

# When the US Invaded Russia

Amidst the backdrop of increased U.S.-Russian tensions and even talk of war, long forgotten is the time the U.S. actually invaded, explains Jeff Klein.

**By Jeff Klein**

*Special to Consortium News*



Amid the bi-partisan mania over the Trump-Putin Summit in Helsinki, fevered, anti-Russian rhetoric in the United States makes conceivable what until recently seemed inconceivable: that dangerous tensions between Russia and the U.S. could lead to military conflict. It has happened before.

In September 1959, during a brief thaw in the Cold War, Nikita Khrushchev made his famous visit to the United States. In Los Angeles, the Soviet leader was invited to a luncheon at Twentieth Century-Fox Studios in Hollywood and during a long and rambling exchange he had this to say:

“Your armed intervention in Russia was the most unpleasant thing that ever occurred in the relations between our two countries, for we had never waged war against America until then; our troops have never set foot on American soil, while your troops have set foot on Soviet soil.”

These remarks by Khrushchev were little noted in the U.S. press at the time – especially compared to his widely-reported complaint about not being allowed to visit Disneyland. But even if Americans read about Khrushchev’s comments it is likely that few of them would have had any idea what the Soviet Premier was talking about.

But Soviet – and now Russian – memory is much more persistent. The wounds of foreign invasions, from Napoleon to the Nazis, were still fresh in Russian public consciousness in 1959 – and even in Russia today – in a way most Americans could not imagine. Among other things, that is why the Russians reacted with so much outrage to the expansion of NATO to its borders in the 1990’s, despite U.S. promises not to do so during the negotiations for the unification of Germany.

The U.S. invasion Khrushchev referred to took place a century ago, after the October Revolution and during the civil war that followed between Bolshevik and anti-Bolshevik forces, the Red Army against White Russians. While the Germans and Austrians were occupying parts of Western and Southern Russia, the Allies launched their own armed interventions in the Russian North and the Far East in

1918.

The Allied nations, including Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the U.S., cited various justifications for sending their troops into Russia: to “rescue” the Czech Legion that had been recruited to fight against the Central Powers; to protect allied military stores and keep them out of the hands of the Germans; to preserve communications via the Trans-Siberian Railway; and possibly to re-open an Eastern Front in the war. But the real goal – rarely admitted publicly at first–was to reverse the events of October and install a more “acceptable” Russian government. As Winston Churchill later put it, the aim was to “strangle the Bolshevik infant in its cradle.”

In addition to Siberia, the U.S. joined British and French troops to invade at Archangel, in the north of Russia, on September 4, 1918.



In July 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had personally typed the “Aide Memoire” on American military action in Russia that was hand-delivered by the Secretary of War at the beginning of August to General William Graves, the designated commander of the U.S. troops en route to Siberia. Wilson’s document was curiously ambivalent and contradictory. It began by asserting that foreign interference in Russia’s internal affairs was “impermissible,” and eventually concluded that the dispatch of U.S. troops to Siberia was not to be considered a “military intervention.”

### **The Non-Intervention Intervention**

But the American intervention began when U.S. soldiers disembarked at

Vladivostok on August 16, 1918. These were the 27th and 31st infantry regiments, regular army units that had been involved in pacification of U.S.-occupied Philippines. Eventually there were to be about 8,000 U.S. troops in Siberia.

Judging from his memoirs, General Graves was puzzled by how different things looked on the ground in Siberia than his vague instructions seemed to suggest. For one thing, the Czechs hardly needed rescuing. By the Summer of 1918 they had easily taken control of Vladivostok and a thousand miles of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

For the next year and a half, General Graves, by all appearances an honest and non-political professional soldier, struggled to understand and carry out his mandate in Siberia. He seems to have driven the U.S. State Department and his fellow allied commanders to distraction by clinging stubbornly to a literal interpretation of Wilson's *Aide Memoire* as mandating strict non-intervention in Russian affairs. The general seemed incapable of noticing the broad "wink" with which everyone else understood these instructions.

Graves strove to maintain "neutrality" among the various Russian factions battling for control of Siberia and to focus on his mission to guard the railroad and protect Allied military supplies. But he was also indiscrete enough to report "White" atrocities as well as "Red" ones, to express his distaste for the various Japanese-supported warlords in Eastern Siberia and, later, to have a skeptical (and correct) assessment of the low popular support, incompetence and poor prospects of the anti-Bolshevik forces.

For his troubles, it was hinted, absurdly, that the General may have been a Bolshevik sympathizer, a charge that in part motivated the publication of his memoirs.

In the face of hectoring by State Department officials and other Allied commanders to be more active in support of the "right" people in Russia, Graves repeatedly inquired of his superiors in Washington whether his original instructions of political non-intervention were to be modified. No one, of course, was willing to put any different policy in writing and the general struggled to maintain his "neutrality."

By the Spring and Summer of 1919, however, the U.S. had joined the other Allies in providing overt military support to "Supreme Leader," Admiral Alexander Kolchak's White regime, based in the Western Siberian city of Omsk. At first this was carried out discretely through the Red Cross, but later it took the form of direct shipments of military supplies, including boxcars of rifles whose safe delivery Graves was directed to oversee.

## Domestic Intervention

But the prospects for a victory by Kolchak soon faded and the Whites in Siberia revealed themselves to be a lost cause. The decision to remove the US troops was made late in 1919 and General Graves, with the last of his staff, departed from Vladivostok on 1 April 1920.

In all, 174 American soldiers were killed during the invasion of Russia. (The Soviet Union was formed on Dec. 28, 1922.)

Interestingly, pressure to withdraw the U.S. troops from Siberia came from fed-up soldiers and home-front opinion opposing the continued deployment of military units abroad long after the conclusion of the war in Europe. It is notable that during a Congressional debate on the Russian intervention one Senator read excerpts from the letters of American soldiers to support the case for bringing them home.

Then, as in later U.S. foreign interventions, the soldiers had a low opinion of the people they were supposed to be liberating. One of them wrote home on July 28, 1919 from his base in Verkhne-Udinsk, now Ulan Ude, on the southern shore of Lake Baikal:

“Life in Siberia may sound exciting but it isn’t. It’s all right for a few months but I’m ready to go home now. . . You want to know how I like the people? Well I’ll tell you, one couldn’t hardly call them people but they are some kind of animal. They are the most ignorant things I ever saw. Oh, I can get a word of their lingo if they aren’t sore when they talk. They sure do rattle off their lingo when they get sore. These people have only one ambition and that is to drink more vodka than the next person.”

Outside of the State Department and some elite opinion, U.S. intervention had never been very popular. By now it was widely understood, as one historian noted, that there may have been “many reasons why the doughboys came to Russia, but there was only one reason why they stayed: to intervene in a civil war to see who would govern the country.”

After 1920, the memory of “America’s Siberian Adventure,” as General Graves termed it, soon faded into obscurity. The American public is notorious for its historic amnesia, even as similar military adventures were repeated again and again over the years since then.

It seems that we may need to be reminded every generation or so of the perils of foreign military intervention and the simple truth asserted by General Graves:

“. . .there isn’t a nation on earth that would not resent foreigners sending

troops into their country, for the purpose of putting this or that faction in charge. The result is not only an injury to the prestige of the foreigner intervening, but is a great handicap to the faction the foreigner is trying to assist.”

General Graves was writing about Siberia in 1918, but it could just as well have been Vietnam in the 1960s or Afghanistan and Syria now. Or a warning today about 30,000 NATO troops on Russia’s borders.

**Jeff Klein is a retired local trade union president who writes frequently about international affairs and especially the Middle East. The postcard and soldier’s letter are in his personal collection.**

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## USS Liberty Survivor Named US Delegate on Gaza Flotilla

A survivor of the Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty* that killed 34 U.S. sailors has joined the Freedom Flotilla headed towards Gaza, as Joe Lauria reports.

**By Joe Lauria**

*Special to Consortium News*

Joe Meadors, a survivor of the 1967 Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty*, has joined the 2018 Gaza Freedom Flotilla as the delegate from the United States. He will board the *Al Awda* (The Return), which left Corisca Sunday night for the final 1,000 miles to Gaza. *Al Awda* is one of four boats on the 75-day [voyage](#) from Scandinavia.

Meadors was a signalman on the bridge of the USS *Liberty*, a surveillance vessel operating in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea near Gaza during the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli war.

Israeli war planes and torpedo boats [attacked](#) the vessel, killing 34 U.S. sailors and wounding 174 crew members.

A 2003 U.S. commission led by Admiral Thomas Moorer [found](#):

“1. That on June 8, 1967, after eight hours of aerial surveillance, Israel

launched a two-hour air and naval attack against USS *Liberty*, the world's most sophisticated intelligence ship, inflicting 34 dead and 173 wounded American servicemen (a casualty rate of seventy percent, in a crew of 294);

2. That the Israeli air attack lasted approximately 25 minutes, during which time unmarked Israeli aircraft dropped napalm canisters on USS *Liberty's* bridge, and fired 30mm cannons and rockets into our ship, causing 821 holes, more than 100 of which were rocket-size; survivors estimate 30 or more sorties were flown over the ship by a minimum of 12 attacking Israeli planes which were jamming all five American emergency radio channels;

3. That the torpedo boat attack involved not only the firing of torpedoes, but the machine-gunning of *Liberty's* firefighters and stretcher-bearers as they struggled to save their ship and crew; the Israeli torpedo boats later returned to machine-gun at close range three of the *Liberty's* life rafts that had been lowered into the water by survivors to rescue the most seriously wounded;

4. That there is compelling evidence that Israel's attack was a deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill her entire crew; evidence of such intent is supported by statements from Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Undersecretary of State George Ball, former CIA director Richard Helms, former NSA directors Lieutenant General William Odom, USA (Ret.), Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, USN (Ret.), and Marshal Carter; former NSA deputy directors Oliver Kirby and Major General John Morrison, USAF (Ret.); and former Ambassador Dwight Porter, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon in 1967;

5. That in attacking USS *Liberty*, Israel committed acts of murder against American servicemen and an act of war against the United States;

6. That fearing conflict with Israel, the White House deliberately prevented the U.S. Navy from coming to the defense of USS *Liberty* by recalling Sixth Fleet military rescue support while the ship was under attack; evidence of the recall of rescue aircraft is supported by statements of Captain Joe Tully, Commanding Officer of the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga*, and Rear Admiral Lawrence Geis, the Sixth Fleet carrier division commander, at the time of the attack; never before in American naval history has a rescue mission been cancelled when an American ship was under attack... ."

Dean Rusk, U.S. Secretary of State at the time of the incident, wrote: "I was never satisfied with the Israeli explanation. Their sustained attack to disable and sink *Liberty* precluded an assault by accident or some trigger-happy local commander. Through diplomatic channels we refused to accept their explanations.

I didn't believe them then, and I don't believe them to this day. The attack was outrageous."

Meadors and Seaman Francis Brown, who was later killed in the attack, hauled up a second American flag from the bridge after the first was shot down early in the air assault. Meadors remained on the bridge throughout the 25-minute attack and was one of several eyewitnesses to the Israeli machine-gunning of the ship's life rafts.



Meadors has described the Israeli attack in detail on the [USS Liberty Veteran's Association website](#):

"I watched some jets pass us, then turn left after they passed our ship, then they started strafing us. The attack lasted 90 minutes, during which we got a message off to the Sixth Fleet asking for assistance. We learned later that Joe Tully, commanding officer of the *USS Saratoga*, launched aircraft within minutes of the attack, but he told us later they were recalled before they reached the horizon. We found this out 20 years after the attack.

