

Obama and the Truth Agenda

Exclusive: The euphemism, “enhanced interrogations,” is finally fading amid truth-telling that President George W. Bush authorized – and the CIA engaged in – torture of “war on terror” detainees. The lack of a backlash to the stomach-turning new details also suggests that Americans are ready for a truth agenda, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Before last month’s elections, the Democrats thought it would be smart to avoid policy debates. So, they delayed action on immigration, kept President Barack Obama away from many races, and withheld the Senate’s report on CIA torture while following a “legacy” strategy of nominating Senate candidates with famous family names. The Democrats got clobbered and all their “legacy” candidates went down to defeat.

It turns out that this sort of strategy is not just anti-democratic by hiding the issues so the people don’t get a chance to weigh in before an election but it’s bad politics, too. Since then, the Democrats have moved forward with a different approach, with President Obama enunciating a somewhat more humane immigration policy and finally allowing release of the executive summary of the torture report.

And, surprise, surprise, the sky hasn’t fallen. Yes, some Republicans have grumbled about Obama abusing his executive powers over immigration, and some torture-implicated CIA officials and a few far rightists continued quibbling that the torture wasn’t really torture. But the backlash has been surprisingly mild. Generally speaking, the American people especially seem okay with the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee’s torture report.

Even the Washington Post’s neocon editorial page praised the long-delayed disclosures. After citing the horrifying examples of near drownings, painful stress positions, sleep deprivations and “rectal feeding,” the Post concluded: “This is not how Americans should behave. Ever.”

So, what’s the lesson here? It may be that the American people or at least many of them are ready for some truth-telling, whether it’s about how black and brown people are treated in this country or about abuses committed by the government that should be confronted and corrected.

Maybe, these Americans are sick and tired of being treated like children or idiots and perhaps the new “smart” political play, as well as the right pro-democracy move, is to start respecting the people by giving them facts, not just

pabulum and propaganda.

So, President Obama might consider following up his new immigration policy and the recent protests against the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner with a new commission on race in America (like the 1960s Kerner Commission which warned that “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white separate and unequal”).

And he might continue reinvigorating American democracy by sharing more facts with the American people. From the same era that brought us CIA “black sites,” it would be a no-brainer for Obama to release the hidden pages of the 9/11 report on Saudi funding of the hijackers.

As Saudi Arabia today pushes the United States to engage in a “regime change” in Syria a move that could lead to a victory by al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front affiliate or the Islamic State the American people might want to know exactly which side the Saudi “allies” are on.

Obama also shouldn’t stop at just releasing unnecessary secrets from George W. Bush’s administration. He should update the American people on controversies in which his own administration rushed to judgments regarding issues related to war or peace.

The Sarin Mystery

On Syria, for instance, the Saudis (along with Turkey and Israel) almost fulfilled their dream of getting the U.S. military to destroy President Bashar al-Assad’s defenses after Secretary of State John Kerry and other U.S. officials and media jumped to the conclusion that Assad was at fault for a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Though the furor over that incident brought the United States to the brink of another Mideast war, many of the supposed “facts” cited by Kerry and the others have crumbled under closer scrutiny, such as the belief that a barrage of rockets carried the sarin from a Syrian military base when a subsequent United Nations investigation discovered only one sarin-laden rocket. Rocket experts also concluded that its very limited range traced more likely to rebel-held territory.

In other words, the sarin attack may well have been a rebel provocation meant to draw the U.S. military into the Syrian civil war on the side of the rebels whose most effective fighters are connected to either al-Qaeda or the even more extreme Islamic State. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?”]

More than a year later, U.S. intelligence analysts have a much more comprehensive take on what actually happened, and President Obama could declassify that information even if it embarrasses Secretary Kerry and other high-ranking members of the administration. If the Assad regime was falsely accused, there is also a fairness imperative to correct the record regardless of what you think about Assad.

Similarly, U.S. intelligence analysts have amassed substantial data on another crucial event, one that has ratcheted up war tensions in Eastern Europe, the July 17 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine. Kerry and others rushed to blame the ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who supposedly gave the rebels the sophisticated surface-to-air missiles capable of bringing down a plane at 33,000 feet.

The stampede of anti-Russian outrage was so strong that the European Union agreed to U.S. demands for economic sanctions against Moscow, touching off a trade war that has made life harder for people in both Russia and Europe. The shoot-down also gave impetus to the Kiev regime's "anti-terrorist operation" in eastern Ukraine, dispatching neo-Nazi and other paramilitary militias who have spearheaded the killing of thousands of ethnic Russians.

