

The Cruel Punishment of Jeffrey Sterling

The Obama administration's cruel war on whistleblowers won another round, getting a 42-month sentence meted out to ex-CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling even as the prosecutors were glum that he wasn't given an even more draconian prison term, as Norman Solomon explains.

By Norman Solomon

Yes, I saw the glum faces of prosecutors in the courtroom a few days ago, when the judge sentenced CIA whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling to three and a half years in prison – far from the 19 to 24 years they'd suggested would be appropriate.

Yes, I get that there was a huge gap between the punishment the government sought and what it got – a gap that can be understood as a rebuke to the dominant hard-line elements at the Justice Department. And yes, it was a positive step when a May 13 editorial by the *New York Times* finally criticized the extreme prosecution of Jeffrey Sterling.

But let's be clear: The only fair sentence for Sterling would have been no sentence at all. Or, at most, something like the recent gentle wrist-slap, with no time behind bars, for former CIA director David Petraeus, who was sentenced for providing highly classified information to his journalist lover.

Jeffrey Sterling has already suffered enormously since indictment in December 2010 on numerous felony counts, including seven under the Espionage Act. *And for what?*

The government's righteous charge has been that Sterling provided information to *New York Times* reporter James Risen that went into a chapter of his 2006 book *State of War* – about the CIA's Operation Merlin, which in 2000 provided Iran with flawed design information for a nuclear weapon component.

As Marcy Wheeler and I wrote last fall: "If the government's indictment is accurate in its claim that Sterling divulged classified information, then he took a great risk to inform the public about an action that, in Risen's words, 'may have been one of the most reckless operations in the modern history of the CIA.' If the indictment is false, then Sterling is guilty of nothing more than charging the agency with racial bias and going through channels to inform the Senate Intelligence Committee of extremely dangerous CIA actions."

Whether "guilty" or "innocent" of doing the right thing, Sterling has already been through a protracted hell. And now – after he has been unemployable for more than four years while enduring a legal process that threatened to send him

to prison for decades – perhaps it takes a bit of numbness for anyone to think of the sentence he just received as anything less than an outrage.

Human realities exist far beyond sketchy media images and comfortable assumptions. Going beyond such images and assumptions is a key goal of the short documentary [“The Invisible Man: CIA Whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling,”](#) released this week. Via the film, the public can hear Sterling speak for himself – for the first time since he was indicted.

One of the goals of the government’s assault on whistleblowers is to depict them as little more than cardboard cutouts. Aiming to dispense with such two-dimensional portrayals, the director Judith Ehrlich brought a film crew to the home of Jeffrey Sterling and his wife Holly. (On behalf of ExposeFacts.org, I was there as the film’s producer.) We set out to present them as they are, as real people. You can watch the film [here](#).

Sterling’s first words in the documentary apply to powerful officials at the Central Intelligence Agency: “They already had the machine geared up against me. The moment that they felt there was a leak, every finger pointed to Jeffrey Sterling. If the word ‘retaliation’ is not thought of when anyone looks at the experience that I’ve had with the agency, then I just think you’re not looking.”

In another way, now, maybe we’re not truly looking if we figure that Sterling has received a light sentence.

Even if the jury’s guilty verdict was correct – and after sitting through the entire trial, I’d say the government didn’t come close to its burden of proof beyond reasonable doubt – an overarching truth is that the whistleblower(s) who provided journalist Risen with information about Operation Merlin rendered a major public service. People should not be punished for public service.

Imagine that you – yes, *you* – did nothing wrong. And now you’re headed to prison, for three years. Since the prosecution wanted you behind bars for a lot longer than that, should we figure you got a “light” sentence?

While the government keeps harassing, threatening, prosecuting and imprisoning whistleblowers for public service, we’re living in a society where corrosive repression continues to use fear as a hammer against truth-telling. Directly countering such repression will require rejecting any claim or tacit assumption that government prosecutors set the standard for how much punishment is too much.

