

# News Coverage of U.S. Foreign Policy. Media Bias by Omission

By [William Blum](#)

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[Anti-Empire Report](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

*"Bias in favor of the orthodox is frequently mistaken for 'objectivity'. Departures from this ideological orthodoxy are themselves dismissed as ideological."* – Michael Parenti

An exchange in January with Paul Farhi, *Washington Post* columnist, about coverage of US foreign policy:

Dear Mr. Farhi,

Now that you've done a study of al-Jazeera's political bias in supporting Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, is it perhaps now time for a study of the US mass media's bias on US foreign policy? And if you doubt the extent and depth of this bias, consider this:

There are more than 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States. Can you name a single paper, or a single TV network, that was unequivocally opposed to the American wars carried out against Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Panama, Grenada, and Vietnam? Or even opposed to any two of these wars? How about one? In 1968, six years into the Vietnam war, the Boston Globe surveyed the editorial positions of 39 leading US papers concerning the war and found that "none advocated a pull-out".

Now, can you name an American daily newspaper or TV network that more or less gives any support to any US government ODE (Officially Designated Enemy)? Like Hugo Chávez of Venezuela or his successor, Nicolás Maduro; Fidel or Raúl Castro of Cuba; Bashar al-Assad of Syria; Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran; Rafael Correa of Ecuador; or Evo Morales of Bolivia? I mean that presents the ODE's point of view in a reasonably fair manner most of the time? Or any ODE of the recent past like Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, Moammar Gaddafi of Libya, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, or Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti?

Who in the mainstream media supports Hamas of Gaza? Or Hezbollah of Lebanon? Who in the mainstream media is outspokenly critical of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians? And keeps his or her job?

Who in the mainstream media treats Julian Assange or Chelsea Manning as the heroes they are?

And this same mainstream media tell us that Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, et al. do not have a real opposition media.

The ideology of the American mainstream media is the belief that they don't have any ideology; that they are instead what they call "objective". I submit that there is something more important in journalism than objectivity. It is

capturing the essence, or the truth, if you will, with the proper context and history. This can, as well, serve as “enlightenment”.

It’s been said that the political spectrum concerning US foreign policy in the America mainstream media “runs the gamut from A to B”.

Sincerely, William Blum, Washington, DC

(followed by some of my writing credentials)

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Reply from Paul Farhi:

I think you’re conflating news coverage with editorial policy. They are not the same. What a newspaper advocates on its editorial page (the Vietnam example you cite) isn’t the same as what or how the story is covered in the news columns. News MAY have some advocacy in it, but it’s not supposed to, and not nearly as overt or blatant as an editorial or opinion column. Go back over all of your ODE examples and ask yourself if the news coverage was the same as the opinions about those ODEs. In most cases. I doubt it was.

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Dear Mr. Farhi,

Thank you for your remarkably prompt answer.

Your point about the difference between news coverage and editorial policy is important, but the fact is, as a daily, and careful, reader of the Post for the past 20 years I can attest to the extensive bias in its foreign policy coverage in the areas I listed. Juan Ferrero in Latin America and Kathy Lally in the Mideast are but two prime examples. The bias, most commonly, is one of omission more than commission; which is to say it’s what they leave out that distorts the news more than any factual errors or out-and-out lies. My Anti-Empire Report contains many examples of these omissions, as well as some errors of commission.

Incidentally, since 1995 I have written dozens of letters to the Post pointing out errors in foreign-policy coverage. Not one has been printed.

Happy New Year

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I present here an extreme example of bias by omission, in the entire American mainstream media: In my [last report](#) I wrote of the committee appointed by the president to study NSA abuses – Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies – which actually came up with a few unexpected recommendations in its report presented December 13, the most interesting of which perhaps are these two:

“Governments should not use surveillance to steal industry secrets to advantage their domestic industry.”

“Governments should not use their offensive cyber capabilities to change the amounts held in financial accounts or otherwise manipulate the financial systems.”

So what do we have here? The NSA being used to steal industrial secrets; nothing to do with fighting terrorism. And the NSA stealing money and otherwise sabotaging unnamed financial systems, which may also represent gaining industrial advantage for the United States.

Long-time readers of this report may have come to the realization that I’m not an ecstatic admirer of US foreign policy. But this stuff shocks even me. It’s the gross pettiness of “The World’s Only Superpower”.

A careful search of the extensive Lexis-Nexis database failed to turn up a single American mainstream media source, print or broadcast, that mentioned this revelation. I found it only on those websites which carried my report, plus three other sites: Techdirt, Lawfare, and Crikey (First Digital Media).

For another very interesting and extreme example of bias by omission, as well as commission, very typical of US foreign policy coverage in the mainstream media: First read the [January 31, page one, Washington Post article](#) making fun of socialism in Venezuela and Cuba.

Then [read the response from two Americans](#) who have spent a lot of time in Venezuela, are fluent in Spanish, and whose opinions about the article I solicited.

I lived in Chile during the 1972-73 period under Salvadore Allende and his Socialist Party. The conservative Chilean media’s sarcastic claims at the time about shortages and socialist incompetence were identical to what we’ve been seeing for years in the United States concerning Venezuela and Cuba. The *Washington Post* article on Venezuela referred to above could have been lifted out of Chile’s *El Mercurio*, 1973.