But I'm told that some U.S. intelligence analysts now view the MH-17 incident much differently from the first few days, with the possibility that the shoot-down may have been committed by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military, possibly trying to bring down a Russian plane and mistakenly destroying the Malaysian airliner which had similar markings.

Whatever the current thinking about who was to blame, clearly U.S. intelligence has much more data today than was available in July when Kerry went on all five Sunday shows pointing the finger at Russia and was joined in his hasty conclusion by virtually the entire U.S. mainstream media.

Obama owes it to the American people and to the families of the 298 dead to release all available U.S. evidence regarding the guilty parties even if that again embarrasses his Secretary of State.

The Tonkin Precedent

Kerry himself should want the full story told regarding both the Syrian sarin case and the Malaysia plane shoot-down, since as a young man he was drawn into the Vietnam War based on false reporting about the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. A suspected clash between North Vietnamese forces and a U.S. destroyer became the basis for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which provided the legal authorization for the Vietnam War.

In the Gulf of Tonkin case, senior officials of Lyndon Johnson's administration soon realized that the attack probably never happened. But that reality was kept hidden from the American people for years as the slaughter went on, with 58,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese dying. If the factual correction had been made in a timely manner, many of those dead, including servicemen who served with Lt. John Kerry, might have been saved.

However, Kerry, now 70, has become like the older men who sent him and his comrades to fight in Vietnam, more concerned about reputation and pride inside Official Washington than about the blood and suffering of the people affected by misdirected U.S. policies. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What's the Matter with John Kerry?](#)"]

Today, Kerry's State Department appears to see both the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine as battlefields where U.S. "hard power" is limited so a decision has been made to use propaganda or "information warfare" as a "soft power" alternative.

Thus, exploiting these terrible tragedies hundreds dying from sarin exposure and 298 dying from a plane attack is viewed as a way to put the U.S. "adversaries" Assad and Putin, respectively on the defensive. In this propaganda world, truth is lost to expediency.

Further following the Tonkin Gulf analogy, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [a highly belligerent anti-Russian resolution](#) on Dec. 4, by a 411-10 margin. It cited as one justification for sending U.S. military equipment and trainers to Ukraine the supposed "fact" that "Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a civilian airliner, was destroyed by a Russian-made missile provided by the Russian Federation to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, resulting in the loss of 298 innocent lives."

But the case of MH-17 is far from resolved, although clearly President Obama has access to information about the incident that could either help confirm or refute the congressional assertion. Yet, he continues to hide that knowledge from the American people as the United States and Russia inch toward a possible nuclear confrontation over Ukraine.

So, it may be time for Obama to embrace a "truth agenda." After all, facts have a special place in a democracy, which is dependent on an informed electorate to function, and information should be withheld from the public only in extraordinary circumstances.

However, after the early days of his administration, when Obama did release some important documents relating to the legal opinions that justified Bush's torture

policies, the President lost his way regarding respect for the people's right to know.

Obama became immersed in the gamesmanship of Official Washington where control of information is regarded as a measure of one's power. But that allowed the Tea Party and others on the Right to present themselves as "populists" who were standing up against the elites, even though many Republicans were more wedded to secrecy than Obama was.

Now, however, Obama is seeing amid the positive reaction to the release of the torture report that many Americans are hungry for facts. They, too, understand that information is power and sense that the political leader who trusts them with that power is the one most on their side.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest 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](#).

Facing Realities of Race

Many white Americans think that racism is a problem of the past and that troubling realities like mass incarceration and murder rates for black and brown men as well as inferior government services in racially diverse communities have other explanations. But recent events have shaken that certainty, as Tony Jenkins explains.

By Tony Jenkins

The U.S. justice system's non-indictment of the officers who killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner has illuminated the structural racism inherent in our culture and institutions. This racism has been with us all along, but the string of obvious injustices very publicly revealed and discussed in the wake of the deaths of two young black men in America by police officers has jump-started a movement that demands a new model of justice and wholesale social and cultural transformation.

To say a nerve has been touched is an understatement. There has been a swelling of intense pain and frustration in black America for a long time. Emotions can

be turbulent when triggering events reveal to the oppressed that their very life has been an experience of daily injustice and the heightened conversation confirms the intuition that something has been wrong all along.

