

CANVAS[ing] For The Nonviolent Propaganda Offensive: Propaganda In The Service Of Imperial Projects

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26 March, 2011

Countercurrents.org

According to Pulitzer prize winning writer Tina Rosenberg, the author of *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World* (W. W. Norton & Company, March 2011), the Centre for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) is “[an organization](#) run by young Serbs who had cut their teeth in the late 1990s student uprising against Slobodan Milosevic.” Rosenberg adds that after ousting Milosevic, these determined young Otpor activists, “embarked on the ambitious project of figuring out how to translate their success to other countries,” whom she notes, set their targets on “the world's autocrats” like for instance Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Here one should add that it is unsurprising that Rosenberg should select the democratically elected Chávez as her first named 'autocrat' (read: US unfriendly leader) owing to her own connection to the US-backed Press and Society Institute (Instituto De Prensa Y Sociedad) -- a group which fulfils a vital role in the [US-led propaganda offensive](#) against Venezuelan democracy. According to Rosenberg, the two former Otpor activists behind the 2003 creation of CANVAS, were Srdja Popovic, who after ousting Milosevic became a Serbian “member of parliament”; and Slobodan Djinic, an individual who had already “founded Serbia's first wireless Internet service provider in 2000 and was well on his way to becoming a mogul.” Rosenberg adds that Popovic “stepped down in 2004” from his parliamentary position, “preferring a career as an organizer and a revolutionary”; while today, Djinic, “is head of Serbia's largest private internet and phone company and funds about half of CANVAS's operating expenses and the costs for half the training workshops out of his own pocket.”¹

¹Rosenberg continues: “The trainers are veterans of successful democracy movements in five countries and are paid as contractors. CANVAS participates in some workshops financed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations Development Program, an international NGO called Humanity in Action, and Freedom House, an American group which gets its money from the U.S. government.”

It is interesting to note that Peter Ackerman serves as the chair of the board of overseers of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (at Tuft's University), where he serves alongside Humanity in Action board member Hans Binnendijk, who is presently the vice president for research at the National Defense University. Hans Binnendijk is also connected to Ackerman through his previous service on the US Committee of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and in 2006, his daughter, Anika Binnendijk, co-authored a journal article with the 2005 Whitehouse “Champion of Freedom” and former leader of Otpor, Ivan Marovic. Anika is also a former associate of the Democratization Policy Council, where she worked with fellow associate Amado Mendoza Jr., who in 2008 was listed as “a trainer-in-training” for CANVAS. Although the Democratization Policy Council now appears to have closed down its operations, it counted amongst their ranks many individuals who have worked and continue to work with leading members of the US 'democracy promoting' establishment. Other notable former associates of the Democratization Policy Council include Dragan Popovic (who was the program director at the NED-funded Humanitarian Law Center, one of Serbia's leading human rights nongovernmental organizations), and Iryna Chupryna (a former activist with PORA -- Ukraine's equivalent of Otpor -- where she “systematized and supervised PORA's

What remains unmentioned in Rosenberg's mammoth CANVAS puff piece are any details about CANVAS's close affiliation to Peter Ackerman's 'democracy promoting' International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), which arise through their former employment of numerous members of the ICNC's advisory board (including the board's chairman Professor Stephen Zunes).² