

Obama and the Truth Agenda. The Sarin Mystery and the Tonkin Precedent

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Image: President Barack Obama talks with Secretary of State John Kerry and National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice in the Oval Office on March 19, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Before last month's elections, the Democrats thought it would be smart to avoid policy debates. So, they delayed action on immigration, kept President Barack Obama away from many races, and withheld the Senate's report on CIA torture – while following a “legacy” strategy of nominating Senate candidates with famous family names. The Democrats got clobbered and all their “legacy” candidates went down to defeat.

It turns out that this sort of strategy is not just anti-democratic – by hiding the issues so the people don't get a chance to weigh in before an election – but it's bad politics, too. Since then, the Democrats have moved forward with a different approach, with President Obama enunciating a somewhat more humane immigration policy and finally allowing release of the executive summary of the torture report.

And, surprise, surprise, the sky hasn't fallen. Yes, some Republicans have grumbled about Obama abusing his executive powers over immigration, and some torture-implicated CIA officials and a few far rightists continued quibbling that the torture wasn't really torture. But the backlash has been surprisingly mild. Generally speaking, the American people especially seem okay with the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee's torture report.

Even the Washington Post's neocon editorial page praised the long-delayed disclosures. After citing the horrifying examples of near drownings, painful stress positions, sleep deprivations and “rectal feeding,” the Post concluded: “This is not how Americans should behave. Ever.”

So, what's the lesson here? It may be that the American people – or at least many of them – are ready for some truth-telling, whether it's about how black and brown people are treated in this country or about abuses committed by the government that should be confronted and corrected.

Maybe, these Americans are sick and tired of being treated like children or idiots – and perhaps the new “smart” political play, as well as the right pro-democracy move, is to start respecting the people by giving them facts, not just pabulum and propaganda.

So, President Obama might consider following up his new immigration policy and the recent protests against the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner with a new commission on race in America (like the 1960s Kerner Commission which warned that “Our nation is

moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal”).

And he might continue reinvigorating American democracy by sharing more facts with the American people. From the same era that brought us CIA “black sites,” it would be a no-brainer for Obama to release the hidden pages of the 9/11 report on Saudi funding of the hijackers.

As Saudi Arabia today pushes the United States to engage in a “regime change” in Syria – a move that could lead to a victory by al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front affiliate or the Islamic State – the American people might want to know exactly which side the Saudi “allies” are on.

Obama also shouldn’t stop at just releasing unnecessary secrets from George W. Bush’s administration. He should update the American people on controversies in which his own administration rushed to judgments regarding issues related to war or peace.

The Sarin Mystery

On Syria, for instance, [the Saudis \(along with Turkey and Israel\)](#) almost fulfilled their dream of getting the U.S. military to destroy President Bashar al-Assad’s defenses after Secretary of State John Kerry and other U.S. officials and media jumped to the conclusion that Assad was at fault for a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Though the furor over that incident brought the United States to the brink of another Mideast war, many of the supposed “facts” cited by Kerry and the others [have crumbled](#) under closer scrutiny, such as the belief that a barrage of rockets carried the sarin from a Syrian military base when a subsequent United Nations investigation discovered only one sarin-laden rocket. Rocket experts also concluded that its very limited range traced more likely to rebel-held territory.

In other words, the sarin attack may well have been a rebel provocation meant to draw the U.S. military into the Syrian civil war on the side of the rebels whose most effective fighters are connected to either al-Qaeda or the even more extreme Islamic State. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?](#)”]

More than a year later, U.S. intelligence analysts have a much more comprehensive take on what actually happened, and President Obama could declassify that information even if it embarrasses Secretary Kerry and other high-ranking members of the administration. If the Assad regime was falsely accused, there is also a fairness imperative to correct the record regardless of what you think about Assad.

Similarly, U.S. intelligence analysts have amassed substantial data on another crucial event, one that has ratcheted up war tensions in Eastern Europe, the July 17 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine. Kerry and others rushed to blame the ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who supposedly gave the rebels the sophisticated surface-to-air missiles capable of bringing down a plane at 33,000 feet.