Norman Solomon’s books include *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. He is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and coordinates its ExposeFacts project. Solomon is a co-founder of

RootsAction.org, which has encouraged donations to the [Sterling Family Fund](#).
Disclosure: After the guilty verdict, Solomon used his frequent-flyer miles to get plane tickets for Holly and Jeffrey Sterling so they would be able to go home to St. Louis.

Netanyahu's Narrow Right-Wing Majority

By the slimmest of margins, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu cobbled together a coalition government that is the most right-wing in Israel's history, with key posts given to extremists who have made no secret of their disdain for Palestinians, writes Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

The political horse-trading in Israel seen over the past eight weeks, which went down to the wire to form a new government, was, in the main, a struggle over who would get what position, regardless of their qualifications and irrespective of what is best for the country.

Given that the new government is composed entirely of right-wing and religious political parties, it will be impossible to resume the peace negotiations in earnest, which of necessity requires significant concessions to which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition partners, especially the Jewish Home party led by Naftali Bennett, sternly object.

The makeup of the new coalition gives the Palestinian Authority (PA) no reason to believe that Netanyahu will advance the peace process; in fact, it will further stifle any efforts to revive the negotiations. Moreover, the Obama administration has basically given up on its efforts to resume such talks as it sees no prospect for any breakthrough.

According to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh, the reality of this new government will push the Palestinians to "briskly peruse its activity on the international stage and [draft] new proposed resolutions for the UN Security Council" in order to seek recognition of the Palestinian state and sue Israel at the International Criminal Court to bar the expansion of the settlements, while charging some of Israel's political leaders with war crimes.

In addition, the new Israeli government creates a precarious environment far more conducive to renewed violence with the Palestinians, as neither the PA nor the Palestinian public have much hope left that the prospect for peace remains

viable. The Israelis should keep in mind what John F. Kennedy once articulated, that “those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”

To be sure, the new Netanyahu-led government was created to serve its own political agenda, which is far removed from Israel’s national interests. Indeed, in Israel the politician’s personal interest comes first, the interest of the political party comes second, favoritism comes third, and the country can wait.

Although Bennett’s Jewish Home lost four seats from the previous election, he used his position as king-maker (without his party, Netanyahu could not have formed the new government) to extort from Netanyahu the coveted Justice Ministry, as well as Agriculture and Education. Netanyahu conceded to all of Bennett’s demands out of sheer desperation to stay in power.

Is there anything more absurd than appointing Ayelet Shaked as Justice Minister and a member of the security cabinet? This is the same bloodthirsty Shaked who called for the annihilation of every Palestinian man, woman and child. This is a call for genocide that Netanyahu has been shamefully silent about, while willfully ignoring the message that her appointment sends to the international community.

Furthermore, Netanyahu submitted a bill to the Knesset to allow him to appoint more than 18 ministers (which is the limit mandated by law) to create more ministerial positions to satisfy several power-hungry Likud members at a cost of tens of millions of dollars to taxpayers.

Netanyahu’s hypocrisy seems to be limitless; he is now trying to lure Isaac Herzog, of the opposition Zionist Union, to join the government only to put a moderate face on the most right-wing government in Israel’s history.

Although in Israel politics and policies rest with the personal ambitions of those who are in power (or aspire to be), Herzog may prove to be the one leader who puts the nation’s interests first. He may well stick to his position and refuse to join a government that provides Netanyahu with the political shield he needs and be party to the destruction of the peace process altogether.

At no time in its history has Israel been more in need of strong, visionary and courageous leadership than today. What the Israeli public has ended up with, however, is a government that offers nothing but more insecurity, uncertainty, greater prospects for violent conflicts and a bleak future. The half-consolation is that this new government has a razor-thin majority in the Knesset and is not likely to last the full four-year term.

Fearing the loss of some public support, however, any political party that hopes

to receive a relative majority of votes shies away from making peace with the Palestinians the centerpiece of its platform and committing to reaching a peace agreement. The Israeli public, however, must face the reality of the occupation and its devastating repercussions. No sane Israeli should believe that time is in Israel's favor.

