a high-profile campaigner who operates in the full glare of the media. How credulous does one have to be to believe that Begg, after all his experiences and running this campaign, is now involved in “terrorism”? Really, anyone?

Since then, other people involved in British charities offering aid to the displaced peoples of Syria have also been scooped up. But this is just affecting

the British Muslim community, right? There's "no smoke without fire," and it does not impinge the lives of most people in the UK, so there has been no widespread outcry... **so nobody speaks up.**

'War on Whistleblowers'

Then we have the ongoing "war on whistleblowers" that I have discussed extensively. This affects every sector of society in every country, but most seriously affects whistleblowers emerging from central government, the military and the intelligence agencies. They are the ones most likely to witness the most heinous crimes, and they are the ones automatically criminalized by secrecy laws.

This is most apparent in the UK, where the Official Secrets Act (1989) specifically criminalizes whistleblowing, and in the USA, where President Barack Obama has invoked the 1917 Espionage Act against whistleblowers more times than all other presidents combined over the last century. If that is not a "war on whistleblowers," I don't know what is.

This, of course, is a paranoid over-reaction to the work of WikiLeaks, and the brave actions of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. This is what Obama's government deems to be the "insider threat." Yet it is only through greater transparency that we can operate as informed citizens; it is only through greater accountability that we can hope to obtain justice. And in this era, when we are routinely lied into illegal wars, what could be more important?

But intelligence and military whistleblowers are rare, specialized and easy to stigmatize as the "other" and now, the insider threat – not quite of the normal world. The issues they disclose can seem a bit remote, not linked to most people's daily experiences **so nobody speaks up.**

But now to my third revamped line of the Pastor Niemoeller poem: the activists or, to use current police terminology, the "domestic extremists." This, surely, does impinge on more people's experience of life. If you want to go out and demonstrate against a war, in support of Occupy, for the environment, whatever, you are surely exercising your democratic rights as citizens, right?

Er, well no, not these days. I have written before about how activists can be criminalized and even deemed to be terrorists by the police (think London Occupy in 2011 here). I'm thinking of the ongoing British undercover cop scandal which continues to rumble on.

For those of you outside the UK, this is a scandal that erupted in 2010. There is was a section of secret police who were infiltrated into activist groups under secret identities to live the life, report back, and even potentially work

as enablers or *agents provocateurs*. As the scandal has grown it appears that some of these cops fathered children with their targets and spied on the grieving families of murder victims.

This sounds like the East German Stasi, but was happening in the UK in the last couple of decades. A government inquiry has just been announced and many old cases against activists will be reviewed to see if tarnished "evidence" was involved in the trials and subsequent convictions. But again this does not affect most people beyond the activist community **so nobody speaks up.**

The Next Layer

Now, people who have always assumed they have certain protections because of their professions, such as lawyers and journalists, are also being caught in this dragnet. Julian Assange's lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, discovered she was on a flight watch list a few years ago. More recently, Jesselyn Radack, human rights director of the U.S. Government Accountability Project and legal adviser to Edward Snowden, was stopped and interrogated at the UK border.

And just this week a Dutch investigative journalist, Brenno de Winter, was unable to do his job since his name was placed on alert in all national government buildings. The police accused him of hacking-related crimes and burglary. They had to retract this when the smear campaign came to light.

Brenno has made his name by freedom of information requests from the Dutch public sector and his subsequent investigations, for which he was named Dutch Journalist of the Year in 2011. Hardly subversion, red in tooth and claw, but obviously now deemed to be an existential, national security threat to the Netherlands.

Nor is this a Dutch problem – we have seen this in the U.S., where journalists such as James Risen and Barrett Brown have been hounded merely for doing their jobs, and the Glenn Greenwald's partner, David Miranda, was detained at London Heathrow airport under counter-terrorism laws.

Journalists, who always somewhat complacently thought they had special protections in Western countries, are being increasingly targeted when trying to report on issues such as privacy, surveillance, whistleblower disclosures and wars.

Only a few are being targeted now, but I hope these cases will be enough to wake the rest up, while there is still the chance for them to take action **before there is nobody left to speak up for us.**

Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK's MI5 Security Service

(the U.S. counterpart is the FBI). She is also a British member of Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence.