The stampede of anti-Russian outrage was so strong that the European Union agreed to U.S. demands for economic sanctions against Moscow, touching off a trade war that has made life harder for people in both Russia and Europe. The shoot-down also gave impetus to the Kiev regime’s “anti-terrorist operation” in eastern Ukraine, dispatching neo-Nazi and other

paramilitary militias who have spearheaded the killing of thousands of ethnic Russians.

But I'm told that some U.S. intelligence analysts now view the MH-17 incident much differently from the first few days, with the possibility that the shoot-down may have been committed by [a rogue element](#) of the Ukrainian military, possibly trying to bring down a Russian plane and mistakenly destroying the Malaysian airliner which had similar markings.

Whatever the current thinking about who was to blame, clearly U.S. intelligence has much more data today than was available in July when Kerry [went](#) on all five Sunday shows pointing the finger at Russia and was joined in his hasty conclusion by virtually the entire U.S. mainstream media.

Obama owes it to the American people and to the families of the 298 dead to release all available U.S. evidence regarding the guilty parties – even if that again embarrasses his Secretary of State.

The Tonkin Precedent

Kerry himself should want the full story told regarding both the Syrian sarin case and the Malaysia plane shoot-down, since – as a young man – he was drawn into the Vietnam War based on false reporting about the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. A suspected clash between North Vietnamese forces and a U.S. destroyer became the basis for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which provided the legal authorization for the Vietnam War.

In the Gulf of Tonkin case, senior officials of Lyndon Johnson's administration soon realized that the attack probably never happened. But that reality was kept hidden from the American people for years as the slaughter went on, with 58,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese dying. If the factual correction had been made in a timely manner, many of those dead, including servicemen who served with Lt. John Kerry, might have been saved.

However, Kerry, now 70, has become like the older men who sent him and his comrades to fight in Vietnam, more concerned about reputation and pride inside Official Washington than about the blood and suffering of the people affected by misdirected U.S. policies. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What's the Matter with John Kerry?](#)"]

Today, Kerry's State Department appears to see both the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine as battlefields where U.S. "hard power" is limited so a decision has been made to use propaganda or "information warfare" as a "soft power" alternative.

Thus, exploiting these terrible tragedies – hundreds dying from sarin exposure and 298 dying from a plane attack – is viewed as a way to put the U.S. "adversaries" – Assad and Putin, respectively – on the defensive. In this propaganda world, truth is lost to expediency.

Further following the Tonkin Gulf analogy, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [a highly belligerent anti-Russian resolution](#) on Dec. 4, by a 411-10 margin. It cited as one justification for sending U.S. military equipment and trainers to Ukraine the supposed "fact" that "Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a civilian airliner, was destroyed by a Russian-made missile provided by the Russian Federation to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, resulting in the loss of 298 innocent lives."

But the case of MH-17 is far from resolved, although clearly President Obama has access to information about the incident that could either help confirm or refute the congressional

assertion. Yet, he continues to hide that knowledge from the American people as the United States and Russia inch toward a possible nuclear confrontation over Ukraine.

So, it may be time for Obama to embrace a “truth agenda.” After all, facts have a special place in a democracy, which is dependent on an informed electorate to function, and information should be withheld from the public only in extraordinary circumstances.

However, after the early days of his administration, when Obama did release some important documents relating to the legal opinions that justified Bush’s torture policies, the President lost his way regarding respect for the people’s right to know.

Obama became immersed in the gamesmanship of Official Washington where control of information is regarded as a measure of one’s power. But that allowed the Tea Party and others on the Right to present themselves as “populists” who were standing up against the elites, even though many Republicans were more wedded to secrecy than Obama was.

Now, however, Obama is seeing – amid the positive reaction to the release of the torture report – that many Americans are hungry for facts. They, too, understand that information is power and sense that the political leader who trusts them with that power is the one most on their side.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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