“The most frustrating thing has been a lack of reaction from the U.S. government. On June 8, 2005, we filed a war crimes report, and they are required to investigate these allegations. They’ve created reports about our mission, but they never did conduct an actual investigation of the attack itself.

“It was an illegal attack. We were on the high seas conducting legal activities. They admitted that they closed the area for military purposes but we tried to find out the boundaries of that area and they wouldn’t tell us.

“The Israelis break international laws with impunity and the U.S. government is not going to hold them accountable, nobody is. There is no doubt that the Israelis were committing piracy on the high seas against the 2010 Gaza Freedom Flotilla and used deadly force against unarmed humanitarians.”

Meadors was aboard the *Sfedoni* in the 2010 Gaza Freedom Flotilla. He was in Greece for the 2011 and 2015 Freedom Flotillas. Born in Corpus Christi, Texas, Meadors is a past president of USS *Liberty* Veterans Association, founded in 1982.

The Flotillas aim to bring attention to the illegal blockade imposed by Israel on Gaza since 2007.

**Joe Lauria is editor-in-chief of Consortium News and a former correspondent for the *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Sunday Times* of London and numerous other publications. He can be reached at [joelauria@consortiumnews.com](mailto:joelauria@consortiumnews.com) and on Twitter [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe) .**

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## The Berkeley Tribute to Robert Parry

A tribute to Robert Parry, the founder and editor of Consortium News, was held in Berkeley last month. Here is the video of the event and excerpts from the speakers who celebrated Bob’s life.

**By Rick Sterling**

**Event Photos by Bill Hackwell**

A celebration and salute to the investigative journalist and publisher Robert



Parry took place on Saturday, May 19 in Berkeley California.

You can watch a video shot by Raj Sahei of the entire event [here](#).

[Robert Parry](#) was born in 1949 and died of pancreatic cancer in January 2018. From 1974 until the early 1990's he worked as investigative journalist for Associated Press, Newsweek magazine and then PBS Frontline. During that time, he played a key role breaking stories on the illegal funding of the Nicaraguan Contras, CIA collusion with drug dealers, and Ronald Reagan election team negotiating with Iran to delaying the release of American hostages until after the 1980 election. Frustrated with the increasing difficulty of getting his research and findings published, Parry founded the investigative journal Consortium News, which continues to today.

Although Bob never became a household name, many readers will recall News stories he played a key role in bringing to public consciousness. He uncovered the "Iran-Contra scandal" where the US secretly sold weapons to Iran via Israel with profits supporting mercenary "Contras" attacking the Nicaraguan government. He uncovered Lt. Col. Oliver North secretly working at the Reagan White House to supervise support for the Contras. He exposed CIA collusion with criminals sending weapons to the Contras and receiving tons of cocaine on return flights from Colombia and Central America.

In 1988, Parry co-authored an [article](#) that documented CIA and State Department activities to misinform the public to promote the desired public policy.

Next, Parry worked with PBS Frontline to uncover the "October Surprise". That story involved Ronald Reagan's election team secretly delaying the release of American hostages held in Iran. These stories appeared in mainstream media but were ultimately swept under the carpet.

### **The CIA-Contra-Cocaine Connection**

The story about CIA complicity with drug-dealers was especially explosive because of the impact of drugs in poor communities across the US. There was an epidemic of cheap crack cocaine flooding poor and especially African American communities.

Robert Parry originally reported the CIA-Contra-Cocaine story in the mid 1980's. Ten years later, in 1996, investigative journalist Gary Webb uncovered what happened after the cocaine arrived in the U.S.: crack cocaine had flooded poor and African American communities, especially in California. The negative consequences were huge. The San Jose Mercury News published Gary Webb's investigation as an explosive front page 3-day series titled ["Dark Alliance"](#).

The story was initially ignored by the foreign policy and media establishment. But after two months of rising attention and outrage, especially in the African American community, a counter-attack was launched in the NY Times, Washington Post and LA Times. The LA Times alone assigned 17 reporters to what one reporter dubbed the "Get Gary Webb team". They picked apart the story, picked apart Gary Webb's personal life and distorted what he wrote. The attack succeeded. The Mercury News editors published a partial "correction" which was taken to apply to the whole story. Gary Webb was demoted and then "let go". His reputation was destroyed and he ultimately committed suicide. An 2014 movie titled "Kill the Messenger", made in consultation with Gary's family and Bob Parry, depicts the events.

When the establishment media was going after Gary Webb, with the quiet encouragement of the CIA, many journalists were silent or joined the pack attack. Later, when an internal CIA investigation confirmed the veracity of Webb's research and writing, they mostly ignored it. Robert Parry was one of the few national journalists to defend Gary Webb and his reporting from beginning to end.

At the Berkeley tribute, journalist Dennis Bernstein recalled being with Bob Parry and Gary Webb: "I remember the power that those guys had with audiences. It was easy to understand why people would be afraid of them. They were truth tellers."

### **The Birth of Consortium News**

As other western journalists were being pressured into compliance or driven out of the profession, Robert Parry chose a different path. Together with his oldest son Sam Parry, he launched the first investigative magazine on the internet: Consortium News. In his last article Bob Parry explained, "The point of Consortium News, which I founded in 1995, was to use the new medium of the modern internet to allow the old principles of journalism to have a new home, i.e., a place to pursue important facts and giving everyone a fair shake."

For the past 23 years, Consortium News has published consistently high quality research and analysis on international issues. To give just a few examples: In March 1999, Bob Parry surveyed the dangers of the Russian economic collapse cheered on by Western neoconservatives while Mark Ames exposed the reality of Russian economic gangsters. In February 2003, Consortium News published the First Memorandum to the President by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) after Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council. VIPS presciently warned of "catastrophic" consequences if the US attacked Iraq.

In 2005, Bob Parry exposed the bias and deception behind the rush to blame the

Syrian government after Lebanese leader Rafik Hariri was assassinated. In April 2011, as the US was pushing to overthrow Qaddafi in Libya, Parry drew parallels to the disastrous consequences of overthrowing the socialist leaning Afghan government three decades earlier.

Beginning in 2014, Bob Parry exposed the dubious accusations regarding the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH-17 in Ukraine. Over the past two years, Bob Parry wrote and edited dozens of articles exposing the bias and lack of evidence behind "Russia-gate". A few examples can be seen here.

### **Commitment to Facts and Objectivity**

Sam and several other speakers at the Berkeley Tribute noted that Robert Parry was not ideological. He believed in following the leads and facts wherever they led. The new editor of Consortium News, Joe Lauria, said, "Bob was not a lefty radical... He didn't start out from an ideological position or have a preconceived notion of what the story should be."

Bob Parry's investigations in the 1980's revealed the U.S. administration plans and propaganda aiming to "glue black hats" on the Nicaraguan government and "white hats" on the Contra opposition. Thus he was well prepared to critically examine the disinformation campaigns accompanying "regime change" campaigns over the past decades: from Yugoslavia to Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and others.

Under Bob Parry's leadership, Consortium News has exposed "fake News" at the highest levels. As journalist Norman Solomon said at the tribute, "It's important to remember that the most dangerous fake News in the last few decades has come from the likes of the front page of the New York Times and Washington Post. There are a million dead Iraqis and many dead Americans to prove it."

### **Challenging the New McCarthyism**

In his last article, published just two weeks before his death, Parry informed Consortium News readers about his health issue. He speculated on possible contributing factors including "the unrelenting ugliness that has become Official Washington and national journalism."

Parry described the decline in journalistic standards and objectivity.

*"This perversion of principles – twisting information to fit a desired conclusion – became the modus vivendi of American politics and journalism. And those of us who insisted on defending journalistic principles of skepticism and even-handedness were increasingly shunned by our colleagues, a hostility that first emerged on the Right and among neoconservatives but eventually*

*sucked in the progressive world as well... The demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia is just the most dangerous feature of this propaganda process – and this is where the neocons and the liberal interventionists most significantly come together. The US media approach to Russia is now virtually 100 percent propaganda.”*

At the Berkeley event, writer Natylie Baldwin addressed this issue,

*“Robert Parry referred to the phenomena of careerism and group think. He argued that it was ruining journalism ...When our most experienced academic expert on Russia, Stephen Cohen, can hardly get an interview on CNN and cannot get an op-ed published by the New York Times or the Washington Post, but a neo-con ideologue like Michael Weiss, who has no on the ground experience or educational credentials about Russia can be hired as a commentator by CNN on the subject, it’s dangerous. When someone like Rachel Maddow, who from her past investigative reporting knows better, has allowed herself to be used as a cartoonish purveyor of anti Russia propaganda, virtually ignoring coverage of more immediate issues facing average Americans and distracting them away from confronting the Democratic Party’s failures and dishonesty, it’s dangerous.”*

Baldwin elaborated on the current critical situation and need for honest and objective journalism. She said,

*“Our media, like our political system, is in crisis. Indeed, these two crises reinforce each other as both our media and our political system are corrupted by money and have been largely reduced to a cheap spectacle. According to polls, large majorities of millennials have contempt for these establishment institutions. They’re open to and looking for alternatives to these broken systems. This makes Robert Parry’s legacy and the space for genuine investigative journalism that he fostered at Consortium News more important than ever.”*

### **Reflections on Bob Parry**

The event began with messages of respect and appreciation by Alicia Jrapko of ResumenLatinoAmericano and Ann Garrison of Black Agenda Report. Ann Wright, former US Army Colonel and State Dept official, sent a video message hailing Bob Parry as one of the “truth-tellers”.

Following are excerpts from major presentations at the event.



**Dennis Bernstein**, Executive Producer of Flashpoints Radio, gave the first presentation. Dennis talked about his experience teaching journalism to high school students in the Bronx in 1984. The importance of investigative

journalism was underscored as Dennis' students investigated the police killing of a 67 year old grandmother named Eleanor Bumpers.

*"Bob Parry was investigating Iran Contra and we were investigating the police in the South Bronx. Because those kids were so dogged with their cameras and with their questions, their investigation led led to one of the only indictments of a police officer for manslaughter in the history of the city. It was their investigation that counteracted the big lie of the press."*

Dennis later worked as a reporter for *Newsday* covering the trial in Tucson Arizona of nuns in the sanctuary movement. There was a 'crazy colonel' from the White House, Oliver North, who was screaming the that nuns were getting in the way of national security and US foreign policy in El Salvador. "We were hearing a story about how this Oliver North was in fact part of this prosecution of these nuns and priests and church workers... they were all convicted."

*"There was a meeting in Washington DC towards the end of 1985 ... That's where I met Robert Parry....I began to follow the work of Robert Parry. I began to understand what it took to be a thorough journalist."*

*"Robert Parry was very special and you know, he rarely rejected pieces that I did, but when he did it was because he felt something wasn't true in the piece. He worked very hard to explain it to me or try and rewrite the piece to save the piece, but he was incredibly patient, incredibly focused..And he was very funny. One Halloween he dressed up as the ghost of William Casey. You all*

remember William Casey? Yeah. Well, that story. Iran Contra, the US government engaged in cocaine operations. The idea that the US government could be, at least in part, responsible for the flood of horrific drugs into communities across the country. Later on, I had an incredible chance to be with Gary Webb, Robert Parry and Pete Brewton, who broke the story about how the CIA was using S&Ls after they were deregulated to fund all kinds of illegal operations.”

“I have a distinct memory of Bob trying to explain to Gary Webb who was riding high on breaking the Dark Alliance stories. He was convinced he had the full support of the leadership of the San Jose Mercury News. I remember Bob trying to caution Gary about how dangerous the story was and what could happen. Gary said he knew his editors were with him and that he had strong support. They were all cheering for Gary until the New York Times and Washington Post shredded him. Bob tried to warn him, tried to tell him.

