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## Review

### Empire of the senseless

By Adam Engel

Online Journal Contributing Writer

### Freeing The World to Death

By William Blum

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December 4, 2004—William Blum, one of the great American historians of the post WWII period, surely one of the boldest and most interesting, has his work cut out for him.

From 1946 until now, this moment, and in the foreseeable future, the U.S. Empire's record of invasions, interventions and general malicious meddling in the governments, societies and "freedoms" of foreign peoples is virtually unparalleled in the history of meddling Empires. Never have so many been made so miserable so often by so few. And it's all on the public record, or enough of it to fill tomes denser by orders of magnitude than the two previous volumes, *Killing Hope* and *Rogue State*, both sizeable books Bill Blum has already written (he also penned a fascinating autobiography, *West Bloc Dissident*, regarding the pursuit of intellectual liberty in the totalitarian mindscape of the "free world").

Unlike most "academic" historians, Blum's style is to rely not on obscure scholarly journals or information grudgingly released by the government under the Freedom of Information Act, but on everyday newspapers accessible to all: the bulk of his citations come from dailies such as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, the *London Guardian*, *The Observer* and others, both full-size and tabloid, that millions read regularly as hard-copy or on the web but do not penetrate. Unlike Blum, they/we do not read between the lines, but accept the relentless propaganda churned out by Washington and Wall Street and dutifully "reported" by the nations "most respected" papers as truth. Hence the charade of "objective journalism" in which every uncomfortable fact or point of view is "balanced" by a cheerful explanation of "what's really going on" by a government official or hack journalist/lobbyist hired to help the public "understand" the news.

It's not that Blum trusts the mainstream newspapers more than the "alternative" (more appropriately called "independent") journals and websites he himself writes for, or that he hasn't waited years for various tidbits to be released under the FOIA. Rather, it is his method to record and comment upon events that are exposed to all, accessible to all, even read by some, but seldom seen for what they really are and, on such rare occasions, never believed. To believe the truth about U.S. foreign policy would be to fight against it with every fiber of one's being, or live a quiet, desperate lie. Fortunately, Blum has chosen the former, for if we assume that what has taken place since the end of WWII has actually taken place, that it is not the result of a conspiracy to fool us into thinking the world is bad, or worse, *America* is bad, "We the People" don't know anything. Or worse: we don't care.

But what about Bill Blum, author of the essays collected in *Freeing the World to Death*? Well, he's an historian, he's supposed to know stuff. Does that excuse us from not knowing? Or allow us to deliberately tell ourselves childish lies, such as we're "liberating" the people of Iraq by slaughtering 100,000 of them,

not to mention the 100,000 we slaughtered in Persian Gulf I and the several hundred thousand, perhaps a million, we killed after that, literally starved, with sanctions.

Well, if Uncle Sam did it, it must have been the right thing. Even Madeleine Albright, who was not only gainfully employed, but rose to the position of secretary of state, said all the living people who became dead ones during the sanctions were "worth it." That is, worth more to The Empire dead than alive. In America, and perhaps beyond, that is the conventional wisdom, "all that goes without saying," to paraphrase Nietzsche, who noticed some troubling trends in German culture that were later to manifest themselves in the ugliness, barbarism, mass murder and plain old tackiness of Nazism. What Blum argues is not so much the hypocrisy of the American government, but the gullibility or "willful ignorance" of the American people. Blum takes his citations from some of the most popular news sources of our time. The facts are there for everyone to see. Yet we don't see, or we gaze with eyes wide shut.

The United States, "leader of the free world" has spent over 50 years harassing over 100 countries worldwide, compiling a nearly spotless record of always supporting the most brutal, corrupt, and murderous dictators, even schooling these exotic beasts in the American way of torture and murder at the infamous School of the Americas, whose graduates rank among the vilest representatives of our species.

*Freeing the World to Death* cites sources that are familiar to many of us as the daily paper on the street or the URL that's so commonplace it's often pre-packaged as a "News Site" bookmark with new Internet browsers (though since 9/11, U.S. journalism has become such an obvious public relations arm of Washington and Wall Street that Blum has turned to the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, both British papers, to find out what's actually happening as a result of U.S. foreign policy). In his previous books, *Killing Hope*, and *Rogue State*, Blum demonstrated that today's journalism is tomorrow's history, culling the most outrageous transgressions of the U.S. against the rest of the planet (and its own citizens, who end up fighting its wars or taking the hit come "blowback" time). But what if the corruption of American journalism, the deconstruction of the "fourth Estate" into an outhouse, is so pervasive that there will be nothing left but lies for future historians to sort through?

Well, there are always the victims. The many millions who did not have to "bear witness" or even get a job with a big corporate news outlet to experience U.S.-sponsored violence firsthand. By being born in the wrong place at the wrong time and daring to say no to America, they became "the news" and consequently, "history," in every sense of the term.