In these moments talking doesn't feel like action and the urge to be civil is tempered by observations of an uncivil system. U.S. political culture models a very ill-mannered form of discourse in which politicians talk past one another making it impossible to work toward the common good.

"Speaking truth to power" accomplishes little or nothing when nobody is listening including those who are speaking. I believe that activists engaged in this movement aren't so much tired of talking; they are skeptical with just cause. However, truth-telling and dialogue still have very real promise in shaping a more preferred future and healing some of these wounds.

Developing faith in public reason and the mechanisms of dialogue takes time, but it may be the most effective way of bringing about social change and changing the fabric of race relations in America.

One of the reasons for our new found consciousness around race is that structural racism is insidious and for the most part invisible. From the end of the Civil Rights era until the present moment it has not remained elevated in our cultural narrative. That's the nature of structural racism and structural violence: they are so deeply codified into the norms of our culture and the tenets of our legal system that they seem innate.

Those in privileged positions don't even notice it as they biases of the culture have no bearing on their day-to-day lives. This is privilege blindness. This isn't the case for young black men in America who have a very real and reasonable fear of the police. This is supported by the oft cited ProPublica report that finds young black men are shot dead by police at a rate 21 times greater than that of young white men and the Pew Research Center's finding that black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men.

The NAACP has a fact sheet on racial disparities in incarceration rates that sheds light on the systemic nature of the problem. Amongst the facts they highlight is an analysis provided by Unlocking America suggesting that if "African American and Hispanics were incarcerated at the same rates of whites, today's prison and jail populations would decline by approximately 50%."

How Transformation Begins

These invisible patterns of injustice, accompanied by the very visible shooting death of Michael Brown and the choking death of Eric Garner, bring awareness to a social problem that has laid dormant or otherwise ignored by the privileged

that define the parameters of mainstream culture.

In transformative learning theory these are the catalysts or trigger events that shock and shake up our worldview and cause us to question our reality. As pioneered in theory and practice by the recently deceased Jack Mezirow, transformative learning with adults seeks to bring about changes in perspective that will guide future action. Mezirow described ten phases of transformative learning that is distilled into four more basic stages: a triggering event, critical reflection, rational discourse, and action.

The trigger event, described by Mezirow as a disorienting dilemma, is not transformative in and of itself. Trigger events can lead to many outcomes, even reinforcing past attitudes. Transformative outcomes generally depend upon the quality of opportunities to process or to engage in critical reflection on the experience. This is a critical step in questioning our assumptions about how the world is and operates.

The protest stage of a movement, generally emerging quickly after the trigger event, can provide a collective space for transitioning to critical reflection. While protests on their own rarely produce lasting change, they are a vital part of the change process. The general media perception of protests is that they serve only as a space for elevating an issue, the collective expression of shared anger, and in some instances the non-violent disruption of the status quo.

Yes protests can lead to violence; such is always the possibility when emotions run high and participants encounter the threat of a highly militarized police force. However, as David Ragland, a leader of a truth-telling campaign in Ferguson, reflects, protests play a role in building community and for collectively helping make sense of the triggering experience.

Ragland suggests, "Protest in general is important for dramatization of issues. It's important for solidarity, networking, understanding the issues and making yourself part of a public forum."

While a well-organized protest can provide a space for critical reflection this is rarely enough. Intentional opportunities for internal and community reflection on the issues need to be provided. Further, critical reflection must also have an internal and external component.

The external dimension requires observation and analysis of the systems of which we are a part. In the context of justice, it requires questioning how the rules of society were created, by whom, and for whom. The internal dimension is more challenging, demanding us to confront and challenge our assumptions about our

role in the problem and to be open to changing our self. This is a step that is difficult to reach without the support of an intentional community of practice.

Critical reflection can also build empathy and help us to consider the context of the other. The reflections of NFL player Benjamin Watson in response to Ferguson, posted and virally spread on Facebook, are a great demonstration of empathic critical reflection. I encourage you to read his reflections in their entirety.

Here is one of Watson's most poignant introspections: "I'M INTROSPECTIVE, because sometimes I want to take 'our' side without looking at the facts in situations like these. Sometimes I feel like it's us against them. Sometimes I'm just as prejudiced as people I point fingers at. And that's not right. How can I look at white skin and make assumptions but not want assumptions made about me? That's not right."

Acknowledging our biases and their origins aids in perspective taking and in framing the issue with reason. This is a humanizing process that moves us past positionality and opens us to the possibility of actually hearing one another. Getting to this state of reciprocity demonstrated in Watson's reflections is a necessary prerequisite for engaging in rational discourse, the next phase in Mezirow's architecture of transformative learning.