But to be with them ... I remember the power that those guys – Bob, Gary Webb and Pete Brewton – had with audiences. It was easy to understand why people would be afraid of them. They were truth tellers. .... They were under attack then and they’re under attack now. I am really troubled. I can’t tell you how much I miss Bob.”

“We lost them. We miss them. But Consortium News because of its power and as a tribute to Bob is continuing.

Thanks to its wonderful new editor, Joe Lauria, it continues. He’s beginning to transform it. He’s making his changes. He’s expanding it. Best part, he is bringing in some wonderful new writers that really enhance the work there. So I miss Bob, I miss him every day, but Consortium News continues and continues stronger than ever.”

**Sam Parry**, oldest son of Robert Parry, flew in from the east coast to attend and

speaking at the event.



*"Thanks very much. I'm so honored to be here and I feel the weight of sort of this incredible crowd and the weight of my father here and the legacy that he created with Consortium News. I'm just so grateful to have you all here and to be part of this event and to do my part, to represent the family, to represent dad here. I know dad was a very humble man in many ways. He never wanted the limelight or the attention shown too brightly on him. He wanted the work to speak for itself, so I know part of him would be a little embarrassed by this great turnout, but another part of him, I know he's smiling. I can feel the smile on his face right now as I look out onto you all. So thank you all very much for coming out and thank you."*

*Dad chose a very difficult profession. Journalism is hard work. You're fighting to get the stories. You're fighting to get the truth. You have to write it down, you have to edit it, you have to make sure you're correct all the time. Dad always felt that he couldn't make a single mistake because if he did, they'd come after him even harder. So he worked really hard to get it all right. And he took a difficult path with his profession. He took on the mainstream as so many of you all have done with your careers as well, but he took on the mainstream. He was part of the mainstream and then he sort of had to confront them and fight for all the stories that he was able to bring forward.*

*And in doing so, he made himself sort of a target of, of retribution and attacks. And so he was attacked all the time. Every day by big, powerful institutions and big powerful people. He took it, but he took it because he had a community of supporters and like minded individuals, people who*

*understood the importance of telling the truth and speaking truth to power and that community of people are people just like you. You were his community, you were his, in many ways, his family, like minded travelers in this world.*

*I especially want to thank you all for being supporters of his, of his website, Consortium News.com and for coming out today, and this is just so beautiful."*

Sam described the early years of Consortium News. It began as a print publication: hand collated, stamped and mailed. At college Sam had learned about the burgeoning new "internet". When Bob discovered original documents proving the October surprise, Sam suggested they could scan the documents and post them for people to see online. Bob responded, "That's an interesting idea"... and thus was born the online Consortium News.

*"We didn't know what the heck we were doing in a lot of ways! We had dad's great journalism of course, but the rest of it we had to figure out as we went along.... Dad worked at this website for the next 23 years. Every single day he was tinkering away at it. He was gathering stories from many of you here in the room, and editing the stories, working with contributors to keep our truth alive. He felt so passionately about that...*

*Something I wanted to share today is that dad was a patriot. I think that he really loved America. He loved our ideals, he loved the people, he loved the idea of holding the institutions that govern us accountable. Right? And that was his passion. That was what he was all about and that's what really drove him and propelled him through his life.*

*We're going to see a video of his life and hopefully you all will enjoy this and maybe it'll bring him to life a little bit more for you all. Thank you for being here." [This 10 minute video can be seen at 1:03:00 of the April Memorial Service [video](#). ]*

**Natylie Baldwin** is a Consortium News contributor and co-author of the book "[Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard: How the West was Checkmated](#)". She said,



*"I'd like to thank everyone for coming out today. I'd like to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak at a tribute to a man who was very inspirational to me. My own interest in foreign affairs began in college not long after I graduated, 9-11 happened. I joined the local peace movement to oppose our wars and it didn't take long for me to realize that the media is a big part of the problem.*



*"The Myth we're taught is that our democracy is underpinned by a media that serves as a watchdog on the government and other powerful institutions, a noble fourth estate. But when it comes to issues of war and the media, rarely if ever has the media served as a questioner of government claims, performing due diligence on a matter of life, death and destruction of societies. We saw the mainstream media's gross negligence with Iraq, Libya, and other examples stretching much further back.*

*"We are now seeing the same thing happened with the world's other nuclear superpower, Russia. I grew increasingly concerned about the degree of recklessness by US political elites who supported the coup in Kiev, completely disregarding Russia's security interests on its border.*

*"I began to dig deeper into post-Soviet Russia and US- Russia relations. I realized just how distorted and lacking in context the narrative Americans were being given, was during this time. One of the sources I relied on among others was Robert Parry and Consortium News. I also connected up with Sharon Tennyson, an independent writer and program coordinator with over three decades of experience on the ground all over Russia, including citizen to citizen diplomacy during Cold War One. She became my mentor and we traveled to*

*Russia in October of 2015 for two weeks where I was able to speak to a cross section of Russians in several different cities on a range of issues.*

*"We traveled to Crimea where I interviewed a range of Crimeans about what happened in late 2013 in early 2014. At this point, I had researched and co-authored a book about the Ukraine crisis providing historical and contextual background of US-Russia relations as well as writing articles for a couple of alternative outlets.*

*"I tried submitting articles about my on-the-ground observations and interviews in Crimea to several other alternative outlets in the hopes of getting this information out to a wider audience. After all, not many American writers had actually been to Crimea and could provide on-the-ground perspectives.*

*"I was having little luck. Somehow I got hold of Robert Parry's email address and submitted it to him. Within 48 hours my article was posted with many others to follow. I was even more pleasantly surprised when a couple of weeks later I received a check in the mail for my work. That is a big deal for independent writers these days.*

*"The money I earned from my articles for Consortium helped finance a return trip to Russia in 2017 and more articles. Bob said that journalism required the acknowledgement that there were usually two sides and possibly more to every story and that Americans needed to hear both sides. It's critical to have an informed citizenry with a reasonable understanding of issues in a democracy. This is especially true with issues that most average Americans don't have practical experience with, such as international policies relating to other countries. In order to conduct a rational foreign policy, one must understand the other country's point of view. It doesn't mean one must agree with it, but we must know how the other side perceives its own interests so that we can determine what they may be willing to risk or sacrifice on behalf of those perceived interests. Further, it's essential to determine areas of common interest in cooperation.*

*"Our media, like our political system, is in crisis. Indeed, these two crises reinforce each other as both our media and our political system are corrupted by money and have been largely reduced to a cheap spectacle. According to polls, large majorities of millennials have contempt for these establishment institutions. They're open to and looking for alternatives to these broken systems. This makes Robert Parry's legacy and the space for genuine investigative journalism that he fostered at Consortium News more important than ever with strong leadership and a continued quality of long form journalism from its current and new contributors, we can make a much needed*

*difference at this critical time. Thank you."*



**Joe Lauria** has been a contributing writer to Consortium News for many years. He was recently hired to become the site's new Editor-in-Chief. He spoke about the legacy of Bob Parry and his plans to continue and expand Consortium News.

*"Bob was not a lefty radical.... He was just reporting the facts and where they lead. ... He didn't start off from an ideological position. He didn't have a preconceived notion of what the story should be."*

*"This is an age of narcissism, not only in the White House, but across the social media landscape. Self promotion is widespread in media. But that was not what Bob Parry was about. He was obsessed, but not with himself whatsoever, but with the story and getting the facts out and holding government accountable...In one C-Span interview he says that that when you hold government to account, it's misunderstood as anti-Americanism. I think he was very pro American as Sam pointed out... He was a patriot because he believed in the people of this country, not the government, and believed in holding them to account."*

*"I was covering the lead up to the invasion of Iraq at the UN Security Council. I was just reporting the facts and the facts were that even US allies such as France and Germany joined with Russia and China to block the resolution that the US administration, George W Bush's administration, was seeking. They had made up their minds to invade anyway. They were going through the motions at the Security Council, seeing if they can get this resolution and if they couldn't, they were going to do it anyway."*

*So I wrote these stories for a Canadian chain which was called Southam News. They published the Montreal Gazette, Ottawa citizen, Calgary Herald and Vancouver Sun. I had been writing for them for since 1999. But I got a call*

one day from the foreign editor of this chain and he told me that his son was a Marine, a Canadian Marine, and that I had to support the war and that my reporting was not supporting the war. I said to him I'm sure you are proud of your son, but that's not my job. My job is to report what's going on about the opposition to this resolution. They never got the resolution, but they got their war.

"Bob was a skeptic, but not a cynic. And there's a big difference there. And you know, he really believed in a nonpartisan principled approach to journalism. And we're living in such a partisan age right now, and you could feel it in the air in Washington where I'm now living, and he had no time for that.

Even if you're an American citizen, when you become a reporter, you're not reporting as an American citizen, you're a reporter and all countries in a complex international crisis need to be equally reported on to let the reader know what each country's interests are, because it is interests that motivate governments when nations clash.

That's tremendous drama for journalism to report on. But instead of letting the reader understand the complexities of these situations the established media say one side is right and portray all the sides as the enemy. It became clear to me that when I worked at the Wall Street Journal that the corporate media does not have this objective view of international reporting. They're promoting an American agenda abroad. That is not journalism. That's not their job, and when you do that, when you suppress the voices of Iranians and Palestinians and Russians and North Koreans, you are dehumanizing these people and that makes it easier to go to war against them.

The American public doesn't get to understand or know anything about Palestinians as people who were just slaughtered at the gates of Gaza.

Bob Parry knew that and he got slammed for that. But we're all very thankful that he started Consortium News because he understood the power of the press is distinct from the power of government.

Too many reporters live vicariously through the power of government. They want that kind of power. So they suck up to it. They want access of course, but they sort of identify with the powerful rather than what the people. They're supposed to be the filter between the government and the people. Bob Understood that there's three parties here, there's government, there's the press and there's the public and we're supposed to be in the middle protecting the public from the lies of government. We are not seeing that now, but this is what I'm committed to try to continue doing at Consortium News.

*I was asked to talk about the future of Consortium News. So I've been there six weeks now and it's an enormous responsibility. I am extremely grateful to the board for hiring me, to have faith in me to do this job. I'm well aware that it's impossible to try to do it as Parry did. I'm not trying to do that. I'm doing what I can do.*

*I've changed the appearance here or there to spruce it up, as Dennis said, and also to have more diverse voices in the paper. For example, Margaret Kimberly of Black Agenda Report wrote a wonderful piece for us on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. I'm looking to get correspondents in various countries around the world. We need Middle Eastern Arabs to write about their countries. I want more people from around the world writing about their own countries in their own voices. We have recently published Asad Abu Khalil – the Lebanese "Angry Arab" blogger who knows the region extremely well, better than almost any Western analyst could. So those are the kinds of voices I'm trying to bring.*

*I'm trying to revive a field of reporting that was very well established for decades in the United States and that has disappeared and that is labor reporting. I understand the unions have shrunk but even where unions don't exist, workers exist. So we're going to cover workers and the issues that they're facing. I'm looking for more stories on the struggles of women in Africa, the Middle East and India and how they are struggling for their rights.*

*I just want to thank everybody for being here today. Thank you.*



**Norman Solomon** is a well-known author and journalist. He spoke of his experience

with Bob and his legacy.