*Freeing the World to Death* is history as most of us U.S. citizens have "lived" it, via CNN or Fox News flashing and spewing in the background, or the daily reporting, corrections, and re-reporting of the morning paper. The daily violations of human dignity that is the media background to our lives. I guess it's better than being the focus of attention à la the "victims," but there is a relationship, however distant, between the rebel fighting the Empire's GIs or local proxies, and the U.S. citizens whose tax dollars foot the bill.

Blum writes, "An Empire can be defined as a state that has overwhelming superiority in military, economic and political power, and uses those powers to influence the internal and external behavior of other states to accommodate the empire's needs. This imperial power intrinsically includes the ability to overthrow or otherwise punish those governments which seek to thwart the empire's desires." (*Freeing the World to Death*, pg 8).

We must pause just to address the invasions/interventions that have occurred since 1987, the year after the first edition of *Killing Hope* was published: did the people of Panama *want* the U.S. Marines to "oust" Noriega, causing massive damage to lives and property? Do the people of Cuba, who are no more responsible for what their allegedly "Communist" government does than the people of China, living under an even more repressive "Communist" system, *want* to be punished by U.S. sanctions? Did the people of Nicaragua, having survived a revolution against the U.S.-sponsored Somoza dictatorship and a relentless "covert" war against U.S.-backed "contras," *want* to cede to U.S. demands that the Sandinistas be removed from power? Did the people of the Sudan *want* the U.S. to destroy the country's largest pharmaceutical plant because the U.S. "mistook" it for a chemical weapons factory, and since a mistake

had been made, didn't they deserve reparations? Did the people of Serbia *deserve* to be bombed into the stone age for "humanitarian reasons" by the U.S. and it's NATO "allies?" Do the people of Iraq think it's "worth it" that 100,000 people died in the first "Gulf War" in 1991, followed by an estimated million deaths due to 12 years of sanctions, followed by another estimated 100,000 deaths (and counting), again mostly civilian women and children? Did those people choose to sacrifice their lives, since the April 2003 invasion, to get rid of Saddam Hussein, the man the U.S. armed and supported when he "killed his own people," as well as when he pursued a bitter internecine war with Iran which resulted in another million deaths on both sides (Hoorah! cried Uncle Sam. Got rid of two birds with one stone and didn't have to waste a shot)?

Oh, I didn't mention the ouster of Aristide in Haiti, or the absolute destruction of what was left of Afghanistan, or the U.S.'s \$3-5 billion/year support of Israel while upbraiding the Palestinians as an "equal partner" in both peace and war. Blum covers these topics and other "diplomatic" sleights-of-hand. ("Interventions: The Unending List;" "Debate in Dublin" and other chapters in *Freeing the World to Death*).

Ask most Americans what wars the U.S. has been involved in before 1991, and you'll probably hear "WW1 and WWII—the 'good' wars—Korea, and Vietnam." But according to Blum there were at least 50 "attempts to overthrow foreign governments; unprovoked military invasion of some 20 sovereign nations; 25 countries who suffered the onslaught of U.S. bombing campaigns, including 40 consecutive days and nights in Iraq in 1991, 78 days and nights in Yugoslavia in 1999, and the subsequent destruction, post-9/11, of Afghanistan and Iraq. Depleted Uranium (DU), "one of the most despicable weapons ever designed by mankind" (Blum, pg 129) was and is still used with increased frequency and intensity, turning the areas we bombed into nuclear wastelands and poisoning the people exposed to DU, including U.S. troops, dooming them to a truncated future of illness, deformed children, and other maladies experienced by the survivors of the world's two other nuclear Petri dishes, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The U.S. has used its massive but ever-expanding "defense" budget to finance the oppression of the planet, either through open invasions, like the ones we're witnessing today in Afghanistan and Iraq, or "covert" operations as we saw—if we caught the movie, "Missing"—in Chile, in which the CIA, (with a little help from the NSA and other branches of the military, not to mention the storm troopers of whatever lucky tyrant we happen to be supporting in the name of "freedom," in this case Pinochet), staged and supported a coup by a ruthless dictator and the inevitable "purging" of "radicals or extremists" (anyone who made the mistake of fighting back, like the Iraqis of today, in defense of his/her country's independence from U.S. domination—"Foolish mortals! Resistance is futile!" chortled the Bad Guy from Planet X).

We saw it all in Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Central America. We watched the Empire grind up thousands if not millions worldwide, day to day, thwarting human desire and fulfillment of the basic necessities of life, never mind liberty and the almost unthinkable "pursuit of happiness" (can you imagine that some wacko idealist once considered that a "human right?"), yet we did and continue to do nothing. Well, not absolutely nothing: many of us voted for a cleaner, more efficient war in Iraq run by Kerry. Surely we realize some connection between the suffering of millions across the globe and the excessive, wasteful, much ballyhooed "lifestyle" that more and more Americans cannot afford.

