

Questioning the Conventional Wisdom of Russian Spy's Poisoning

The recent poisoning of a Russian spy has started a tit-for-tat of expelling diplomats between the US and Russia, an escalation of tensions that deserves serious questioning, explained former ambassador Craig Murray in an interview with Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico.

By Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico

Former UK Ambassador Craig Murray found out very quickly what happens when one contradicts the conventional wisdom regarding the recent poisoning of former Russian spy and double agent Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia, in the English city of Salisbury on March 4.

Ambassador Murray, who in the following interview raises compelling questions about who may be responsible for the attacks, other than the Russians, has been the butt of a full-scale cyber attack on his website over many days.

Meanwhile, the usual suspects in the US and Western corporate press continue to fan the flames of a new cold war with Russia. Indeed, Russia will expel 60 US diplomats and has ordered the shuttering of the US consulate in St. Petersburg, according to an announcement by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Lavrov, who made the announcement in Moscow on Thursday, March 29, summoned US ambassador Jon Huntsman to the Russian Foreign Ministry to confirm the action.

Dennis J. Bernstein and Randy Credico interviewed Ambassador Murray on March 26th, 2018.

Dennis Bernstein: President Trump ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian officials from the United States and the closing of the Russian consulate in Seattle. The move follows the alleged poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury on March 4. Joining us is someone who knows a great deal about the matter and has come under fire for taking an oppositional position, former UK ambassador, author and activist, Craig Murray. Mr. Murray, everyone says the Russians did it, no doubt about it, but you disagree.

Craig Murray: I'm not saying the Russians didn't do it, I am saying there are other possibilities. We are not supposed to assign responsibility for crime in this way, saying there is a bad guy in the neighborhood and therefore it must be him. So far, there has been no real evidence at all that it was the Russian state that did it.

I find it remarkable that the very day this happened the British government was announcing that it was the Russian state that was behind this. They couldn't possibly have had time to analyze any of the evidence. It is as though this is being used as a trigger to put prearranged anti-Russian measures into place and to "up" the Cold War rhetoric. You can't help get the feeling that they are rather pleased this has happened and were even expecting it to happen.

DB: This is coming out of the European Union today: "The European Union strongly condemns the attack that took place against Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, England on March 4 that also left a police officer seriously ill.

The lives of many citizens were threatened by this reckless and illegal action. The European Union takes extremely seriously the UK government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible."

CM: This phrase "highly likely" admits that they don't have the evidence to back this up. It's a speculation.

DB: They say that the poison is consistent with what the Russians have used in the past.

CM: The claim is that this is one of a group of nerve agents known as a Novichok. The Novichok program was being run in the 1980's by the Soviets. The idea was to develop chemical weapons which could be quickly put together from commercial pesticides and fertilizers. They came up with a number of theoretical designs for such weapons.

Until now, the official position of the British government and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was that there was doubt as to whether they actually produced any of these. As of now, they haven't been put on the banned list, precisely because the scientific community has doubted their existence. So the British government's ability on day-one to identify this was quite remarkable.

Novichok is not a particular weapon but a class of weapon. Russia is by no means the only country capable of producing this kind of weapon. In 2016, the Iranians succeeded in producing several Novichok weapons and they reported their results to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Their motivation was that they were concerned that they themselves might be attacked by chemical weapons, possibly from Israel. There are at least a couple dozen countries who have the technical capability to create this type of nerve agent.

In order to take blood samples from the Skripals, who were both in a coma, doctors had to get court approval. And in giving evidence to the High Court, two scientists stated that the Skripals had been poisoned by a Novichok nerve

agent or a “closely related agent.” It looks to many people like this may just be a silly amateur mixture of different insecticides.

Other questions arise. The British government has been telling us that this is ten times more powerful than a standard nerve agent. Thankfully, so far, nobody has been killed. Why isn't this deadly agent more effective? Why is it that the doctor who administered first aid to Yulia Skripal was completely unaffected, even though he had extensive physical contact with her?

DB: But some people will say that the only country that would want to silence a former Russian spy would be Russia.

CM: Our foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, has gone on record as saying that the Russians have been secretly stockpiling this chemical weapon for a decade and have had a secret program of assassination techniques. But if you were Vladimir Putin and you had this secret nerve agent, why would you blow your cover by using it on this retired spy who you released from prison years ago? The whole scenario is utterly implausible.

Why would Russia wish to ruin its international reputation with this entirely gratuitous violence against an old spy? Skripal was exchanged as part of a spy swap. If people are going to swap spies and then kill them, there won't be any spy swaps in the future. A KGB person like Putin is the last person who is going to destroy the system of spy swaps.

Randy Credico: Mr. Murray, there has been a concerted effort to defame you and undermine your credibility. What effect has this had on you and your family?

CM: It has been really quite unpleasant. The mainstream media has permitted no doubt at all. All of them are just printing government propaganda. I went on social media to post my doubts about this story being too convenient and too easy. My first piece on this, “Russian to Judgment,” had millions of viewers. That brought upon me the wrath of the establishment. I became the recipient of hundreds of pieces of Twitter abuse in which I was called a nut and a conspiracy theorist.