*"Hearing the discussion a few minutes ago about fake news, it's so important to remember that the most dangerous fake news in the last few decades resulted in a million or more dead Iraqis and many dead Americans. The most dangerous fake news has come from the likes of the front page of The New York Times and the Washington Post. That's just a reality. It's not about ideology or rhetoric it is just cold, hard life and death fact.*

*Bob was somebody who had not only the curiosity that was constant to try to find out more, but also a tremendous work ethic. It was just part of who he was. I had the very good fortune to work with him on a series of articles about Colin Powell. Bob and I worked on a series of articles that are still archived on Consortium, about Powell. The more we looked into it, the more we saw the tremendous gap between the positive coverage and that from the beginning of his career in Vietnam, Powell always took that expedient path, the expedient way of getting along to get along with the powerful who could give him promotions. In working with Bob, a couple of aspects have always stayed with me very strongly. One is that he would frequently say as we were trying to go through material, that I have to master the information. I have to master the material....He was very insistent. You know, it's sort of like you don't pull it out of the oven before it's baked. We can't rush these stories. We've got to know that it's nailed down and solid and we've really dug. And the other aspect I remember is how generous he was on a professional basis. In this multipart series that we did, Bob ended up doing the vast amount of the work but he insisted my name by on every article byline. Sad to say that's not that common.*

*Bob was not about his name in lights. It was about, "Let's get the work done."*

Norman described how Bob was aware of the areas that mainstream journalists shouldn't touch, but he went there regardless.

*"Almost all mainline journalists obey that unspoken directive that is accepted, internalized: Don't go there. And Bob went there and he*

went there again and again. As his book "Fooling America" points out, he had to go to speak, pay a price. I remember him telling me a number of years ago when he was hammering on the Israeli role in US foreign policy and then writing about Russia, one of his colleagues, top colleagues, somebody who was in the press corps in DC who was a high editor at that point at the New York Times, said to him, 'Bob, you're losing credibility. You keep this up. You're going to marginalize yourself.' But Bob had crossed that Rubicon a long time earlier.

Norman spoke of previous fearless American journalists like George Seldes and IF Stone.

Bob Parry exemplified the attitude of: show me. I'm not going to assume that this is truthful because I might have a favorable view of this government or might assume that because other journalists are reporting it, it is received wisdom, I'm not going to take any of that on faith. If you want to go on faith, go to a house of worship.

One day toward the end of December I looked at Consortium News and saw that Bob had suffered a stroke. Then, a number of days later, there was an article by Bob. As I read it, there was a tremendous wave of feeling that it was, what's the French word, a *cri de coeur*. I later learned how extremely difficult it was just physiologically for Bob to write it.

It's one of the greatest articles about journalism I have ever read. My friend and often collaborator on articles, Jeff Cohen, said to me 'That article by Bob Parry should be assigned and read by every journalism student in America.' It's about independent journalism. It's about the herd mentality that has gotten to so many journalists in this country. Pseudo journalists, supposedly journalists, and editors run with the crowd and independent journalism is the opposite of running with the crowd. It's about holding that lantern high and saying, we have work to do and let's do it together. Thank you."

At the end of the event, participants purchased copies of Robert Parry's books "Fooling America" (1992), "Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, The Press & Project Truth" (1999), and "America's Stolen Narrative: From Washington and Madison to Nixon, Reagan and the Bushes to Barack Obama" (2012).

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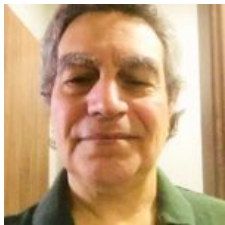
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## Bob Parry: Holding Government and Media to Account

A memorial was held on Saturday for Robert Parry, the late founder and editor of this web site. Among the speakers paying tribute to Bob was Joe Lauria, the new editor of Consortium News.

**By Joe Lauria**



If you watch Bob's various talks available on YouTube you'll see that he was often asked why he started Consortium News. Bob says, essentially, that he got fed up with the resistance he faced from editors who put obstacles in the way of his stories, often of great national significance. One editor at *Newsweek* told him they were suppressing a story for "the good for the country." The facts he'd unearthed went too far in exposing the dark side of American power. His editor was speaking, of course, about what was for the good of the rulers of the country, not the rest of us. As we just heard from John Pilger, Bob created a consortium for journalists who ran up against similar obstruction from their editors: a place for them to publish what they could not get published in the mainstream.

Sixteen years after Bob launched Consortium News with Sam and Nat I became one of those journalists. I'd had similar experiences. When I covered the diplomacy at the U.N. leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq for a Canadian chain that published the *Montreal Gazette*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and other papers, I gave equal weight in my stories to the German, French and Russian opposition on the Security Council to the invasion. So the chain's foreign editor called me up one day from Ottawa to berate me for not supporting the war effort in my reporting.

He told me his son was a marine. I told him I was certain he was proud of him, but my job was not to support the war but to report objectively on what was happening at the Security Council. The Bush administration never got their resolution. But they invaded anyway. It was illegal under international law as Kofi Annan finally said after being pressured by a BBC interviewer. Annan was then hounded to the point of a near nervous breakdown by the likes of then UN Ambassador John Bolton, who, unfortunately, has since gotten a promotion. I, on



the other hand, on the day of the invasion was fired.

Later, while covering the U.N. for *The Wall Street Journal*, I found that several of my stories were suppressed or inconvenient facts were getting edited out. One was a story I twice had rejected on a declassified Defense Intelligence Agency document that predicted the rise of ISIS back in 2012 but was ignored in Washington. It said the U.S. and its allies in Europe, Turkey and the Gulf were supporting a Salafist principality in eastern Syria that could turn into an Islamic State. Such a story would undermine the government's war on terrorism.

In another instance, my editors repeatedly removed from my stories, on the UN vote on Palestine's observer status, a line indicating that 130 nations had already recognized Palestine. At that point I realized the Journal had an agenda—not to neutrally report complex international events from multiple sides, but to promote US interests abroad. So I turned to Bob and he accepted a piece from me on that Palestine issue in late 2011, the first of many of my articles that he eventually published.

Bob was without doubt the best editor I've ever had. He was the only one who really understood—or accepted—what I was writing about.

Bob was a supreme skeptic, but he never descended to cynicism. His legacy, which I am committed to carry on, was of a principled, non-partisan approach to journalism. He took a neutral stance reporting on international issues, which some wrongly saw as anti-American. Bob knew never to take a government official's word for it, especially an intelligence official. He knew people in all governments lie. But there are two other parties involved: the press and the public. He understood that the press had to act as a filter, to verify and challenge government assertions, before they are passed on to the public. Bob became distraught, and in his last piece poignantly said so, about the state of American journalism, where careerism and vanity had aligned the profession with those in power, a power through which too many reporters seem to live vicariously.

The press' power is distinct from the government's, it is the power to hold government accountable on behalf of the public. Bob understood that the mainstream media's greatest sin was the sin of omission: leaving out of a story, or marginalizing, points of view at odds with a U.S. agenda, but vital for the reader to comprehend a frighteningly complex world.

The viewpoints of Iranians, Palestinians, Russians, North Koreans, Syrians and others are never fully reported in the Western media, though the supposed mission of journalism is to tell all sides of a story. It's impossible to understand an international crisis without those voices being heard. Routinely

or systematically shutting them out also dehumanizes people in those countries, making it easier to gain popular support in the U.S. to go to war against them.

The omission of such news day after day in newspapers and on television adds up over the decades to what Bob called the Lost History of post-war America. It is a dark side of American history—coups overthrowing democratically-elected leaders, electoral interference, assassinations and invasions. Omitting that history, as it continues to unfold nearly everyday, gives the American people a distorted view of their country, an almost cartoonish sense of America's supposed morality in international affairs, rather than it just pursuing its interests, too often violently, as all great powers do.

These things aren't normally mentioned in polite society. But Bob Parry built his extraordinary career telling those truths. And I'm going to do my damndest to continue, and honor, his legacy.

Thank you.

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## America's Complicated Relationship with International Human Rights Norms

The U.S. has long had a love-hate relationship with international norms, having taken the lead in forging landmark human rights agreements while brushing off complaints over its own abuses, Nat Parry explains.

By Nat Parry

American exceptionalism – the notion that the United States is unique among nations due to its traditions of democracy and liberty – has always been the foundation of the nation's claim to moral leadership. As a country founded on ideals that are today recognized the world over as fundamental principles of international norms, the U.S. utilizes its image as a human rights champion to rally nations to its cause and assert its hegemony around the world.

Regardless of political persuasion, Americans proudly cite the influence that the founding principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights have had on the rest of the world, with 80 percent agreeing that “the United States’ history and its Constitution ... makes it the greatest country in the world” in a 2010 Gallup poll. Respecting these principles on the international level has long been considered a requisite for U.S. credibility and leadership on the global stage.



Much of this sentiment is an enduring testament to U.S. leadership following World War II, a period in which international legal principles of human rights and non-aggression were established, as well as the four decades of the Cold War, in which the “free world,” led by the United States, faced off against “totalitarian communism,” led by the Soviet Union.

During those years of open hostility between East and West, the U.S. could point not only to its founding documents as proof of its commitment to universal principles of freedom and individual dignity, but also to the central role it played in shaping the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **Fourteen Points and Four Freedoms**

While the U.S. didn’t fully assume its position as moral arbiter until after the Allied victory in World War II, its role in these matters had already been well-established with Woodrow Wilson’s professed internationalism. As expressed in his famous “Fourteen Points,” which sought to establish a rationale for U.S. intervention in the First World War, the United States would press to establish an international system based on “open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.”

Wilson had seen the First World War as evidence that the old international system established by the Europeans had failed to provide necessary security and stability, and sought to replace the old diplomacy with one based on cooperation, communication, liberalism and democracy.

Speaking on this issue throughout his presidency, he consistently advocated human rights and principles of self-determination.

“Do you never stop to reflect just what it is that America stands for?” Wilson asked in 1916. “If she stands for one thing more than another, it is for the sovereignty of self-governing peoples, and her example, her assistance, her encouragement, has thrilled two continents in this Western World with all the fine impulses which have built up human liberty on both sides of the water.”

These principles were expanded upon by subsequent American administrations, and especially by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In his January 1941 State of the Union address, Roosevelt spelled out what he called “the Four Freedoms,” which later became the foundation for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“In the future days,” he said, “which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.”

He continued: “The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.”

Following the Allied victory over the Axis powers, FDR’s widow Eleanor Roosevelt took her late husband’s vision and attempted to make it a reality for the world through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Chairing the Commission on Human Rights, a standing body of the United Nations constituted to undertake the work of preparing what was originally conceived as an International Bill of Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt pushed to ensure that FDR’s “four freedoms” were reflected in the document.

Under Roosevelt’s leadership, the Commission decided that the declaration should be a brief and inspirational document accessible by common people, and envisioned it to serve as the foundation for the remainder of an international bill of human rights. It thus avoided the more difficult problems that had to be addressed when the binding treaty came up for consideration, namely what role the state should have in enforcing rights within its territory, and whether the mode of enforcing civil and political rights should be different from that for economic and social rights.

As stated in its preamble, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that

every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

Much of the language in the Declaration echoed language contained in the founding documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Whereas the U.S. Declaration of Independence articulates the “unalienable right” to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

While the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits Congress from “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble,” the UDHR provides that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” and that “everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.” Whereas the Eighth Amendment forbids “cruel and unusual punishments,” the UDHR bars “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Although the United States made it clear that it could not support a legally binding UDHR, it readily endorsed the final document as a political declaration, one of 48 nations to vote in favor of the Declaration at the UN General Assembly in December 1948. With no votes in opposition and just eight abstentions – mostly from Eastern Bloc countries including the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Poland – the Declaration served as a defining characteristic of the contrast between East and West in those early days of the Cold War.

### **A Small Problem**

There was of course one small problem. Despite the United States formally embracing “universal human rights” on the international stage, its respect for those rights domestically was considerably lacking. Throughout the country and especially in the South, African Americans endured racist segregation policies and were routinely denied the right to vote and other civil rights.