Any newly-elected leader must have a clear vision of where Israel will be 10 or 15 years down the line; only on that basis will he or she develop a strategy that would realize that vision. Certainly there are issues and developments beyond the control of any Israeli leader.

Whether or not the Palestinians are willing or capable of meeting Israel halfway, or even if they still seek Israel's destruction, Israel and only Israel has the power to determine its own destiny. Israel has the military power, logistical and technical capabilities, and financial means to take unilateral action, if it must, by systematically withdrawing from Palestinian territories.

There will be no Palestinian leader who will object to any partial territorial withdrawal and refuse to cooperate with Israel on all security matters. Even under the current circumstances, there is full security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. This level of cooperation can only increase if more territory is evacuated and settlements activity is suspended while the negotiations are in process.

Given the composition of the government, the Israeli public should wake up and realize how corrupt the Netanyahu government is and how he and his gang are undermining Israel's very existence by clinging to a dogmatic ideological/religious belief that they can have it all.

The time is overdue for the rise of new leadership that pursues peace with vigor, seeks social justice and equality, and lives up to the promise behind Israel's creation: as a proud, just and progressive Jewish state at peace with itself and with its neighbors.

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations at the Center for Global Affairs at NYU. He teaches courses on international negotiation and Middle Eastern studies. alon@alonben-meir.com. Web: www.alonben-meir.com. For media inquiries, contact Kim Hurley at 212.600.4267 or at kimberlee@alonben-meir.com.

The Bin Laden Murder Mystery

Seymour Hersh, a great journalist with superb sources and the courage to challenge conventional wisdom, has presented a counter-narrative of the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, but Hersh's story compelling in many respects, even to the New York Times has some elements that stretch credulity, says John Gardner.

By John Gardner

In my endlessly unfolding book on the history of the North American Great Lakes Region, one of the most puzzling conundrums is The Kensington Stone. The Stone is either a piece of historical evidence that undoes the standard narrative of the European-American encounter, or a hoax. It's a stone unearthed by a semi-literate Swedish-American farmer in the 1880s that, ultimately translated by medieval rune scholars, depicted an Indian massacre of a bunch of Norse adventurers in 1341, near the Red River in Minnesota.

There are a lot of reasons why the stone is a hoax, including most persuasively some anachronisms in the runic characters – futmarks, they're called; the lack of any corroborating evidence for an expedition, which would necessarily have had royal sponsorship by King Magnusson III, whose court was comparatively well-documented; and the sheer implausibility of medieval Norsemen exploring that far from ocean.

Norse adventurers were intrepid, and went great distances; possibly around Cape Horn, even to China. But they didn't, for obvious and good reasons, stray far from their long boats, their connection back home. Unlike Magellan, they didn't know how to build their own ships. Letting somebody destroy their abandoned ship would have marooned them.

My take on the implausibility of The Stone is simpler. Why would 24 Norse soldier-explorers, returning to the day's base camp and finding their comrades all dead and bleeding, inscribe and leave a monument in hard stone that they could be extremely confident no rune-reader would ever come across? It's a big job for men whose primary ambitions at the time must have been burying the dead and scrambling before the natives returned.

The contrary evidence, however, is just as compelling. Why would a semi-literate Swedish-American farmer participate in such a hoax? And, if he did, how did he do such a masterful job of it? How would he (1) create The Stone, complete with futmarks that were, after about a century, found to be accurately of the era after all; (2) put it in the roots of a tree upturned by his sons in a land-clearing project; and – most impressively – (3) hand it over to the Scandinavian

rune experts at The University of Minnesota for no money.

When The Stone, pronounced a fake, was returned to him, he showed no disappointment, but turned it face down and used it for an entrance block to the back of his house. Later, a young academic came along and evinced considerable enthusiasm for it. The farmer sold it to him for ten dollars. Neither he nor his sons ever revealed anything about some plot of deception. Nor, for that matter, did they ever take any interest in it.

So there's a story of potential historic significance that is at once incredible and irrefutable. That's my reaction to Seymour Hersh's exposé of the killing of Bin Laden.