Our recent "great struggles" between Democrats, so called, and Republicans, so called, in light of bipartisan support for Bush's invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq, the absence of any real investigation into the affairs of 9/11, and Kerry's graceful acceptance of defeat as if, like Gore, he at least acknowledges that sometimes the "good" guys win, and sometimes the "bad" guys win, but no one ever cries "fix" or "foul" in professional wrestling.

We were an empire when Kennedy invaded Cuba as surely as we were an empire when both Johnson and Nixon showered Southeast Asia with ordnance. We were an empire under the "human rights" champion, Jimmy Carter, whose regime trained al Qaeda and began the U.S.'s covert economic and military offensive against Nicaragua, just as we were an empire under Ronald Reagan who, perhaps falling back on his old tricks as a Hollywood stool-pigeon and back-stabbing snitch during the House Un-American Activities Committee's inquisitions, supported both sides with guns and butter during the Iraq/Iran war. We were an empire under Bush I, who as CIA chief, vice-president and president helped

arm and create the tyrant, Saddam, even as the latter "gassed his own people" with chemicals manufactured by American and European corporations.

Reagan and Bush armed, trained, and supported a fanatic fundamentalist named Osama bin Laden (whose family goes back a long way with the Bushes) and his fellow Mujhadeen.

When I first read *Killing Hope* 10 years ago, then *Rogue State* a few years after that, I pushed them on friends and family alike, saying "read this, you're not gonna believe 90 percent of this stuff, but it's been there all along, right there in the newspapers in front of our faces." The newspapers we skimmed daily without actually reading "between the lines." The dull block-paragraphs we failed to compare to similar paragraphs relating the same events months, weeks, perhaps days earlier with a "different" skew or spin according to what the powers in D.C. willed us to believe.

We'd already tossed the newspapers in piles for recycling or weaned puppies on them without questioning the "revisions" these proudly "objective" journals placed on events, without reading between the lines.

The newspapers purported to "balance" unpleasant facts with avuncular, "expert" opinion provided by corporate and government PR flacks who washed from our brains the vague suspicion that the U.S. was not acting with the best of intentions for all the good, hard-working people who didn't take drugs and "played by the rules" or some other such nonsense.

"The main shortcoming of the establishment media lies in errors of omission, much more than errors of commission. It's not that they tell bald lies so much as it is that they leave out parts of stories, or entire stories, or historical reminders, which if included might put the issue in a whole new light, in a way not compatible with their political biases. Or they might include all the facts, leading to an obvious interpretation, but leave out suggesting an alternative interpretation of the same facts which stands the first interpretation on its head. But the information they do report is often quite usable for my purposes." (Blum, pg 233.)

More than any particular "fact" or omission, reading Bill Blum and others like him teaches us not *what* so much as *how* to read: how to read between the lines; how to recognize government double-speak from facts reported by "renowned" journalists or even burped up by accident—then quickly retracted—from our "leaders" own mouths. Such "accidents" and misstatements have kept George Bush's press handlers and their willfully gullible audience of mainstream reporters busy explaining what the president didn't say when he said whatever offensive thing he said the previous day, but what he meant to say, which was [*fill in the blank and wish upon a star*].

Though Blum's specialty is American foreign policy, also included in this collection, destined to provide fodder for future historians of our era, are essays regarding our domestic illusions or rather, the kind of domestic policy which one would expect to complement a foreign policy which puts us at endless war with everyone always: The War Against Drugs (but not Drug Companies); The War Against Crime (and Free Speech); The War Against Cholesterol (but not Fast Food conglomerates); The War Against The Philistines (or Palestinians, as Israel's all-powerful persecutors are known as today); The War Against Hugo Chavez (and any other defiant Latin American leader who might threaten the U.S. by setting a good example); The War Against Communism (or selective memories of it: sanctions against Cuba, but free trade with China), and of course, Son of the War Against Communism, the War Against Terror ("we have nothing to fear but fear itself?"), which is the toughest one of all. Freud, Jung, and countless others before and after them have devoted their lives to fighting "terror" and the best anyone is yet to come up with is Oxycontin, to name only one of the legal chemicals, besides alcohol, in our vast armory of WMDs (gallant Republican Warrior, Rush Limbaugh, used Oxycontin to fight terror for over five years!)

Finally, Blum's book leaves one with a queasy feeling not only about the government created, ostensibly, "of the people, by the people and for the people," but . . . the people. Either "we" are extraordinarily ignorant and naïve, believing what "our" government tells us no matter what facts, opinions, or international outcry appears on the scene to nudge us awake, or we are not a very kind people at

all. True, if one looks at Blum's citations one would see that virtually all of them are from nationally famous, "mainstream" newspapers, television news shows, and magazines, but not all of us have the skill of a historian for sorting public information from public relations.