Lynching, while not as pervasive as its heyday earlier in the century, was still a major problem, with dozens of blacks murdered with impunity by white lynch mobs throughout the 1940s.

In 1947, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

filed an "Appeal to the World" petition in the United Nations that denounced racial discrimination in the United States as "not only indefensible but barbaric." The American failure to respect human rights at home had international implications, argued the NAACP. "The disenfranchisement of the American Negro makes the functioning of all democracy in the nation difficult; and as democracy fails to function in the leading democracy in the world, it fails the world," read the NAACP petition.

The NAACP's appeal provoked an international sensation, with the organization flooded with requests for copies of the document from the governments of the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the Union of South Africa, among others. According to NAACP chief Walter White, "It was manifest that they were pleased to have documentary proof that the United States did not practice what it preached about freedom and democracy."

The U.S. delegation to the UN refused to introduce the NAACP petition to the United Nations, fearing that it would cause further international embarrassment. The Soviet Union, however, recommended that the NAACP's claims be investigated. The Commission on Human Rights rejected that proposal on December 4, 1947, and no further official action was taken.

According to W.E.B. DuBois, the principle author of the petition, the United States "refused willingly to allow any other nation to bring this matter up." If it had been introduced to the General Assembly, Eleanor Roosevelt would have "probably resign[ed] from the United Nations delegation," said DuBois. This was despite the fact that she was a member of the NAACP board of directors. While Roosevelt's commitment to racial justice may have been strong, it was clear that her embarrassment over the U.S.'s failures to respect the "four freedoms" at home was even stronger.

It was in this context that the United States endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. That year also marked the beginning of tentative steps the U.S. began making towards respecting basic rights within its borders.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces. The next month, the Democratic Party included a civil rights plank in its platform. "The Democratic Party," read the platform adopted at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, "commits itself to continuing its efforts to eradicate all racial, religious and economic discrimination."

While there was clearly a domestic motivation for embracing the cause of civil rights (presidential adviser Clark Clifford had presented a lengthy memorandum to President Truman in 1947 which argued that the African-American vote was

paramount for winning the 1948 election), there was also a strong international component to the Democratic Party's support for civil rights.

### **UN Bragging Rights**

In addition to its civil rights plank, the 1948 Democratic platform included a wholehearted endorsement of the recently established United Nations, and expressed "the conviction that the destiny of the United States is to provide leadership in the world toward a realization of the Four Freedoms." But the Democrats recognized that the U.S. had a long way to go to realizing those four freedoms at home.

"We call upon the Congress to support our President in guaranteeing these basic and fundamental American Principles: (1) the right of full and equal political participation; (2) the right to equal opportunity of employment; (3) the right of security of person; (4) and the right of equal treatment in the service and defense of our nation," the platform stated.

The Democratic platform also proudly pointed to the accomplishment of organizing the United Nations: "Under the leadership of a Democratic President and his Secretary of State, the United Nations was organized at San Francisco. The charter was ratified by an overwhelming vote of the Senate. We support the United Nations fully and we pledge our whole-hearted aid toward its growth and development."

For its part, the Republican Party also embraced the fledgling UN, stating in its 1948 platform that "Our foreign policy is dedicated to preserving a free America in a free world of free men. This calls for strengthening the United Nations and primary recognition of America's self-interest in the liberty of other peoples." While the Democrats pointed to the president's leadership for helping establish the UN, the Republicans also wanted to make sure that they received due credit. Their party platform listed "a fostered United Nations" as one of the main accomplishments of the Republican Congress, despite "frequent obstruction from the Executive Branch."

As "the world's best hope" for "collective security against aggression and in behalf of justice and freedom," the Republicans pledged to "support the United Nations in this direction, striving to strengthen it and promote its effective evolution and use." The UN "should progressively establish international law," said the Republicans, "be freed of any veto in the peaceful settlement of international disputes, and be provided with the armed forces contemplated by the Charter."

As a major component of the progressive establishment of international

law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was to be codified into legally binding treaties.

Although the Declaration was endorsed by the U.S. and 47 other countries in December 1948, the two corresponding legally binding covenants to define the obligations of each state required another two decades of work. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were ready for ratification in 1966, some 18 years later.

The United States became a signatory to both covenants on Oct. 5, 1977. It ratified the ICCPR on June 8, 1992, but to this date has not fully subscribed to the ICESCR, one of just seven countries in the world not to ratify the agreement.

### **Cold War Context**

Throughout those years, the U.S. was engaged in an intense ideological battle with the Soviet Union, in which human rights were used as a rhetorical weapon by each side against the other. While American leaders chastised the Soviets for their failures to respect fundamental liberties, including freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of association, the USSR could readily point to the blatant institutionalized racism that plagued American society.

Racial discrimination belied America's rhetoric about democracy and equality, making the U.S. cause of freedom look like a sham especially to people of color in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Soviets enthusiastically exploited the issue, imbuing their anti-capitalist propaganda with tales of horrors suffered by African Americans.

So, in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* that segregated schools were unconstitutional and ordered that school integration proceed "with all deliberate speed," the case was trumpeted by the American establishment as evidence of the great strides being made toward full equality for all citizens.

At times, racial discrimination in the United States caused such international embarrassment that the State Department would pressure the White House to intervene. In 1957, for example, when a Federal District Court ordered the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, to allow African-American students to attend, Governor Orval Faubus declared that he would refuse to comply with the decree. Several hundred angry and belligerent whites confronted nine African-American students who attempted to enter the school on September 4, 1957.



The National Guard, called up by Faubus, blocked the students from entering the school. Pictures of the angry mob, the frightened African-American students, and armed National Guardsmen were seen all over the world, and the Soviets eagerly seized on the propaganda.

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles informed President Dwight Eisenhower that the Little Rock incident was damaging the United States' credibility abroad, and could cost the U.S. the support of other nations in the UN.

Eisenhower attempted to negotiate a settlement with Faubus, but when that failed, he sent in federal troops. The nine African-American students were finally allowed to attend Central High under the armed protection of the United States military.

The developing international human rights project led to deep ideological divisions in the United States, with some conservatives, especially in the South, concerned that the national government would use international human rights law to promote national civil rights reforms. Arguing that the civil rights question was beyond the scope of Congress's authority and concerned about the constitutional power of treaties, conservatives launched several attempts in the 1950s to amend the U.S. Constitution to limit the government's ability to subscribe to treaties.

Those failed efforts to amend the Constitution were based on the premise that the federal government had no say in the matters of states and localities in regulating race relations, and that since Article VI of the Constitution provides treaties the status of "supreme law of the land," the U.S. would find itself subjected to the whims of the international community on these matters.

Those fears would prove unfounded, since the U.S. didn't formally subscribe to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights until 1977, long after most of the relevant domestic civil rights legislation had been adopted, but the right-wing opposition to U.S. submission to international norms had become thoroughly established as American conservative orthodoxy.

Nat Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.*

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## The King Assassination Case and the

# Mueller Probe

Fifty years after the King assassination, Americans still have a hazy view of the House Select Committee on Assassinations' findings, an ambiguous understanding that may end up characterizing American views on Robert Mueller's probe as well, Bob Katz explains.

By Bob Katz

What is our official conclusion about the Martin Luther King assassination? Or rather, after all this time, is there an "official" conclusion? The answer to that goes beyond mere historical curiosity. For the murky ambiguities that define this case, coupled with an evident fondness among Americans for simplified, easy-reader versions of wrenching events, could well foreshadow the ultimate outcome of another critical probe 50 years later – Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into alleged collusion between Donald Trump and the Russian government to sway the outcome of Election 2016.

When it comes to the April 4, 1968 assassination of Dr. King, James Earl Ray is the name that pops up first in the minds of most Americans, as well as in Google searches and history textbooks. An oft-convicted thief, Ray managed to elude a massive international manhunt for two months before being captured in London while trying to board a plane to Brussels. Questions concerning his finances, travels, and possible collusion with others have always surrounded the case, although Ray's culpability is widely assumed.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations, the most comprehensive formal investigation into King's murder, and the only one with subpoena power, concluded in 1979 that, "there is a likelihood that James Earl Ray assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a result of a conspiracy."

Ray never stood trial. Soon after his arrest he pled guilty. Three days later, he attempted to withdraw the plea, a quest that consumed much of the rest of his life. The HSCA report, therefore, stands as the single most authoritative interpretation of the case, and the closest thing we have to a definitive last word. Yet relatively few Americans have heard of the HSCA or, if they have, know much at all about its findings.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of King's assassination, it's worth asking what's behind this erasure, this gradual airbrushing of the HSCA findings from the historical record? It could happen again, after all, the virtual deletion from public memory of an official investigation into a crucial national mystery. (Just saying.)

## House Select Committee on Assassinations

The HSCA spent two years in the late 1970s investigating the King assassination as well as that of President Kennedy. Funded by Congress and headed by Robert Blakey, a Notre Dame law professor and former Justice Department official with an expertise in organized crime prosecutions, the HSCA had its own professional staff and unprecedented access to police and intelligence agency files.

On August 16, 1978, James Earl Ray was brought to the Rayburn Office Building on Capitol Hill to testify. His appearance, some ten years after the murder that traumatized the country and snuffed out one of America's leading voices for peace and justice, was intensely anticipated.

Every major news outlet, print and electronic, was present. Rev. Jesse Jackson, who had been at King's side on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel that fateful spring evening, took what probably counted as a box seat, behind Ray, as close as he could get. I too was there, in the gallery, working with a public interest group that monitored the hearings.

Flanked by seven U.S. Marshalls, Ray entered the hearing room to stone silence as spectators and media were commanded to remain seated and stationary. He calmly raised his right hand to take the oath, this unassuming figure already a peer of John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald in the pantheon of American villains. Seeing Ray in person was like seeing a ghost.

But this ghost was stripped of all standard trappings of creepiness. There was no eerie musical soundtrack accompanying his entrance. He wore a striped tie with a blue-green checkered sport coat that might have made a positive impression on a Missouri parole board in the 1950s. His dark hair was combed in a wave and tapered above the ears to reveal graying sideburns. With darting eyes and a tight-lipped grimace, he appeared just handsome enough to have landed an audition for the role of a petty burglar in a "Law & Order" episode.

Peppered with questions from the committee chair, Louis Stokes of Ohio, Ray nervously gave answers with varying degrees of forthrightness concerning his racial animus (he professed none and investigators also found little evidence of this); his finances while on the run (smuggling and odd jobs were his explanation – the HSCA believed Ray and one of his brothers robbed an Alton, IL bank of \$27,000 in July, 1967); and accomplices (Ray insisted that a blond Latino named "Raoul" directed much of his activity, including the purchase of a rifle and a road trip that brought him to Memphis on April 3 – investigators believed Ray's brothers John and Jerry, both petty criminals, assisted him).

It was, alas, no ghost story. There was no "aha!" moment of reckoning, no

Hollywood ending.

### **A Disappointingly Obscure Scoundrel**

Regarding its investigation of a conspiracy, the HSCA explicitly implicated a St. Louis lawyer named John Sutherland who'd been active in such segregationist groups as the St. Louis Citizens Council, the Southern States Industrial Council, and the American Independent Party of George Wallace. Within these networks, Sutherland was reported to have circulated a "serious" offer to have King killed, coupled with the promise of a \$50,000 reward.

Sutherland, who died in 1970 and was never interrogated, proved a disappointingly obscure scoundrel for story-telling purposes. And the HSCA, commendably circumspect, employed language that was hardly meant to excite headlines:

"James Earl Ray may simply have been aware of the offer and acted with a general expectation of payment after the assassination; or he may have acted, not only with an awareness of the offer, but also after reaching a specific agreement, either directly or through one or both brothers, with ... Sutherland. The legal consequences of the alternative possibilities are, of course, different. Without a specific agreement with the Sutherland group, the conspiracy that eventuated in Dr. King's death would extend only to Ray and his brother(s); with a specific agreement, the conspiracy would also encompass Sutherland and his group."