This is particularly relevant in the context of the political relationships that are inherent in a public forum. Parties engaged in public discourse need to agree to present and listen to reasonable arguments.

Dialogue is a particularly transformative form of discourse. Harold Saunders, President of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, describes its transformative nature: "Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others' concerns into her or his own picture, even when disagreement persists. No participant gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other's valid human claims that he or she will act differently toward the other."

It is easy to see how critical reflection and rational discourse are necessary prerequisites to engaging in this form of transformative dialogue. To be able to listen, to truly hear and learn from one another requires this preparatory reflection and thought work. This form of dialogue is very distinct from the polarizing culture of political discourse. It is oriented toward the common good; emphasizes healing and building the relationship rather than solving the issue; and encourages participants to listen and not speak past one another.

Truth-telling and Dialogue in Action

How might truth-telling and dialogue, as transformative processes for healing the wounds of structural racism appear in action? In the past few weeks there have been some public calls for the establishment of a truth-and-reconciliation commission on race in the United States. Truth-and-reconciliation commissions have had success around the world, most notably in addressing apartheid in South Africa.

A coalition of groups on the ground, led by the Center for Educational Equity and the Peace and Justice Studies Association, is establishing a “National Community Institute for Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Ferguson & Beyond.”

A truth-telling project will kick off soon to collect personal stories of people of color victimized by police violence and other forms of institutionalized racism and injustice.

Speaking truth is important. At a political level it’s a way of documenting injustices and making them public. Truth-telling is essentially a form of critically reflective storytelling, and as personal narrative it humanizes the social dilemma by rooting it in human experience.

The International Institute for Sustained Dialogue (IISD) incorporates story telling as a critical and transformative dimension of its approach. Through assessment of several of IISD’s sustained dialogue efforts, Philip Stewart and Nissa Shamsi observe how story telling can build empathy:

“In Sustained Dialogue, [as seen in examples cited in their research], when differences or conflict are seen as identity-based, participants are encouraged to relate their personal stories. Often these involve various kinds of traumatic experiences with people like others in the dialogue. These stories often invoke cognitive (I understand where you are coming from) and then emotional (I feel what you are feeling) empathy for the story teller, resulting, over time, in a broadened sense of identity capable of accepting, at one end of response, and of embracing at the other.”

With this understanding, truth-telling/story-telling can be viewed as a necessary bridging process, transforming parties in a dialogue from adversaries to fellow humans connected in a complex, interrelated web of experience that each has interpreted differently based upon relative positions of power and privilege, culture and worldview.

The dialogue that follows truth-telling can be transformational if the conditions of openness, empathy and public reason are present and agreed upon. Getting to this stage can be the hardest part. There are many modes and

practices of dialogue, each suitable to different contexts and requiring various levels of preparation, skills, and experience.

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation offers a beginners guide to dialogue work and provides details for over 180 tools and methods for public participation. Restorative justice (RJ) is a particularly relevant dialogue model for the exploration of structural racism and justice. Based on indigenous circle processes, RJ emphasizes a conception of justice that holds community wholeness and integrity at its core. If the proper conditions are met and principles adhered to, most dialogue models have the potential to be transformative.

Inching Toward Social Healing

Action, the final stage in Mezirow's transformative learning model, actualizes the transformative process. For the individual, action equates with behavioral and attitudinal change and the development of transformative capacities rooted in empathy, perspective taking, and listening skills.

At the social and political level, transformative action requires relationship building supporting cultural change; the modeling and testing of new social institutions and democratic practices; and experimentation with new processes of justice that have human dignity at their core.

From an emotional vantage, such as that experienced at early stages of the transformative process, this may seem like an inconceivable level of action and change. History, however, reminds us that fostering the long view is essential. The preferred order may not emerge entirely in our lifetime, but we may cultivate the conditions and cultural qualities for enduring change for future generations.

Healing the wounds of structural racism in a post-Ferguson American through truth-telling and transformational dialogue is a challenge we must accept. The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner have triggered an awakening of consciousness, which through intentional opportunities such as the "National Community Institute for Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Ferguson & Beyond" may lead to the critical reflection essential for perspective taking and new meaning making.

Through dialogue new ideas and perspectives on racial justice can be confirmed, in and by community, and just relationships can be built that may lead to action for sustaining change through ongoing engagement and fostering new ways of being together.

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