

Living in a One-Superpower World: Edward Snowden vs. Robert Seldon Lady

Now You See Him, Now You Don't

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Global Research, July 30, 2013

[TomDispatch.com](#) 28 July 2013

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

He came and he went: that was the joke that circulated in 1979 when 70-year-old former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller had a heart attack and [died](#) in his Manhattan townhouse in the presence of his [evening-gown-clad](#) 25-year-old assistant. In a sense, the same might be said of retired CIA operative Robert Seldon Lady.

Recently, Lady proved a one-day wonder. After years in absentia — poof! — he reappeared out of nowhere on the border between Panama and Costa Rica, and made the news when Panamanian officials took him into custody on an Interpol warrant. The CIA's station chief in Milan back in 2003, he had achieved brief notoriety for overseeing a [la dolce vita version](#) of extraordinary rendition as part of Washington's Global War on Terror. His colleagues kidnapped Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, a radical Muslim cleric and terror suspect, [off the streets of Milan](#), and rendered him via U.S. airbases in Italy and Germany to the [torture chambers](#) of Hosni Mubarak's Egypt. Lady evidently rode shotgun on that transfer.

His Agency associates proved to be the crew that couldn't spook straight. They left behind such a traceable trail of five-star-hotel and restaurant bills, charges on false credit cards, and unencrypted cell phone calls that the Italian government [tracked them down](#), identified them, and [charged](#) 23 of them, Lady included, with kidnapping.

Lady fled Italy, leaving behind a multimillion-dollar villa near Turin meant for his retirement. (It was later confiscated and sold to make [restitution payments](#) to Nasr.) Convicted in absentia in 2009, Lady received a nine-year sentence (later reduced to six). He had by then essentially vanished after admitting to an Italian newspaper, "Of course it was an illegal operation. But that's our job. We're at war against terrorism."

Last week, the Panamanians picked him up. It was the real world equivalent of a magician's trick. He was nowhere, then suddenly in custody and in the news, and then — poof again! — he wasn't. Just 24 hours after the retired CIA official found himself under lock and key, he was flown out of Panama, evidently under the protection of Washington, and in mid-air, heading back to the United States, vanished a second time.

State Department spokesperson Marie Harf [told reporters](#) on July 19th, "It's my understanding that he is in fact either en route or back in the United States." So there he was, possibly in mid-air heading for the homeland and, as far as we know, as far as reporting goes, nothing more. Consider it the CIA version of a miracle. Instead of landing, he just evaporated.

And that was that. Not another news story here in the U.S.; no further information from government spokespeople on what happened to him, or why the administration decided to extricate him from Panama and protect him from Italian justice. Nor, as far as I can tell, were there any further questions from the media. When TomDispatch inquired of the State Department, all it got was this bit of stonewallese: “We understand that a U.S citizen was detained by Panamanian authorities, and that Panamanian immigration officials expelled him from Panama on July 19. Panama’s actions are consistent with its rights to determine whether to admit or expel non-citizens from its territory.”

In other words, he came and he went.

Edward Snowden: The Opposite of a Magician’s Trick

When Lady was first detained, there was a little flurry of news stories and a little *frisson* of tension. Would a retired CIA agent convicted of a serious crime involving kidnapping and torture be extradited to Italy to serve his sentence? But that tension had no chance to build because (as anyone might have predicted) luck was a Lady that week.

After all, the country that took him into custody on that Interpol warrant was a genuine rarity in a changing Latin America. It was still [an ally of the United States](#), which had once built a canal across its territory, controlled its politics for years, and in 1989 [sent in](#) the U.S. military to forcefully sort out those politics once again. Italy wanted Lady back and evidently requested that Panama hand him over (though the countries had no extradition treaty). But could anyone be surprised by what happened or by the role Washington clearly played in settling Lady’s fate? If you had paid any attention to the [global pressure](#) Washington was exerting in an “[international manhunt](#)” to get Edward Snowden, the NSA whistleblower it had already charged under the draconian Espionage Act, back to its shores, you knew which direction Robert Seldon Lady would be heading when he hit the nearest plane out of Panama — and I don’t mean Italy.

But here was the curious thing: when Panama sent him north, not east, there wasn’t the slightest ripple of U.S. media curiosity about the act or what lay behind it. Lady simply disappeared. While the Italian minister of justice “[deeply regretted](#)” Panama’s decision, there was not, as far as I can tell, a single editorial, outraged or otherwise, anywhere in this country questioning the Obama administration’s decision not to allow a convicted criminal to be brought to justice in the courts of a democratic ally or even praising Washington’s role in protecting him. And we’re not talking about a media with no interest in trials in Italy. Who doesn’t remember the wall-to-wall coverage of the murder trial (and retrial) of American student [Amanda Knox](#) there? For the American media, however, Lady clearly lacked Knox’s sex appeal (nor would he make [millions](#) off a future account of his Italian sojourn).