The upshot: no riveting narrative arc, no snappy logline. The HSCA findings have thus been consigned to history's dustbin, invisible to all but scholars and buffs, doomed by poor ratings. It was a classic show biz failure, a failure to recognize that its attention-deficit audience – we the people – prefers explanations that are neatly wrapped and sound-bite succinct.

Obviously the HSCA was handicapped by strict adherence to the known facts, which turned out to be convoluted and puzzling. No scriptwriter with blockbuster dreams would ever want to be so confined. "Inspired by a true story," whatever that means, is where the real action is.

Which brings us to the Mueller probe. It may yet yield high-profile trials for dastardly offenses, and wouldn't that be nice. Absent an A-list conviction, the Mueller investigation seems susceptible to the same factors that effectively sidelined the King findings. Too many confounding footnotes, too many loose threads, and an assortment of two-bit bad guys standing in, but for who?

All available box office evidence suggests that Americans crave political dramas that are sharply plotted, easy to follow and seamlessly resolved. The ambiguous kind? Not so much. The truth, in the long run, may not be an ideal vehicle for

maximizing audience share.

If in the end Mueller demonstrates only that vile crimes were perpetrated with craven or treasonous intent by despicable actors plausibly though not provably affiliated with the White House, what will be the popular understanding of the Trump-Russia-election saga ten years, twenty years from now? Especially when a far less complicated account – NO COLLUSION! – gets blasted from the loudest megaphone known to humankind.

**Bob Katz was involved in monitoring the HSCA investigation and was present for James Earl Ray's testimony. He is the author of several books and his writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, as well as Consortium News. His most recent book is *The Whistleblower: Rooting for the Ref in the High-Stakes World of College Basketball* (see [BobKatz.info](http://BobKatz.info) )**

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## In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in February focused on the release of the so-called "Nunes Memo", the US system of perpetual warfare, and the growing risk of confrontations in Syria, North Korea and Iran.

**"Outpouring of Support Honors Robert Parry"** Feb. 1, 2018

**"U.S. Media's Objectivity Questioned Abroad"** by Andrew Spannaus, Feb. 2, 2018

**"Nunes Memo Reports Crimes at Top of FBI and DOJ"** by Ray McGovern, Feb. 2, 2018

**"'Duck and Cover' Drills Exacerbate Fears of N. Korea War"** by Ann Wright, Feb. 3, 2018

**"Do We Really Want Nuclear War with Russia?"** by Robert Parry, Feb. 4, 2018

**"Recipe Concocted for Perpetual War is a Bitter One"** by Robert Wing and Coleen Rowley, Feb. 4, 2018

**"WMD Claims in Syria Raise Concerns over U.S. Escalation"** by Rick Sterling, Feb. 4, 2018

**"Connecticut Court Decision Highlights U.S. Educational Failures"** by Dennis J. Bernstein, Feb. 5, 2018

**"Understanding Russia, Un-Demonizing Putin"** by Sharon Tennison, Feb. 6, 2018

**“Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?”** by Robert Parry, Feb. 6, 2018

**“No Time for Complacency over Korea War Threat”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 7, 2018

**“‘This is Nuts’: Liberals Launch ‘Largest Mobilization in History’ in Defense of Russiagate Probe”** by Coleen Rowley and Nat Parry, Feb. 9, 2018

**“A Note to Our Readers”** by Nat Parry, Feb. 10, 2018

**“Donald Trump v. the Spooks”** by Annie Machon, Feb.23, 2018

**“How Establishment Propaganda Gaslights Us Into Submission”** by Caitlin Johnstone, Feb. 12, 2018

**“Budget Woes Sign of a Dysfunctional Empire”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 13, 2018

**“The Right’s Second Amendment Lies”** by Robert Parry, Feb. 16, 2018

**“NYT’s ‘Really Weird’ Russiagate Story”** by Daniel Lazare, Feb. 16, 2018

**“Russians Spooked by Nukes-Against-Cyber-Attack Policy”** by Ray McGovern and William Binney, Feb. 16, 2018

**“Nunes: FBI and DOJ Perps Could Be Put on Trial”** by Ray McGovern, Feb. 19, 2018

**“U.S. Empire Still Incoherent After All These Years”** by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Feb. 20, 2018

**“Time to Admit the Afghan War is ‘Nonsense’”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 22, 2018

**“Selective Outrage Undermines Human Rights in Syria”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 23, 2018

**“The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died”** by Daniel Lazare, Feb. 24, 2018

**“Growing Risk of U.S.-Iran Hostilities Based on False Pretexes, Intel Vets Warn”** by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, Feb. 26, 2018

**“Who Benefits from Russia’s ‘Peculiar’ Doping Violations?”** by Rick Sterling, Feb. 26, 2018

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## Capitalism’s Process of Universal Commodification

The Marvel/Disney movie “Black Panther” is the latest example of an idea with anti-capitalist origins being co-opted for corporate commodification and profit, explains Lawrence Davidson in this analysis.

By Lawrence Davidson

### Paradoxical Profit

Unless regulated, capitalism operates as a wide-open market system. If a demand exists or can be created and a profit made, that demand will be met. As a consequence, capitalism has the capacity to commercialize almost anything, including its detractors and even its enemies.

Here are some examples:

- Che Guevara, the iconic Marxist revolutionary. He was young and handsome when he served at the side of Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution in the 1950s. Today, most people outside of Cuba know of him only as an image on T-shirts, backpacks and posters. He has been immortalized at a profit by the economic system he despised.
- Wall-E, a 2008 animated movie about an “adorable robot” left behind on earth after mankind abandons the planet. It seems that humans have reduced their home to a garbage heap and Wall-E (short for “Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class”) has the job of cleaning the place up. Ironically, the movie suggests to us the dangers of commercialism while still managing to gross \$533.3 million worldwide. Half of that came from audiences in the U.S., the homeland of “shop till you drop.”
- Apple’s “Think Different” sales campaign. This promotion of Apple products opens with the line, “Here is to the crazy ones.” This is followed by images of Einstein, Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King, among others – folks who, the commercial tells us, are “rebels and misfits and have no respect for the status

quo.” Apple was promoting its groundbreaking computer products using the images of some people who really didn’t believe in a capitalist system. Nonetheless, this promotion campaign became iconic and probably can be said to have helped the company “change the world” – just not in the direction some of those “crazy ones” would have liked.

– Graffiti Art. There is a 2016 documentary film, Wall Writers: Graffiti In Its Innocence, that depicts the early days of graffiti art (1960s and 1970s) as a sometimes illegal wall writing phenomenon. It explains that the original “wall writers” were anonymous people seeking recognition basically among their own kind. There was no thought that this activity was giving rise to an art form and certainly not to the possibility that it could be a vehicle to riches. But the graffiti phenomenon exploded across the United States and soon spread to England. By 1973 it was sufficiently in the public mind to be used as a successful movie title, “American Graffiti.” Soon after that (by the 1980s), some of the best graffiti had recognized artistic value and was integrated into the art market. Currently some of it is sold for millions of dollars.

– The Weather Underground is an on-line site that “provides local & long range weather forecasts, weather reports, maps & tropical weather conditions for locations worldwide.” But where does that name come from? It is taken from a radical anti-capitalist youth group known as the “Weathermen.” This group broke off from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), also a radical group, in 1970. After doing so the radical Weathermen declared war on the U.S. government.

It seems that both the meteorological Weathermen and the radical political Weathermen began at the University of Michigan. That is where the meteorologists first got their start in 1995, working with the university’s internet weather database. That is also where in 1970, the SDS split apart and the radical Weathermen Underground was founded. By the way, the split came about democratically through a vote of assembled members. I know. I was there (on the non-Weathermen side). Maybe some of the future meteorologists were there as well, and that is how they chose the name.

The Weather Underground forecasting organization is now owned by The Weather Company, which in turn is owned by IBM.

### **Black Panther – The Movie and the Party**

Market capitalism will also seek to profit from aspects of culture – even those parts that are marginalized, for instance, African American culture and the concept of Black pride.

In 1971 we got the Shaft movies of the cool Black private eye who plays tough on



the streets of New York City. This gave rise to a myriad other “blaxploitation” films. The Shaft productions mimicked White equivalents using Black actors and Black backdrops. They demonstrated that African Americans are part of a dominant culture which cannot be uniquely Black. In truth, it is a White culture that has been modified over time by its minority components: Black, Asian, Latin, Native American, etc. into a hybrid that is uniquely American.

I don’t want to be misunderstood here. African Americans can take great pride in their movies and other arts. Black actors, screenwriters, directors and producers are as competent as their White counterparts. However, they and their Black audience are still captive to that preexisting hybrid cultural canvas on which they, and other minorities, are led to play out their creativity.

This brings us to the latest, and perhaps most spectacular example of this dilemma, the Disney company’s movie Black Panther. I have two comments on this worldwide commercial success (the movie has grossed over a billion dollars).

– As with some of the examples given in the first part of this analysis, the movie exploits for profit an organization that was anti-capitalist. The giveaway is the title itself. The “Black Panther” is closely linked in cultural memory to an organization known as the Black Panther Party. This was a radical organization created in the 1960s to provide for the needs of poor Black neighborhoods (the group originated the idea of the school breakfast program) and to protect residents both from criminals and the police, who were viewed as racist occupiers. The Black Panther Party became the target of violent attacks by agents of the U.S. government and eventually destroyed.

– Having been rendered safe through its destruction, the Black Panther Party’s image could be reworked and then reintroduced back into the prevailing culture. The Disney movie does just this. This is not to say that the film does not have merit. Its depiction of strong Black women, Black scientists and technicians, and the able and successful Black civilization of Wakanda are inspiring. On the other hand, the savagery that is part of Wakanda’s succession process is problematic.

Overall, the movie is formulaic. It is a familiar good vs. bad scenario. There is a not entirely unsympathetic arch-villain, minor bad guys who come around to be good guys, and competitive tension in the good-guy camp. We have gangsters, government agents and almost non-stop violence. Nothing particularly original here. Nor is there anything original, and certainly nothing radical, about the film’s answer to the problems of poor African Americans – an outreach center in a needy urban neighborhood. By the way, this “cinematically portrayed help effort” works primarily because of the fantasy that there is a Black superpower backing it up. When real Black Panthers tried the same sort of outreach in the

1960s, they were arrested and sometimes murdered.

It is worrisome that the enthusiasm for the movie is based on a fantasy that essentially makes the tragedy of the real-life Black Panthers disappear. As the culture war now being fought in the U.S. between often racist ultra-conservatives and besieged progressives shows, we need change in the real world. Fantasy can give you a momentary lift and sense of pride, but in the end the real world's problems are still there.

In 1983, the Irish novelist Iris Murdoch remarked that “we live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.” Che Guevara, many graffiti artists, some of the “crazy ones” depicted in Apple’s “Think Different” campaign, the original radicals of the Weather Underground, and the members of the Black Panther Party, all knew what reality was. They wanted to change it without recourse to fantasy. And, each time their attempts were stymied by a system that judged human needs solely in terms of monetary profit. This is brilliantly demonstrated by the fact that the images of these enemies of the system have been re-presented to us as within the context of profitable fantasy. The process has been remarkably successful and remarkably lucrative. It is also depressing and, in terms of social progress, represents a road to nowhere.