On one hand, the official story has always been incredible. Who can actually believe that Bin Laden would be living in the Pakistani West Point, 20 minutes from a major USA-Pakistani dark site used to train the guardians of the local nuclear repository; and that nobody in the armed forces and/or ISI would know? And, further, who can believe that two Blackhawks could penetrate Pakistani air space, conduct a raid in such a location, and escape with no Pakistani interference;

...unless there were, as Hersh alleges, massive and effective collaboration with Pakistani military and/or ISI personnel?

So the official story is implausible; and, when you stop to think about it, so is the lack of a video – anywhere – of the purported burial at sea. (Why wasn't *that*, at least, shown to calm Islamic anxieties about the propriety of his burial? Pretty simple thing to pull off; and it's hard not to believe that the U.S. Navy doesn't routinely record events of that nature.) Other inconsistencies and discrepancies are also plausible, lending an air of credence to Hersh's story.

On the other hand: Let's suppose his exposé is true:

Why would senior Pakistani ISI officials possibly permit their obvious collaboration be exposed by having U.S. Navy Seals pull off such an improbable stunt that would render their purported lack of involvement implausible?

And, more: Why would they possibly concoct, as Hersh says they and the U.S. government did, a cover story that Bin Ladin was killed by an American drone strike somewhere in Waziristan? Why not simply take him to Waziristan, leave his dead body, let Americans know the coordinates, and have the real smash-and-grab take place there? It's like The Kensington Stone: Neither the hoax nor the purported story adds up.

John Gardner is at work on a history of the North American Great Lakes. He can be reached at personalgardnerjohn@gmail.com .

A Summer of War or Peace

After the final deal to restrict Iran's nuclear program is finalized expected in June a crucial series of votes will follow in Congress as Republicans and some Democrats seek to scuttle the deal, a prospect that Jamal Abdi and Trita Parsi of the National Iranian American Council warn could mean war.

By Jamal Abdi and Trita Parsi

This summer, the U.S. Senate will choose between war and peace with Iran. If the right decision is made, President Barack Obama's pending nuclear deal with Iran will be sustained and both a war and an Iranian nuclear bomb will be avoided.

If the wrong vote is cast, diplomacy will collapse and the U.S. and Iran will once again be on a path towards a disastrous war that will make the Iraq war look like the cake-walk it was promised to be. ...

This crucial vote will likely take place in July after a deal has been reached and before Congress leaves town for the summer recess. It's the result of the Senate passing the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act 98-1 last week. The House is expected to take up the legislation as soon as this week, and the President will sign it into law thereafter – assuming no “poison pill” amendments are inserted.

In essence, the bill restricts the President's authorities to waive sanctions while Congress considers whether or not to reject an agreement. A vote of disapproval would permanently revoke the President's authorities to offer substantial sanctions relief and thus block the U.S. from implementing the deal.

If Congressional hawks were to succeed in blocking a deal that our negotiators had agreed to, it would not just set a devastating precedent for any future U.S. diplomatic efforts, it would unravel nuclear constraints and international sanctions on Iran and put war on the front burner.

A vote of disapproval would require 60 votes to pass the Senate and a simple majority to pass the House. If supporters of peace lose this vote, the President will have no choice but to veto the resolution. The other side will then seek to override Obama's veto – and for that they will need two-thirds of both the Senate and House, i.e. 67 Senators and 290 Representatives. *That's the vote that*

the American people cannot afford to lose.

At the moment, it appears that supporters of a deal have sufficient numbers to uphold a veto and protect the deal. At the same time that the Senate passed the review bill, 151 Democrats in the House of Representatives sent a letter to the President commending the framework nuclear agreement and urging that our diplomats seal a final deal.

Given that the letter was signed by more than a third of the House, if the same number of representatives refuse to reject a final deal, a Presidential veto would hold. That letter, led by Reps. Jan Schakowsky, D-Illinois, Lloyd Doggett, D-Texas, and David Price, D-North Carolina, will undoubtedly boost perceptions in Iran that President Obama can uphold America's end of the nuclear bargain.