[Note to readers: Please do not send me the usual complaints about my using the name “America(n)” to refer to “The United States”. I find it to be a meaningless issue, if not plain silly.]

## JFK, RFK, and some myths about US foreign policy

On April 30, 1964, five months after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, was interviewed by John B. Martin in one of a series of oral history sessions with RFK. Part of the interview appears in the book “JFK Conservative” by Ira Stoll, published three months ago. (pages 192-3)

RFK: The president ... had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam and that we should win the war in Vietnam.

MARTIN: What was the overwhelming reason?

RFK: Just the loss of all of Southeast Asia if you lost Vietnam. I think everybody was quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall.

MARTIN: What if it did?

RFK: Just have profound effects as far as our position throughout the world, and our position in a rather vital part of the world. Also it would affect what

happened in India, of course, which in turn has an effect on the Middle East. Just as it would have, everybody felt, a very adverse effect. It would have an effect on Indonesia, hundred million population. All of those countries would be affected by the fall of Vietnam to the Communists.

MARTIN: There was never any consideration given to pulling out?

RFK: No.

MARTIN: ... The president was convinced that we had to keep, had to stay in there ...

RFK: Yes.

MARTIN: ... And couldn't lose it.

RFK: Yes.

These remarks are rather instructive from several points of view:

1. Robert Kennedy contradicts the many people who are convinced that, had he lived, JFK would have brought the US involvement in Vietnam to a fairly prompt end, instead of it continuing for ten more terrible years. The author, Stoll, quotes a few of these people. And these other statements are just as convincing as RFK's statements presented here. And if that is not confusing enough, Stoll then quotes RFK himself in 1967 speaking unmistakably in support of the war. It appears that we'll never know with any kind of certainty what would have happened if JFK had not been assassinated, but I still go by his Cold War record in concluding that US foreign policy would have continued along its imperial, anti-communist path. In Kennedy's short time in office the United States unleashed many different types of hostility, from attempts to overthrow governments and suppress political movements to assassination attempts against leaders and actual military combat; with one or more of these occurring in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, British Guiana, Iraq, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Cuba and Brazil.
2. "Just have profound effects as far as our position throughout the world, and our position in a rather vital part of the world." Ah yes, a vital part of the world. Has there ever been any part of the world, or any country, that the US has intervened in that was not vital? Vital to American interests? Vital to our national security? Of great strategic importance? Here's President Carter in his 1980 State of the Union Address: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America". "What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it to make war." – Simone Weil (1909-1943), French philosopher
3. If the US lost Vietnam "everybody was quite clear that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall." As I once wrote:

Thus it was that the worst of Washington's fears had come to pass: All of Indochina – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos – had fallen to the Communists. During the initial period of US involvement in Indochina in the 1950s, John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower and other American officials regularly issued doomsday pronouncements of the type known as the "Domino Theory",

warning that if Indochina should fall, other nations in Asia would topple over as well. In one instance, President Eisenhower listed no less than Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Indonesia amongst the anticipated “falling dominos”.

Such warnings were repeated periodically over the next decade by succeeding administrations and other supporters of US policy in Indochina as a key argument in defense of such policy. The fact that these ominous predictions turned out to have no basis in reality did not deter Washington officialdom from promulgating the same dogma up until the 1990s about almost each new world “trouble-spot”, testimony to their unshakable faith in the existence and inter-workings of the International Communist Conspiracy.

## Killing suicide

Suicide bombers have become an international tragedy. One can not sit in a restaurant or wait for a bus or go for a walk downtown, in Afghanistan or Pakistan or Iraq or Russia or Syria and elsewhere without fearing for one’s life from a person walking innocently by or a car that just quietly parked nearby. The Pentagon has been working for years to devise a means of countering this powerful weapon.

As far as we know, they haven’t come up with anything. So I’d like to suggest a possible solution. Go to the very source. Flood selected Islamic societies with this message: “There is no heavenly reward for dying a martyr. There are no 72 beautiful virgins waiting to reward you for giving your life for jihad. No virgins at all. No sex at all.”

Using every means of communication, from Facebook to skywriting, from billboards to television, plant the seed of doubt, perhaps the very first such seed the young men have ever experienced. As some wise anonymous soul once wrote:

A person is unambivalent only with regard to those few beliefs, attitudes and characteristics which are truly universal in his experience. Thus a man might believe that the world is flat without really being aware that he did so – if everyone in his society shared the assumption. The flatness of the world would be simply a “self-evident” fact. But if he once became conscious of thinking that the world is flat, he would be capable of conceiving that it might be otherwise. He might then be spurred to invent elaborate proofs of its flatness, but he would have lost the innocence of absolute and unambivalent belief.

We have to capture the minds of these suicide bombers. At the same time we can work on our own soldiers. Making them fully conscious of their belief, their precious belief, that their government means well, that they’re fighting for freedom and democracy, and for that thing called “American exceptionalism”. It could save them from committing their own form of suicide.

## Notes

1. *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1968, p.2-A
2. *New York Times*, April 8, 1954

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