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## Behind Colin Powell’s Legend – My Lai

**From the Archive:** With media focus on the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War’s My Lai massacre, Colin Powell’s role as a military adviser has continued to elude scrutiny, so we’re republishing a 1996 article by Robert Parry and Norman Solomon.

By Robert Parry and Norman Solomon (first published in 1996)

On March 16, 1968, a bloodied unit of the Americal division stormed into a hamlet known as My Lai 4. With military helicopters circling overhead, revenge-seeking American soldiers roused Vietnamese civilians – mostly old men, women and children – from their thatched huts and herded them into the village’s

irrigation ditches.

As the round-up continued, some Americans raped the girls. Then, under orders from junior officers on the ground, soldiers began emptying their M-16s into the terrified peasants. Some parents desperately used their bodies to try to shield their children from the bullets. Soldiers stepped among the corpses to finish off the wounded.

The slaughter raged for four hours. A total of 347 Vietnamese, including babies, died in the carnage that would stain the reputation of the U.S. Army. But there also were American heroes that day in My Lai. Some soldiers refused to obey the direct orders to kill.

A pilot named Hugh Clowers Thompson Jr. from Stone Mountain, Ga., was furious at the killings he saw happening on the ground. He landed his helicopter between one group of fleeing civilians and American soldiers in pursuit. Thompson ordered his helicopter door gunner to shoot the Americans if they tried to harm the Vietnamese. After a tense confrontation, the soldiers backed off. Later, two of Thompson's men climbed into one ditch filled with corpses and pulled out a three-year-old boy whom they flew to safety.

### **A Pattern of Brutality**

While a horrific example of a Vietnam war crime, the My Lai massacre was not unique. It fit a long pattern of indiscriminate violence against civilians that had marred U.S. participation in the Vietnam War from its earliest days when Americans acted primarily as advisers.

In 1963, Capt. Colin Powell was one of those advisers, serving a first tour with a South Vietnamese army unit. Powell's detachment sought to discourage support for the Viet Cong by torching villages throughout the A Shau Valley. While other U.S. advisers protested this countryside strategy as brutal and counter-productive, Powell defended the "drain-the-sea" approach then – and continued that defense in his 1995 memoirs, *My American Journey*.

After his first one-year tour and a series of successful training assignments in the United States, Maj. Powell returned for his second Vietnam tour on July 27, 1968. This time, he was no longer a junior officer slogging through the jungle, but an up-and-coming staff officer assigned to the Americal division.

By late 1968, Powell had jumped over more senior officers into the important post of G-3, chief of operations for division commander, Maj. Gen. Charles Gettys, at Chu Lai. Powell had been "picked by Gen. Gettys over several lieutenant colonels for the G-3 job itself, making me the only major filling that role in Vietnam," Powell wrote in his memoirs.

But a test soon confronted Maj. Powell. A letter had been written by a young specialist fourth class named Tom Glen, who had served in an Americal mortar platoon and was nearing the end of his Army tour. In a letter to Gen. Creighton Abrams, the commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, Glen accused the Americal division of routine brutality against civilians. Glen's letter was forwarded to the Americal headquarters at Chu Lai where it landed on Maj. Powell's desk.

"The average GI's attitude toward and treatment of the Vietnamese people all too often is a complete denial of all our country is attempting to accomplish in the realm of human relations," Glen wrote. "Far beyond merely dismissing the Vietnamese as 'slopes' or 'gooks,' in both deed and thought, too many American soldiers seem to discount their very humanity; and with this attitude inflict upon the Vietnamese citizenry humiliations, both psychological and physical, that can have only a debilitating effect upon efforts to unify the people in loyalty to the Saigon government, particularly when such acts are carried out at unit levels and thereby acquire the aspect of sanctioned policy."

Glen's letter contended that many Vietnamese were fleeing from Americans who "for mere pleasure, fire indiscriminately into Vietnamese homes and without provocation or justification shoot at the people themselves." Gratuitous cruelty was also being inflicted on Viet Cong suspects, Glen reported.

"Fired with an emotionalism that belies unconscionable hatred, and armed with a vocabulary consisting of 'You VC,' soldiers commonly 'interrogate' by means of torture that has been presented as the particular habit of the enemy. Severe beatings and torture at knife point are usual means of questioning captives or of convincing a suspect that he is, indeed, a Viet Cong...

"It would indeed be terrible to find it necessary to believe that an American soldier that harbors such racial intolerance and disregard for justice and human feeling is a prototype of all American national character; yet the frequency of such soldiers lends credulity to such beliefs. ... What has been outlined here I have seen not only in my own unit, but also in others we have worked with, and I fear it is universal. If this is indeed the case, it is a problem which cannot be overlooked, but can through a more firm implementation of the codes of MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) and the Geneva Conventions, perhaps be eradicated."

Glen's letter echoed some of the complaints voiced by early advisers, such as Col. John Paul Vann, who protested the self-defeating strategy of treating Vietnamese civilians as the enemy. In 1995, when we questioned Glen about his letter, he said he had heard second-hand about the My Lai massacre, though he did not mention it specifically. The massacre was just one part of the abusive pattern that had become routine in the division, he said.

## **Maj. Powell's Response**

The letter's troubling allegations were not well received at Americal headquarters. Maj. Powell undertook the assignment to review Glen's letter, but did so without questioning Glen or assigning anyone else to talk with him. Powell simply accepted a claim from Glen's superior officer that Glen was not close enough to the front lines to know what he was writing about, an assertion Glen denies.

After that cursory investigation, Powell drafted a response on Dec. 13, 1968. He admitted to no pattern of wrongdoing. Powell claimed that U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were taught to treat Vietnamese courteously and respectfully. The Americal troops also had gone through an hour-long course on how to treat prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions, Powell noted.

"There may be isolated cases of mistreatment of civilians and POWs," Powell wrote in 1968. But "this by no means reflects the general attitude throughout the Division." Indeed, Powell's memo faulted Glen for not complaining earlier and for failing to be more specific in his letter.

Powell reported back exactly what his superiors wanted to hear. "In direct refutation of this [Glen's] portrayal," Powell concluded, "is the fact that relations between Americal soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent."

Powell's findings, of course, were false. But it would take another Americal hero, an infantryman named Ron Ridenhour, to piece together the truth about the atrocity at My Lai. After returning to the United States, Ridenhour interviewed Americal comrades who had participated in the massacre.

On his own, Ridenhour compiled this shocking information into a report and forwarded it to the Army inspector general. The IG's office conducted an aggressive official investigation and the Army finally faced the horrible truth. Courts martial were held against officers and enlisted men implicated in the murder of the My Lai civilians.

But Powell's peripheral role in the My Lai cover-up did not slow his climb up the Army's ladder. Powell pleaded ignorance about the actual My Lai massacre, which pre-dated his arrival at the Americal. Glen's letter disappeared into the National Archives – to be unearthed only years later by British journalists Michael Bilton and Kevin Sims for their book *Four Hours in My Lai*. In his best-selling memoirs, Powell did not mention his brush-off of Tom Glen's complaint.

## **MAM Hunts**

Powell did include, however, a troubling recollection that belied his 1968

official denial of Glen's allegation that American soldiers "without provocation or justification shoot at the people themselves." After mentioning the My Lai massacre in *My American Journey*, Powell penned a partial justification of the American's brutality. In a chilling passage, Powell explained the routine practice of murdering unarmed male Vietnamese.

"I recall a phrase we used in the field, MAM, for military-age male," Powell wrote. "If a helo spotted a peasant in black pajamas who looked remotely suspicious, a possible MAM, the pilot would circle and fire in front of him. If he moved, his movement was judged evidence of hostile intent, and the next burst was not in front, but at him. Brutal? Maybe so. But an able battalion commander with whom I had served at Gelnhausen (West Germany), Lt. Col. Walter Pritchard, was killed by enemy sniper fire while observing MAMs from a helicopter. And Pritchard was only one of many. The kill-or-be-killed nature of combat tends to dull fine perceptions of right and wrong."

While it's certainly true that combat is brutal, mowing down unarmed civilians is not combat. It is, in fact, a war crime. Neither can the combat death of a fellow soldier be cited as an excuse to murder civilians. Disturbingly, that was precisely the rationalization that the My Lai killers cited in their own defense.

But returning home from Vietnam a second time in 1969, Powell had proved himself the consummate team player.

*For more on Colin Powell's real record, please [check out the "Behind Colin Powell's Legend" series.](#)*

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## 'Hostiles' and Hollywood's Untold Story

Hollywood's recent attempt to depict Frontier life captures the reality of "hostiles" shooting various weapons at one another, but the real history is more interesting, Jada Thacker explains in this essay.

By Jada Thacker

A theatrical poster for the recent American Western movie "Hostiles" depicts its principal characters – a Frontier widow, a hardboiled Indian fighter, and an Indian chief – with a helpful blurb stating the story's theme with the subtlety of a striking rattlesnake: "We are all hostiles."

Some critics think the movie somehow ought to have been a different one – that it should have included a bit more of this, or a bit less of that...whatever. Maybe they have a point. Though it hardly seems fair to ding “Hostiles” for being an imperfect example of the ideal Frontier fantasy.

But it is fair to criticize a movie for being a perfect example of a movie genre that consistently ignores the most essential themes of the American Frontier. “Hostiles” succeeds brilliantly as the latest addition to a very long list of movies that focus laser-like attention on hostile Frontier characters, rather than on the consequences of Frontier hostility.

The American Frontier was not, as Hollywood formerly portrayed it, merely a canvas background prop for a violent soap box drama starring Cowboys & Indians – or, as more recently re-imagined, an ethnic melodrama featuring white Bad Guys versus Noble Indian resistance.

Nor can the American Frontier be considered a particularly hostile place without expunging from history the slaughter-grounds of Cannae, Verdun, Stalingrad, or even America’s own Gettysburg – each of which produced more bloated corpses than any number of Wild Wests. In an encyclopedia of human violence, the massacres at the Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee would be relegated to a footnote.

Yet, the significance of the American Frontier endures. William Faulkner was not referring to the Frontier experience when he said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” but he was right.

Unacknowledged by the silver screen, contemporary America remains as hostile as it ever was to the Frontier dwellers of tee-pees, log cabins, wigwams, or army outposts. Every American today who rages at corrupt and incompetent government, who counts out their pennies for rent or mortgage, or who despairs of the growth-driven, mechanized rape of the American landscape can thank the American Frontier experience for their trouble.

## **Frontier Anarchy**

No government existed in North America at the time of European contact. The societies that pre-existed there lived in a condition of anarchy.

Although the term “anarchy” is used casually to denote a condition of chaos, it literally refers only to a society without government (from the Greek: a [without] + *archy* [rulers]). Anarchy is the *voluntary* self-organization of people without the use of authoritative force. Thus, anarchy does not denote an absence of social order, but only the absence of a *forcible* social order.

Anarchy is not an exception to human organization, but the rule – if we can

forgive the pun. All non-governmental organizations are anarchic, voluntary associations: sports teams, business entities, civic groups, church congregations, trade unions, symphony orchestras, and marriages included. American Indian societies had thrived just so without authoritative force for some 20,000 years before Europeans appeared to set things straight.

Immediately upon European arrival, the Frontier materialized as a lethal No Man's Land where the alien hierarchical order of government clashed catastrophically with indigenous anarchy. At issue was not just the survival of hostile individuals, but the survival of fundamentally hostile political cultures.

Unlike anarchy, government has nothing to do with the voluntary self-organization of society. Nobody ever volunteers to be arrested, pay fines, go to jail, or be executed – or pay the taxes necessary for doing so to others. And no such elements of coercion existed in North America prior to the importation of European authoritarianism. (When so-called “democratic government” later purported to banish British tyranny, it made certain to keep prisons and capital punishment intact.)

