

William Blum: Anti-Imperial Advocate

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In the incessant self-praise of the US imperial project, kept safe in a state of permanently enforced amnesia, occasional writings prod and puncture. Mark Twain expressed an ashamed horror at the treatment of the Philippines; Ulysses Grant, despite being a victorious general of the Union forces in the Civil War and US president, could reflect that his country might, someday, face its comeuppance from those whose lands had been pinched.

In the garrison state that emerged during the Cold War, the New Left provided antidotes of varying strength to the illusion of a good, faultless America, even if much of this was confined to university campuses. Mainstream newspaper channels remained sovereign and aloof from such debates, even if the Vietnam War did, eventually, bite.

The late William Blum, former computer programmer in the US State Department and initial enthusiast for US moral crusades, gave us various exemplars of this counter-insurgent scholarship. His compilation of foreign policy ills in [Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower](#), was written with the US as sole surveyor of the land, all powerful and dangerously uncontained. To reach that point, it mobilised such familiar instruments of influence as the National Endowment for Democracy and the School of the Americas, a learning ground for the torturers and assassins who would ply their despoiling trade in Latin America. The imperium developed an unrivalled military, infatuated with armaments, to deal with its enemies. Forget the canard, insists Blum, of humanitarian intervention, as it was espoused to justify NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

His [Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II](#), remains his best and potently dispiriting affair, one in which Washington and its Christian warriors sought to battle the "International Communist Conspiracy" with fanatical, God-fearing enthusiasm. In this quest, foreign and mostly democratically elected governments were given the heave-ho with the blessings of US intervention. Food supplies were poisoned; leaders were subjected to successful and failed assassinations (not so many were as lucky as Cuba's Fidel Castro); the peasantry of countries sprayed with napalm and insecticide; fascist forces and those of reaction pressed into the service of Freedom's Land.

The squirreling academic, ever mindful of nuts, has been less willing to embrace Blum. This has, to some extent, been aided by such curious instances as the mention, by one Osama bin Laden, of [Rogue State](#) in a recording that emerged in 2006.

"If I were president I could stop terrorist attacks against the United States in a few days. Permanently."

Sales surged at this endorsement from the dark inspiration behind September 11, 2001.

“This is almost,” [observed](#) Blum wryly, “as good as being an Oprah book.”

Killing Hope, praised by various high priests in academe on its initial release in 1986, morphed. Various extensions and additions were not approved. Blum, considering the US in its vicious full bloom of the post-Cold War, saw the wickedness of the market in Eastern European countries, the hand of US power in sabotaging negotiations between the Muslims, Croats and Serbs in Bosnia that led to an ongoing murderous conflict, and ongoing mischief in the Middle East (the Syrian Civil War, sponsored jihadists).

Much of this, admittedly, finds an audience, if only for the fact that it excuses, to some extent, local factors and failings. Students of imperial history tend to forget the manipulations of local elites keen to ingratiate themselves and sort out problems with the aid of a foreign brute. It is worth pointing out that, in the vastness of US power, a certain incompetence in exercising it has also prevailed.

But the groves of the academy have tended to sway away from Blum for many of the usual reasons: tenure, security and treading carefully before the imperium’s minders.

“It merits mention,” [poses](#) Julia Muravska, very keen to mind her P’s and Q’s before the academic establishment as a doctoral candidate, “that after the release of the last majorly revised edition in 1995, successive versions of *Killing Hope* have largely passed under the radar of mainstream punditry and academia, but remained stalwartly cherished not only in left-leaning circles, but also amongst conspiracy theorists and fringe commentators.”

Such is the damning strategy here: to be credible, you must wallow in mainstream acceptance and gain acknowledgment from the approving centre; to be at the fringe is to not merely to be unaccepted but unacceptable. Amnesia is a funny old thing. While Blum’s scholarship at points had the failings of overstretch, a counteracting zeal, his overall polemics, and advocacy, were part of a tradition that continues to beat in an assortment of publications that challenge the central premises of US power.

Much of Blum’s takes remain dangerously pertinent. “Fake news” has assumed a born-again relevance, when it should simply be termed measured disinformation, one that the CIA and its associates engaged in, and still do, with varying degrees of success. The Russians hardly deserve their supposed monopoly on the subject, though they are handy scapegoats.

Blum did well to note an absolute pearler by way of example: the efforts of the CIA’s Office of Policy Coordination and the US Post Office to solicit a letter writing campaign in 1948 to influence the course of Italy’s 1948 elections. American Italians, or so it was thought, were mobilised to swamp the mother country with warnings of atheistic communism and the threat it posed to Catholic authority. Should Italy turn red, US largesse and aid would stop flowing to a country still suffering from the ills of war. Italians known to have voted communist would not be permitted to enter the US.

Some individuals, guided by samples run in newspapers, offered specimens, but it soon became a campaign featuring “mass-produced, pre-written, postage paid form letters, cablegrams, ‘educational circulars’ and posters, needing only an address and signature.” Italian political parties, generally those of centre, could count on the CIA for a helpful

contribution.

Empire remains a terrible encumbrance, draining and ruining both the paternal centre and its patronised subjects. It is a salient reminder as to why Montesquieu insisted on the durability of small republics, warning against aggrandizement. Doing so produces the inevitable, vengeful reaction. As Blum [surmised](#),

“The thesis in my books and my writing is that anti-American terrorism arises from the behaviour of US foreign policy. It is what the US government does which angers people all over the world.”

To that end, his mission, as [described](#) to the *Washington Post* in an interview in 2006, has been one of, if not ending the American empire, then “at least slowing down” or “injuring the beast.”

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