However, nothing is certain – especially for a showdown vote that powerful interest groups like AIPAC have been preparing for over a decade, according to a former lobbyist from the organization. Furthermore, if the President is only able to protect a deal by veto, it could encourage opponents to cry foul and pursue additional efforts to block and undermine the deal.

Unless the attempt to kill an agreement is soundly defeated this summer, there could be further efforts to re-litigate the deal in Congress, limit the President from implementing it, and pass new sanctions to kill the agreement.

The endgame is now fast approaching. Iran and the United States will likely convert their agreement in principle into a historic deal this summer. Then, Congress will take a critical vote to determine whether the U.S. continues down the path toward peace or marches down the road to war.

If accepted, it can be the beginning of the end of more than three and a half decades of U.S.-Iran enmity. In the weeks ahead, it is imperative that the American people make sure that Congress ends up on the right side of history.

Jamal Abdi is Policy Director, National Iranian American Council. Trita Parsi is NIAC president. [This [article](#) was originally published at HuffingtonPost.com.]

The Saudis' Hurt Feelings

Republicans are slamming President Obama for strained relations with the Saudi royals and other Persian Gulf sheiks, but U.S. relations with these oil-rich monarchs have been tense before and given their support for Sunni terrorism should be tenser still, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

The biggest news about President Barack Obama's summit this week with Gulf leaders has been who's not coming. Pundits and critics alike have described Saudi King Salman's no-show as a diplomatic slap in the face at the Obama administration.

Various commentators speculated that the king was displeased with President Obama's negotiations to curb Iran's nuclear capabilities, his failures to intervene decisively in Syria, and his call for domestic reforms in the Arab world. Somehow, left unexplained, those concerns did not stop Salman from greeting Obama warmly in January.

Addressing the king's decision to send his Crown Prince instead, Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, told MSNBC, "It's an indicator of the lack of confidence that the Saudis and others have. . . . This administration feels that they can somehow make agreements with Iran throughout the region when these countries view Iran as a direct threat."

Back in March, McCain similarly read into Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen a signal that "the countries in the region no longer have confidence or are willing to work with the United States of America." (Of course, conservatives have also taken President Obama to task for showing *too much* respect for Saudi Arabia. After his polite bow to then-Saudi King Abdullah at the Group of 20 summit in 2009, the Washington Times denounced Obama's "shocking display of fealty to a foreign potentate.")

Almost unnoticed amid all this speculation about the summit was a statement by Saudi Arabia's foreign minister: "The idea that this is a snub because the king did not attend is really off base. The fact that our crown prince and deputy crown prince attend an event outside of Saudi Arabia at the same time is unprecedented." Maybe the 79-year-old king, who has serious health problems, simply didn't want to fly more than 10,000 kilometers for a second meeting with Obama in five months.

Snub or not, the suggestion that a U.S. president should alter national policies to please a foreign king is bizarre, particularly coming from politicians who wear American flags on their lapels and evoke American exceptionalism at every opportunity.

Just as dubious is the suggestion that President Obama has irresponsibly let U.S.-Saudi relations sour after years of close friendship. The notion that "For over 40 years, the United States has walked hand-in-hand with Saudi Arabia through the thicket of Middle Eastern crises," in the words of two Brookings

scholars, is simply nonsense.

The two countries have repeatedly clashed in the years since Saudi-led oil embargoes caused American drivers to curse OPEC. Those disputes have reflected deep and longstanding differences over perceptions of national security, human rights and other interests. President Obama did not create those differences.

Consider the George W. Bush years. True, the Bush administration did many favors for Saudi Arabia after the 9/11 attacks, including classifying 27 pages of a congressional report that, according to one U.S. official, described “direct involvement of senior [Saudi] government officials in a coordinated and methodical way directly to the hijackers.” In many ways, however, relations between Washington and Riyadh suffered worse strains under Bush than they do today.