Moviegoers, no less than movie-makers and history textbooks, blithely assume that Indian leaders wielded the same authority as did government officials in white society. Not so. Indians had no officials because they had no offices. Indian chiefs led by example and inspiration only; they possessed no more coercive ability than a scoutmaster or a captain of a football team.

In any event, Indians had no written laws that begged enforcement. Anarchic political culture does not depend on the enforcement of rules and regulations, but upon free consent to them. A Wikipedia article summarizes the Abenaki people's consensual customs:

“Group decision-making was done by a consensus method. The idea is that every group (family, band, tribe, etc.) must have equal say, so each group would elect a spokesperson. Each smaller group would send the decision of the group to an impartial facilitator.

“If there was a disagreement, the facilitator would tell the groups to discuss again. In addition to the debates, there was a goal of total understanding for all members. If there was not total understanding, the debate would stop until there was understanding.

“When the tribal members debate issues, they consider the Three Truths: Peace: Is this preserved? Righteousness: Is it moral? Power: Does it preserve the integrity of the group?



“These truths guide all group deliberations, and the goal is to reach a consensus. If there is no consensus for change, they agree to keep the status quo.”

Not all Indian self-organization was this formal, but it all was intensely democratic. The hierarchical European political culture which ruled by indelible law, dictated by police and military forces and financed by forcible taxation, decidedly was not.

The collision of anarchy and government in America was not a melodramatic struggle between “good” and “evil.” But it did involve a spiritual choice – between a circle and a pyramid.

The Indian way was represented by a circle or hoop, symbolized physically by the Puebloan people’s *kiva*, a circular, ceremonial meeting place. The Lakota and other tribes conceived of universal order as a hoop. The symbolic meaning is one of balance and equality, with each member of society located equidistant from a common core. Indian leaders did not occupy the position of “top dog” or “king of the hill” but as central mediators among equals.

In contrast, all civilizations – including the white civilization that hovered in the wings of the Frontier stage – are pyramidal structures. In pyramidal culture, authority resides at the apex and flows only downward, forcibly if necessary. While pyramidal culture was not unique to the colonizing European culture of the day – Ancient Egyptians and Aztecs expressed their pyramidal culture in stone, just as current organization charts express our pyramids on paper – it was utterly foreign to the Indian consciousness.

So-called “Indian Nations” were conceptual fallacies that did not in fact exist. Even the famous Iroquois League, or Haudenosaunee, was not an example of “Indian government” and certainly not of pyramidal structure. It was a decentralized, voluntary confederacy – a hooplike “League of Peace” (ca.1140 – 1784) of its six constituent tribes – not a hierarchical command-and-control structure that dominated Indian society.

### **Frontier Economics**

Lest the Right-Libertarians among us applaud too loudly the absence of Big Government (or any government) in Indian society, the central conflict between white and red men (a term Indians used to describe themselves) was a contest between individualistic vs. collective property rights.

To be clear, Indians had a keen sense of territorial sovereignty. But this did not include personal property ownership, which was both unknown and an anathema to the Indian way. T.R Fehrenbach, a notable commentator on Frontier culture and

author of the encyclopedic *Comanches: The History of a People*, put it simply:

“Hypocrisy was perhaps inevitable in a people [whites] who convinced themselves that they were creating something new in the New World, while actually carrying out the most primordial form of conquest.”

But then he adds:

“Amerindians resisted all sincere imitation of their conquerors. Broken warriors refused to become economic men, to accept the concept of private property or the discipline of incessant labor.”

Quite frankly, the Comanche people (the *Nermernuh*) of whom Fehrenbach spoke were without doubt the most rapacious Indians that whites ever encountered. (Other Indians were intimidated by them, too, and for good reason, a point “Hostiles” duly observes.) Alongside hunting buffalo, raiding and stealing constituted the *raison d’etre* of their predatory society.

In fact, hostility and theft generally characterized Indian between-group behavior both before and after European arrival; they did not need the presence of whites to justify their elevation of lethal larceny to an art form. By the same token, European pioneers needed no particular excuse to exterminate Indians, or each another, while committing Grand Theft Continent.

Ironically, armed robbery was the primary economic activity whites and Indians shared in common. “Making a killing” by “hostile takeovers” of others’ property is not a new pony trick invented by corporate raiders.

But the ruthless exploitation of one’s own kinsmen and their resources is something else. This was as unthinkable to tribal peoples as it was premeditated by the bringers of civilization. The privatization of shared resources proved to be the profound and irreconcilable issue that separated the two peoples’ concepts of economic justice.

Even in abject defeat, Indians never shared the whites’ notion that the land’s resources could, or should, be monopolized as private property. Since Indians perceived themselves essentially as children of the Earth, private ownership of land made no more sense to them than a child claiming to own its parents.

Unlike whites, the Indian concept of territory was communal. What they possessed in common they defended in common. Their view of communal property rights flowed naturally from their egalitarian culture, which did not tolerate landlords or economic class distinctions.

Within any Indian band, no privileged economic class could exist simply because

there was no hierarchical power structure to sustain one. Since no Indian had the power to control the food supply of another, they were liberated at birth from the private monopolization of the “means of production.” Possession of property was not justified by individual privilege but was their common birthright.

Thus, Indian society was devoid of both private property and the State. This is inconvenient news for today’s Marxists and Right-Libertarians, alike.

Indian society repudiated the Right-Libertarian (anarcho-capitalist) notion that individual liberty requires the sanctity of private property ownership. No humans have exercised more individual liberty, nor owned less private property, than American Indians. Ownership of private property – which cannot and does not exist in the absence of government-sanctioned privilege – would not have conferred any liberty to Indians they did not already possess.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, Indian society also belied the Marxian notion that economics is determined to evolve from capitalism, through socialism, to the ideal of communism. In reality, American Indians had beat Marx to the punchline 20,000 years before he set pen to paper.

In modern parlance, Indians were communists long before communism was cool. Contemporary Indians may disavow Marx as an industrial materialist with no respect for their spiritual way; that doesn’t mean their people were not original communists, but only that they are not Marxists.

Marx was the latecomer – and then he got it all backwards. The American Frontier experience graphically demonstrated that humanity was not advancing toward a stateless, economic Utopia but was rooting out and laying waste to prehistoric communism wherever it still persisted.

All “isms” aside, reality reveals that whoever exercises effective ownership of a place rules it for their benefit. First and foremost, the Frontier was a place of a hostile and involuntary transfer of economic property from communal Indian ownership into the itchy palms of the private white owners who usually stood at the apex of an authoritarian pyramid.

### **Frontier Ecology**

Pre-contact Indians lived in Stone Age societies. They possessed no metal implements, and the highest level of tool technology available to them employed only stone, bone, and clay.

In *Stone Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins famously referred to Stone Age people as the “original affluent society” – not because they possessed much material

wealth, but rather because they required so little and because their modest needs were so readily fulfilled when compared to the far greater requirements of us Moderns.

On the other hand, we would be mistaken to believe Indians were conscious “environmentalists.” Like any society, theirs took from nature what was needed for survival. Stone Age people had no reason to conserve that which was beyond their power to despoil.

As Sahlins “original affluence” implies, the trick to achieving environmental sustainability does not lie in *not taking* what is needed, but in *not needing to take* more than the environment can afford. “What the environment can afford” is known in ecology-speak as *carrying capacity*.

More formally stated, carrying capacity is the ability of the environment to sustain a given population of organisms indefinitely. “Sustain” usually means “to feed” and “indefinitely” simply means “with no end in sight.” Thus, a given number of organisms that continues to live (and reproduce) within the means of its food-energy supply is “ecologically sustainable.”

In any event, “living sustainably” should not be conceptualized as “living in harmony with nature.” Nature is not a Barbershop Quartet. Nature is nothing if not a relentless, biological gang fight encompassing every organism on the planet. Each organism will lose the fight eventually, only to decompose into the itinerant molecules from which it was temporarily pasted together.

In fact, the natural *danse macabre* preserves ecological balance at the expense of harmony. Any cosmic harmony on the American Frontier, existed only under the influence of mezcal and peyote.

Moreover, just because an organism manages to survive individually does not imply that it lives in a sustainable society. Sustainability requires that a given *number* of organisms must be able to survive *indefinitely*. No environmental carrying capacity can sustain too many needy organisms, or even a few organisms that consume more food-energy than the environment can replace.

By any measure, however, American Indians had been living sustainably for millennia before Europeans waded ashore with their metallurgy, animal husbandry, intensive agriculture, literacy – and their marked tendency toward epidemic plagues, famine, industrialized warfare, and commercial-grade slavery. Upon arrival, the benighted invaders found practically nothing to remind them of their ecologically stressed homelands, which they had abandoned.

Nowhere in America did the colonizers find the privation, starvation, social depravity, and ecological wastage that characterized their soil-ravaged and

forest-denuded homeland. Having accidentally stumbled upon a Stone Age population that lived sustainably, civilized Europeans set about at once to destroy it, as they had done at home. Indeed, had Europeans possessed a sustainable culture, they would not have needed to ditch their depleted continent in search of lootable resources elsewhere.

The supreme irony of the Old-World invasion was that Europeans never realized the “savages” inhabiting the Americas were practically identical to their own ancestors, though a couple of hundred generations removed. Ecologically, the European invasion did not represent the wave of the future, but a retrogression to their own Edenic past.

The environmental devastation that had taken several thousand years to accomplish in Europe was replicated in three centuries in the Americas. Such was the price and the speed of the “progress” achieved on the American Frontier.

### **Frontier Armageddon**

The Frontier did not disappear just because the westward movement had run out of geographical space, its few Indian survivors having been herded into open-air prisons. Rather, the Frontier itself was destroyed by the westward migration of the Industrial Revolution – a truly monstrous creation of unrelenting factory toil, rolling on steel rails, powered by steam, and financed by perpetual human servitude to debt.

The terminal theme of the Frontier was not to be man’s conquest of nature, or even of man’s conquest of other men, but instead the industrial conquest of humanity. Metastasizing far beyond the “primordial form of conquest” of Indians by hypocritical whites, this final act of destruction was so complete that not even whites survived it.

A Stone Age world bound by blood kinship, loyalty, courage, intuition and revenge was within a single lifetime displaced by the depersonalized tyranny of contract law, freight schedules, time zones, taxes, universal debt and ‘no trespassing’ signs. Proud Indian warriors, brave Texas Rangers, indomitable pioneer sod-busters – all alike swept away only to be reincarnated by industrialized karma as sweatshop wage-slaves, coal mining troglodytes, and corporate lackeys.

After this cataclysm, we can rely on Hollywood to remind us now and again that the Frontier was where some hostile hombres ran amok shooting various weapons at one another – as if that is not the daily fare of modern-day America. The theatrical poster blurb “We are all hostiles” could be a permanent contemporary subtitle to American civilization.

But the American Frontier was not a blurb or a subtitle. It was a war that raged westward for 300 years before its place was lost to history. Yet, the ultimate loss of the Frontier was not *by* those fortunate few who once lived within the warzone; the greater loss was *to* those unfortunate multitudes who were fated to live thereafter without it. And that would be us.

Possibly lost to us forever has been our egalitarian self-determination, our common possession of the means of survival, our ecological sustainability, and our sense of the primacy of personal human worth. These hallmarks of human society have been eradicated so thoroughly that even celluloid fables of our own history betray hardly a trace of their multi-millennial existence. Unwilling to recall such a way of life, we retell only tales of hostility that surrounded its death.

But lest old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind, Americans everywhere now commemorate the first day of each calendar month with a nagging sense of loss – as befits the date on which the rent is due in this erstwhile Land of the Free.

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