

Who Will Blow the Whistle Before We Attack Iran?

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Global Research, February 18, 2006

[truthout](#) 18 February 2006

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The question looms large against the backdrop of the hearing on whistleblowing scheduled for tomorrow afternoon by Christopher Shays, chair of the House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations. Among those testifying are Russell Tice, one of the sources who exposed illegal eavesdropping by the National Security Agency, and Army Sgt. Sam Provance, who told his superiors of the torture he witnessed at Abu Graib, got no satisfaction, and felt it his duty to go public. It will not be your usual hearing.

I had the privilege of being present at the creation of the international Truth-Telling Coalition on September 9, 2004 and of working with Daniel Ellsberg in drafting the coalition's [Appeal to Current Government Officials](#) to put loyalty to the Constitution above career and to expose dishonesty leading to misadventures like the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Whether or not encouragement from the Coalition played any role in subsequent disclosures, we are grateful for those responsible for the recent hemorrhaging of important information – from the “Downing Street Minutes,” showing that by summer 2002 the Bush administration had decided to “fix” intelligence to “justify” war on Iraq, to disclosures regarding CIA kidnappings, secret prisons, and state-sponsored torture.

As former FBI translator Sibel Edmonds, who leads the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition, keeps reminding us, “Information is the oxygen of democracy.” And with this administration’s fetish for secrecy and our somnolent Fourth Estate, we would likely all suffocate without patriotic truth-tellers (aka whistleblowers).

Whistleblowing and Vietnam

There are several times as many potential whistleblowers as there are actual ones. I regret that I never got out of the former category during the early stages of the Vietnam War, when I had a chance to try to stop it. I used to lunch periodically with my colleague Sam Adams, with whom I trained as a CIA analyst and who was given the task of assessing Vietnamese Communist strength early in the war. Sam proved himself the consummate analyst. Relying largely on captured documents, he concluded that there were twice as many Communists (about 600,000) under arms in the South as the US military there would admit to.

Adams learned from Army analysts that Gen. William Westmoreland had placed an artificial cap on the official Army count rather than risk questions regarding the prospects for “staying the course” (sound familiar?). It was a clash of cultures, with Army intelligence analysts following politically dictated orders, and Sam Adams aghast. In a cable dated August 20, 1967, Westmoreland’s deputy, Gen. Creighton Abrams, set forth the rationale for the deception. The new, higher numbers, he said “were in sharp contrast to the current

overall strength figure of about 299,000 given to the press.” Noting that “We have been projecting an image of success over recent months,” Abrams cautioned that if the higher figures became public, “all available caveats and explanations will not prevent the press from drawing an erroneous and gloomy conclusion.”

When Sam’s superiors decided to acquiesce in the Army’s figures, Sam was livid. He told me the whole story over lunch, and I remember a long silence as each of us ruminated on what might be done. I recall thinking to myself, someone should take the Abrams cable down to the New York Times (at the time an independent newspaper). The only reason for the cable’s “SECRET EYES ONLY” classification was to hide the deception.

I adduced a slew of reasons why I ought not to: a plum overseas assignment for which I was in the final stages of language training; a mortgage; the ethos of secrecy; and, not least, the analytic work (which was important, exciting work, and which Sam and I both thrived on). One can, I suppose, always find reasons for not sticking one’s neck out. For the neck, after all, is a convenient connection between head and torso. But if there is nothing for which you would risk your neck, it has become your idol, and necks are not worthy of that. I much regret giving such worship to my own neck.

As for Sam, he chose to go through grievance channels and got the royal run-around, even after the Communist countrywide offensive at Tet in January-February 1968 proved beyond any doubt that his count of Communist forces was correct. When the offensive began, as a way of keeping his sanity, Adams drafted a cable saying, “It is something of an anomaly to be taking so much punishment from Communist soldiers whose existence is not officially acknowledged.” But he did not think the situation at all funny.

Dan Ellsberg Steps In

Sam kept playing by the rules, but it happened that – unbeknownst to Sam – Dan Ellsberg gave Sam’s figures on enemy strength to the (then independent) New York Times, which published them on March 19, 1968. Dan had learned that President Lyndon Johnson was about to bow to Pentagon pressure to widen the war into Cambodia, Laos, and up to the Chinese border – perhaps even beyond. Later, it became clear that his timely leak – together with another unauthorized disclosure to the Times that the Pentagon had requested 206,000 more troops – prevented a wider war. On March 25, Johnson complained to a small gathering, “The leaks to the New York Times hurt us ... We have no support for the war ... I would have given Westy the 206,000 men.”

Ironically, Sam himself played by the rules; that is, until he learned that Dan Ellsberg was on trial for releasing the Pentagon Papers and was being charged with endangering national security by revealing figures on enemy strength. Which figures? The same old faked numbers from 1967! “Imagine,” said Adams, “hanging a man for leaking faked numbers,” as he hustled off to testify on Dan’s behalf.

