

Milosevic's Death: A Political Assassination blamed on the Victim

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In the summer of 2004 I met with former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in Scheveningen prison when I was approved as a defense witness. Before I could get in, I had to pass four totally separate check points, unable to take in anything but papers. Each level of security was more rigid than the one before.

No one who has met with President Milosevic over the past four years would believe he would risk killing himself rather than finishing his trial. And no one who visited Scheveningen in The Hague would believe the outlandish claims that somehow he was able to smuggle in un-prescribed medications on a regular basis. They would instead suspect that the authorities were desperately trying to cover up their own crimes.

My role as witness was based on my trip to Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, during the 78-day U.S./NATO bombing. I visited bombed schools, hospitals, heating plants and market places, recording the harm done to civilians. In addition, I had written since 1993 on the behind-the-scenes U.S. role in the strangulation and forced dismemberment of Yugoslavia.

Even after my name was accepted as a defense witness, it was a complicated and lengthy procedure to make the visit. Though all was approved on the day of the visit, it still took four hours to get through the checkpoints into the special unit inside the prison where the defendants for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) were kept totally segregated from general population and closely monitored.

Scheveningen prison is a maximum-security high-tech facility. Milosevic and other indicted prisoners are housed in a special prison unit within the larger prison. This section is spread over four floors with 12 cells each. The unit is specially patrolled by United Nations guards. Cameras are everywhere. Every movement of the prisoners is monitored and controlled. When the president was first placed in his cell, lights were kept on 24 hours a day and every motion was monitored.

WHERE DID RIFAMPICIN COME FROM?

Now the Dutch authorities claim that Milosevic was taking a rare, difficult-to-acquire antibiotic used to treat leprosy or tuberculosis that has the unique ability to counteract the medicine he was taking to control his high blood pressure. How did this medicine, rifampicin, get into Milosevic's system? He was held in a maximum security prison in triple lock down in a special contained unit within a larger Dutch prison once used by the Nazis to detain Dutch resistance fighters.

When rifampicin was found last Jan. 12 in Milosevic's blood, the ICTY kept the report of the

blood tests secret, even from Milosevic and his doctors, who were complaining that something terribly wrong was damaging the defendant's health. While the prisoner and his defense committee and assistant lawyers were demanding health information, the ICTY officials sat on this report. If ICTY officials responsible for Milosevic's health really believed he was sneaking toxic medications into the prison, why hadn't they publicized this report much earlier?

DELAYS HURT MILOSEVIC

Equally outlandish are the claims that Milosevic staged his illness to delay the trial. The prosecution delayed the trial, first by adding charges against the president regarding Croatia and Bosnia when they realized they had no war-crimes case on the original Kosovo charges, then by bringing hundreds of witnesses to generate 500,000 pages of prosecution testimony from February 2002 to February 2004.

Each time Milosevic was too sick to continue in court, the prosecution moved to impose counsel and to take away the prisoner's right to present his own defense. Milosevic was determined to use the trial as a platform to defend not only himself but the people of Yugoslavia, and to indict the U.S., Germany and the NATO powers for their role in the criminal destruction of his country. He welcomed the trial as the only platform where he could make the historical record. In his words to the court he constantly described why, despite his bad health, he was determined to continue.

When I met Milosevic it was in the special room that was the only place where the ICTY allowed him to work or have the court papers to prepare for his defense. Whenever his blood pressure rose and he was unable to continue the court sessions, he was also barred from any access to his defense materials.

During each step of the trial Milosevic's cardiovascular problems, especially his high blood pressure had resulted in several delays in the trial. At each step the ICTY officials tried to use the issue of his health in constant efforts to deny him the right to conduct his own defense. Neither the illness nor the delays helped his defense.

The ICTY charged that Milosevic was secretly medicating himself and avoiding taking prescribed medicines. Milosevic answered this charge himself for the court record on Sept. 1, 2004: "You probably don't know the practice in your own Detention Unit. I take my medication in the presence of guards. I'm given them. I take them in the presence of the guard, and the guard writes down in the book the exact time when I ingested those medicines."

Despite the life-threatening cardiovascular risk raised in every dispute with the prosecution, tribunal officials refused even to secure regular check-ups of the president's health condition. They also denied access for months to specialists who were willing to come to Scheveningen, delaying his care.

The president's own explanation of his problem was more consistent and credible than the ICTY's. In a letter addressed to the Russian Embassy two days before he died, Milosevic writes that he has taken no antibiotics in more than four years. He asks why the medical report on the discovery of rifampicin was kept secret from him for almost two months. He writes that he believes that "active steps are being taken to destroy my health." He warns that he is sure he is being poisoned and that his life is in danger.

A POLITICAL TRIBUNAL

The ICTY's handling of President Milosevic's death has been like its handling of the entire trial: an attempt to blame the victim for the crime.

The ICTY is not a real international court, with the ability to try any accused war criminal. It is a political court set up by the UN Security Council at the insistence of Secretary of State Madeline Albright in 1993 in violation of the UN Charter. Its scope is limited to trying the peoples of the former Yugoslavia and the vast majority of prisoners are Serbs. It is a propaganda apparatus and internment camp for political prisoners disguised as an unbiased court. It aims to punish the victims for the crimes committed against them and to absolve the imperialist powers who invaded, bombed, dismembered and forced the privatization of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia.

When Milosevic discussed the trial with me, his scope of historical knowledge, his energy despite his illness, cut through my own jet-lag and fatigue from the four-hour entrance hurdle and allowed us to finish the interview with enthusiasm for the next step of the tribunal.

Now the world is asked to believe that Milosevic is responsible for his own death. It is a scenario so incredibly complex, an elaborate suicide story that is as improbable as the charges he was facing. The bought-and-paid-for corporate media is accepting and propagating the story of his death in the same servile fashion they accepted the very existence of this illegal court and the justification for the destruction of Yugoslavia.

Milosevic is now gone. But his summation answering two years of the prosecution case and his opening defense speech live on. He has left a ringing indictment of U.S. and European big-power intervention in the Balkans in a historic document in an "I accuse" format. His speech, which contains extensive documentation and factual detail, has been published in Serbian, Greek, French, Russian and English. This response, "The Defense Speaks-for History and the Future," (IAC 2006) will stand long after the tawdry war propaganda has collapsed.

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