RC: Who stands to benefit from this attack?

CM: It adds fuel to the new Cold War. The armaments industry are the primary people who benefit. This kind of thing is very good for defense budgets. It is very good news for the spies and security services. Here in the UK the industry employs over 100,000 people. In a country of 60 million, this is a strong and very highly paid interest group. All of these people are seeing a major ramping up of their budgets. When the people feeding-in the intelligence are the same people who are benefiting financially from that story, then you have to worry.

And particularly for right-wing politicians this is a cheap way of getting support.

DB: Mr. Murray, I don't think that we can separate this from the so-called "Russiagate frenzy." Can you state unequivocally that there were substantial leaks from the DNC, as opposed to hacks?

CM: I can promise you that what came out of the DNC were leaks. They were from somebody who legally had access to the information. It was not an outside hack, not by the Russians, not by anyone.

DB: What if you were subpoenaed before Congress, would you take the fifth or would you tell that story?

CM: I've actually been in touch with them, saying I know what happened here and could perhaps save them a lot of time. But they haven't replied and I don't expect them to. If called, I would turn up and I would gladly tell them what I have told you: That I know for sure that this wasn't a Russian hack but a leak. I would not give any further details because that might compromise others.

The other thing about the Skripal case, of course, is the connection to Orbis Intelligence and Christopher Steele and Pablo Miller. The person who wrote the dossier on Donald Trump for the Clinton campaign was Christopher Steele of Orbis Intelligence. He was in MI6 in the Russian Embassy in Moscow at the time when Skripal was a key double agent. The guy who was responsible for handling Skripal on a day-to-day basis was Pablo Miller. Pablo Miller also worked for Orbis Intelligence. The MI6 has never had the close-up access to Putin that that dossier claims to have. Plainly, a great deal of it is fabrication.

I strongly suspect that Mr. Skripal was involved in the production of that dossier about Donald Trump. I admit that this is circumstantial, but that dossier was produced while Pablo Miller was working for Orbis Intelligence.

Like Mr. Steele, Pablo Miller was a former MI6 agent in Russia. And Pablo Miller was also living in Salisbury, within a short distance of Skripal. If you are going to produce a dossier which invents a lot of stuff about Donald Trump and his connections to the circle around Putin, you need a Russian source who can give you names and lend the dossier a degree of authenticity. I believe that that kind of detail is what Skripal provided to the Steele dossier.

This would seem a much more plausible lead in investigating this case. The idea that you kill someone for something that happened twelve years ago is frankly much less compelling than something that is happening now. Of course, there is a possibility that Skripal revealed something in the dossier which the Russians didn't want revealed, that they decided he was still a danger and should be

eliminated.

The other possibility is that Mr. Skripal was a double agent who worked for money. He sold to the British names of Russian officers and agents serving abroad. So he is not the most principled of people. And once you've become a double agent, it's not hard to become a triple agent. And if Skripal knows that this dossier is full of lies, he might come out and confess to fabricating all of this in hopes of making financial gain.

DB: You feel that you are under attack for taking this position?

CM: Yes, and it is not just the nasty tweets and emails. My website has been under attack, at a rate of millions of hits per minute.

RC: Have any of the mainstream media in Britain reported anything other than the government line?

CM: Strangely enough, after I posted it, the BBC reported the fact that Skripal's handler in Russia was now working for Steele and that Skripal and Pablo Miller lived in the same town. But the BBC contacted Orbis and they said that wasn't true. That was the end of that.

RC: You have been attacked by foreign minister Boris Johnson.

CM: Interestingly, when talking to journalists, Boris Johnson and others have stated clearly that this poison must have come from Russia, but in their formal statements to Parliament and the United Nations Security Council, they write that it was "a weapon of a type developed by Russia." That is very different from saying that it is a Russian weapon.

RC: Are you concerned that this might be leading to nuclear war?

CM: I think that the Russians have the sense not to overreact. All they have done so far is to match what is done rather than up the ante. So when we expelled 23 diplomats, the Russians expelled 23 diplomats. And it looks like this sort of tit for tat will result from the other expulsions.

But I strongly believe that this is happening because there are a lot of people—in the military, in the weapons industry—who miss the Cold War. They are seeing a threat to their budgets. We are entering a period where there is not going to be a lot of international cooperation and we are going to see a lot of militaristic posturing. Of course, there is always the prospect that something can go wrong.

DB: What do you think of John Bolton being appointed National Security Advisor? This is someone who has said that he would be happy if North Korea disappeared.

He doesn't seem to be someone who would support the ongoing arrangement with Iran.

CM: I think it is very scary. Bolton obviously is the hawk of hawks and he bore a huge responsibility for the Iraq War. It is a very strange and irresponsible appointment. A couple days ago, I was reviewing Trump's term in office and I realized that one good thing is that he hasn't initiated a war till now. I'm not convinced Hillary wouldn't have gotten us into an armed conflict by this point. But then, now Trump appoints John Bolton, which leads me to suspect that war might not be far off.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