Blum points out that "in the absence of European and Arab governments showing a lot more courage to stand up to the empire, it's the American people we have to turn to, for no one has the potential leverage over the monster than the monster's own children have. And that's the problem, for the American people are . . . well . . . how can one put this delicately? . . . like one in every 50 adult Americans claims a UFO abduction experience; a National Science Board survey found that 27 percent of adults believe the sun revolves around the earth; according to a Gallup poll 68 percent believe in the devil (12 percent are unsure); and most Americans believe that God created evolution . . . There are all kinds of intelligence in this world: musical, scientific, mathematical, artistic, academic, literary, and so on. Then there's political intelligence, which might be defined as the ability to see through the bulls\*\*t which every society, past, present and future, feeds its citizens from birth on to assure the continuance of prevailing ideology." ("Winning Hearts and Mindless" pg 265–267)

Is Blum saying that a citizenry 42 percent of whom believed (according to June, 2003 polls) that Iraq had a direct involvement with 9/11, most being certain that Iraqis were among the 19 hijackers and 55 percent of whom believed that Saddam Hussein had close ties to al Qaeda, (pg 265) aren't up to the task of being responsible citizens of a working democracy?

"One can only wonder what, besides a crowbar, it would take to pry such people away from their total support of what The Empire does to the world," writes Blum (pg 266).

*Freeing the World to Death* is an invaluable contribution to understanding (or attempting to understand) why contemporary Americans behave the way they do. The strongest point of this book, among many strong points, lies in its re-evaluation, from the side of rationality, not "gut feeling" or "faith," of all the "news" we've been exposed to since the "humanitarian" war in Bosnia ushered in the age of Bush. It was Democrat Bill Clinton, after all, who signed the Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act well before 9/11; Clinton who liquidated hundreds of thousands of Iraqis with sanctions; Clinton who said he would refuse to lift the sanctions, which amounted to a siege that hurt the Iraqi people, not Saddam, so long as Hussein remained in power; Clinton who oversaw the Empire between Bushes I and II. Kerry, it should be noted, debated Bush not on whether the U.S. military should be in Iraq, but how it can be used most effectively while in Iraq.

Every American old enough to remember the enormous amount of government time, citizens' tax-money and creepy, voyeuristic wind, the foul air of a moral scold's "secret" perversions, blown across the "Lewinsky Scandal" should read this book. The news events are the stories they heard, or read, as they were occurring, but with the difference that Blum puts them into the necessary context of an Empire at war—covert or overt—with much of the planet, including its own pathetically loyal and unquestioning citizen/consumers ("We want to feel needed. What can we do to help?" asked the Citizen/Consumers. "Shop," said the Retailer-in-Chief).

Blum writes of "people who get virtually all their news from the shock-and-awe tabloid weeklies, AM-radio talk shows, and television news programs which, because of marketplace pressure, aim low in order to reach the widest possible audience, resulting in short programs with lots of commercials, weather, sports and entertainment. These news sources don't necessarily have to explicitly state the above falsehoods to produce such distorted views; they need only channel to their audience a continuous stream of statements from the government and conservative 'experts' justifying the war and demonizing Saddam Hussein as if they were neutral observers; ignore contrary views except when an expert is on hand to ridicule them and label them 'conspiracy theories;' and never put it all together in an enlightening manner. This constant drip-drip of one-sided information, from sources who can be described as stenographers for the powers-that-be, can produce any benighted variety of the human species." (pg 267).

Ultimately, after reading a book such as *Freeing the World to Death*, we are faced with the question we ourselves put to Nazi Germany: to what extent are "the people" responsible? It is difficult, almost

impossible, to finish this book, to "relive" the events written about (often at the time they were happening at the end of the '90s and first years of this decade up to June 2004, but with the perpetually happy talking heads excised, commercials lifted, man behind the curtain exposed), without asking oneself the question that was asked again and again of the citizens as well as the leadership of Nazi Germany: what kind of people would let this happen?

Bill Blum's updated commentary on the affairs of The Empire can be viewed on [www.killinghope.org/](http://www.killinghope.org/).

*Adam Engel ([bartleby.samsa@verizon.net](mailto:bartleby.samsa@verizon.net)) is a disloyal, disobedient, disgruntled and disillusioned citizen-by-circumstance of The Empire. He has seen crowds of up to 100,000 people at open air music and sports events, but he has never met 100,000 people, or even counted sheep past a few hundred, yet as a taxpayer, he has participated in the killing of 100,000 Afghans and Iraqis and over 1000 Americans, mostly since President-elect George Bush posed in a flight suit on May 1, 2004, and declared victory . . . over what?*

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