In this same period, there was, of course, another man who almost magically disappeared. In a transit area of Moscow’s international airport, Edward Snowden [discovered](#) that the U.S. government had deprived him of his passport and was determined to bring him back to Washington by just about any means to stand trial. That included [forcing the plane](#) of Bolivian President Evo Morales, returning from Moscow, to make an unscheduled landing in Austria and be searched for Snowden.

The NSA whistleblower was trapped in a kind of no-man’s-land by an Obama administration

demanding that the Russians turn him over or face the consequences. After which, for days, he disappeared from sight. In his case, unlike Lady's, however, Washington never stopped talking about him and the media never stopped speculating on his fate. It hasn't yet.

He's only appeared in public once since his "disappearance" — at a [press conference](#) at that airport with human rights activists from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The U.S. government promptly deplored and denounced the event as something Moscow "facilitated" or "orchestrated," a "propaganda platform," and a State Department spokesperson even [suggested](#) that Snowden, not yet convicted of anything, shouldn't have the right to express himself in Moscow or anywhere else.

The truth is: when it comes to Snowden, official Washington can't shut up. Congressional figures have denounced him as a "[traitor](#)" or a "[defector](#)." The world has repeatedly been lectured from the bully pulpit in our national capital on how necessary his return and trial is to freedom, justice, and global peace. Snowden, it seems, represents the opposite of a magician's trick. He can't disappear even when he wants to. Washington won't let him, not now, not — as officials have made clear — ever. It's a matter of morality that he faces the law and pays the (already preordained) price for his "crime." This, in today's Washington, is what passes for a self-evident truth.

The Lady Vanishes

It's no less a self-evident truth in Washington that Robert Seldon Lady must be protected from the long (Italian) arm of the law, that he is a patriot who did his duty, that it is the job of the U.S. government to keep him safe and never allow him to be prosecuted, just as it is the job of that government to protect, [not prosecute](#), CIA torturers who took part in George W. Bush's Global War on Terror.

So there are two men, both of whom, Washington is convinced, must be brought in: one to face "justice," one to escape it. And all of this is a given, nothing that needs to be explained or justified to anyone anywhere, not even by a Constitutional law professor president. (Of course, if someone had been accused of kidnapping and rendering an American Christian fundamentalist preacher and terror suspect off the streets of Milan to Moscow or Tehran or Beijing, it would no less self-evidently be a different matter.)

Don't make the mistake, however, of comparing Washington's positions on Snowden and Lady and labeling the Obama administration's words and actions "hypocrisy." There's no hypocrisy involved. This is simply the living definition of what it means to exist in a one-superpower world for the first time in history. For Washington, the essential rule of thumb goes something like this: we do what we want; we get to say what we want about what we do; and U.N. ambassadorial nominee Samantha Powers then gets to [lecture](#) the world on human rights and oppression.

This version of how it all works is so much the norm in Washington that few there are likely to see any contradiction at all between the Obama administration's approaches to Snowden and Lady, nor evidently does the Washington media. Its particular blind spots, when it comes to Washington's actions, remain striking — as when the U.S. effectively downed the Bolivian president and his plane. Although it was an act of seemingly self-evident illegality, there was [no serious reporting](#), no digging when it came to the behind-the-scenes acts of the U.S. government, which clearly pressured four or five European governments (one of which may have been Italy) to collude in the act. Nor, weeks later, has there been any

follow-up by the Washington media. In other words, an act unique in recent history, which left European powers [disgruntled](#) and left much of Latin America [up in arms](#), has disappeared without explanation, analysis, punditry, or editorial comment here. Undoubtedly, given the lack of substantial coverage, few Americans even know it happened.

The lucky Mr. Lady's story has followed a similar trajectory. Having vanished in mid-air, he has managed so far not to reappear anywhere in the U.S. press. What followed was no further news, editorial silence, and utter indifference to an act of protection that might otherwise have seemed to define illegality on an international level. There was no talk in the media, in Congress, or anywhere else about the U.S. handing over a convicted criminal to Italy, just about how the Russians must return a man Washington considers a criminal to justice.

This, then, is our world: a single megapower has, since September 2001, been in a financing and construction [frenzy](#) to create the first global surveillance state; its torturers run free; its kidnappers serve time at liberty in this country and are rescued if they venture abroad; and its whistleblowers — those who would let the rest of us know what "our" government is doing in our name — are pilloried. And so it goes.

All of it adds up to a way of life and the everyday tradecraft of a one-superpower world. Too bad Alfred Hitchcock isn't around to remake some of his old classics. Imagine what a thriller *The Lady Vanishes* would be today.

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