Ellsberg, who copied and gave the Pentagon Papers – the 7,000-page top secret history of US decision-making on Vietnam – to the New York Times and Washington Post, has had difficulty shaking off the thought that, had he released them in 1964 or 1965, war might have been averted.

Like so many others, I put personal loyalty to the president above all else –

above loyalty to the Constitution and above obligation to the law, to truth, to Americans, and to humankind. I was wrong.

And so was I, it now seems, in not asking Sam for that cable from Gen. Abrams. Sam, too, eventually had strong regrets. When the war drew down, he was tormented by the thought that, had he not let himself be diddled by the system, the left half of the Vietnam Memorial wall would not be there, for there would be no names to chisel into such a wall. Sam Adams died prematurely at age 55 with nagging remorse that he had not done enough.

In a letter appearing in the (then independent) New York Times on October 18, 1975, John T. Moore, a CIA analyst who worked in Saigon and the Pentagon from 1965 to 1970, confirmed Adam's story after Sam told it in detail in the May 1975 issue of Harper's magazine:

My only regret is that I did not have Sam's courage ... The record is clear. It speaks of misfeasance, nonfeasance and malfeasance, of outright dishonesty and professional cowardice. It reflects an intelligence community captured by an aging bureaucracy, which too often placed institutional self-interest or personal advancement before the national interest. It is a page of shame in the history of American intelligence.

Next Challenge: Iran

Anyone who has been near a TV in recent weeks has heard the drumbeat for war on Iran. The best guess for timing is next month.

Let's see if we cannot do better this time than we did on Iraq. Patriotic truth tellers, we need you! In an interview last year with US News and World Report, Republican Senator Chuck Hagel said that on Iraq, "The White House is completely disconnected from reality ... It's like they're just making it up as they go along."

Ditto for an adventure against Iran. But the juggernaut has begun to roll; the White House/FOX News/Washington Times spin machine is at full tilt. This is where whistleblowers come in. Some of you will have the equivalent of the Gen. Abrams cable, shedding light on what the Bush administration is up to beneath the spin. Those of you clued into Israeli plans and US intelligence support for them might clue us in too. Don't bother this time with the once-independent Congressional oversight committees; you will have no protection, in any case, if you choose that route - CIA Director Porter Goss's recent claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Nor should you bother with the once-independent New York Times. Find some other way; just be sure you get the truth out - information that will provide the oxygen for democracy.

Better Late Than Never?

Don't wait until it's too late - like Dan Ellsberg and Sam Adams did on Vietnam. Any number of people would have had a good chance of stopping the Iraq war, had they the courage to disclose publicly what they knew BEFORE it was launched.

One of them, Paul Pillar, was national intelligence officer for the Middle East from 2000 to 2005, and has just published an article in Foreign Affairs titled "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq." It is an insider's account of his tenure and the "disturbing developments" he

witnessed on the job. In substance it tells us little more than what we have long since pieced together ourselves, but it provides welcome confirmation.

Sadly, Pillar speaks of the politicization of intelligence as though it were a bothersome headache rather than the debilitating cancer it is. Interviewed on NPR, he conceded without any evident embarrassment that, with respect to Iraq, “intelligence was not playing into a decision to be made. It was part of the effort to build support for the operation.” So, in the vernacular of Watergate, Pillar’s article is “modified limited hangout,” in which he pulls many punches. Nowhere in Pillar’s 4,450 words, for example, appears the name of former CIA director George Tenet, whom he now joins at Georgetown University.

It should qualify as another “disturbing development” that Pillar parrots the administration’s default explanation for what drove its decision to topple Saddam: “namely, the desire to shake up the sclerotic power structures in the Middle East and hasten the spread of more liberal politics and economics in the region.” The word “oil” appears once in Pillar’s article: “military bases” and “Israel” not at all. He splits hairs to be overly kind to former Secretary of State Colin Powell. “To be fair,” writes Pillar, “Secretary Powell’s presentation at the UN never explicitly asserted that there was a cooperative relationship between Saddam and al-Qaeda.” Pillar seem to have forgotten how Powell used that speech to play up “the potentially more sinister nexus between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder,” and spoke of a “Saddam-bin Laden understanding going back to the early and mid-1990s.”

Truly Disturbing

Generally absent is any sense of the enormity of what the Bush administration has done and the urgent imperative to prevent a repeat performance. With no perceptible demurral from inside the government, George W. Bush launched a war of aggression, defined by the Nuremberg Tribunal as “the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes only in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole” - like torture, for example.

If this doesn’t qualify for whistleblowing, what does? Let us hope that administration officials, or analysts - or both - will find the courage to speak out loudly, and early enough to prevent the “disconnected-from-reality” cabal in the Bush administration from getting us into an unnecessary war with Iran.

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