A major point of contention, then more than today, was the fate of the Palestinians. Abdullah was reportedly shocked by President Bush’s unstinting support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and instructed his ambassador to tell top White House officials to expect a freezing of relations: “Starting from today . . . you [Americans] go your way, I [Saudi Arabia] go my way. From now on, we will protect our national interests, regardless of where America’s interests lie in the region.”

Abdullah also broke with Bush early by opposing an invasion of Iraq, and, ironically, by supporting better relations with Iran. “Saudi Arabia has achieved a new detente with its traditionally hostile neighbor, Iran, which the United States still considers a hostile power,” noted Washington Post reporters David Ottaway and Robert Kaiser in early 2002.

President Bush rebuffed Saudi concerns and invaded Iraq a year later. Within a month, the Saudis forced Washington to agree to withdraw virtually all U.S. troops from their country, a dramatic sign of Riyadh’s displeasure.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, clueless U.S. occupation forces put pro-Iranian Shiites in charge of the new regime. Its subsequent repression of many Sunnis led to an uproar among Saudi Arabia’s conservative clerics, who formed a major part of King Abdullah’s power base.

Reported the London Times, “Saudi religious scholars have caused consternation in Iraq and Iran by issuing fatwas calling for the destruction of the great Shi’ite shrines in Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, some of which have already been bombed. And while prominent members of the ruling al-Saud dynasty regularly express their abhorrence of terrorism, leading figures within the kingdom who advocate extremism are tolerated.”

Saudis soon began funding the Sunni uprising in Iraq, with deadly results for U.S. troops. Associated Press reported in 2006 that Saudi citizens were “giving millions of dollars to Sunni insurgents in Iraq and much of the money is used to buy weapons, including shoulder fired anti-aircraft missiles.” A study by West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center determined that more than 40 percent of the foreign al-Qaeda insurgents battling U.S. forces in Iraq were Saudi nationals.

U.S.-Saudi relations continued to worsen in early 2007, as King Abdullah publicly blasted America’s “illegitimate foreign occupation” of Iraq. According to the Washington Post that March, “The king is reported to have canceled a state dinner that Bush had planned to hold in his honor next month – though officially the White House says no dinner was ever scheduled.”

The split only widened over time. In July 2007, Helene Cooper of The New York Times reported that “Bush administration officials are voicing increasing anger at what they say has been Saudi Arabia’s counterproductive role in the Iraq war.”

Most disturbingly, the administration learned that the Saudis were urging other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to give more financial support to the rebellious Sunnis in Iraq. Cooper added, “Senior Bush administration officials said the American concerns would be raised next week when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates make a rare joint visit to Jidda, Saudi Arabia.”

Summing up the state of U.S.-Saudi relations, Steve Clemons, director of the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation, said the Bush administration “thinks the Saudis are no longer behaving the role of the good vassal,” while the Saudis “see weakness, they see a void, and they’re going to fill the void and call their own shots.”

So they did, and today’s bloodthirsty Islamic State, born out of the remnants of Saddam’s army and the Saudi-funded Sunni insurgency, is the result. In the words of veteran Middle East reporter Patrick Cockburn, “Saudi Arabia has created a Frankenstein’s monster over which it is rapidly losing control.”

In view of this history, Saudi Arabia’s alleged snub of the Obama administration is small beer indeed. Memories in Washington must be short indeed if anyone really believes the two countries had smooth relations in times past. On the contrary, many of America’s most difficult foreign policy challenges today reflect the deadly consequences of our profound disagreements with Saudi Arabia.

The real question, then, isn’t what the White House has done lately to displease Riyadh, or what President Obama must do to regain the King’s favor. It’s why the

United States, with its unmatched power, remains so reluctant to publicly challenge Saudi policies, ranging from the funding of terrorists to the mass bombing of civilians in Yemen, that jeopardize regional peace and U.S. security.

Jonathan Marshall is an independent researcher living in San Anselmo, California. Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "Unjust Aftermath: Post-Noriega Panama"; "The Earlier 9/11 Acts of Terror"; "America's Earlier Embrace of Torture"; "Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions"; "Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran"; and "Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor."
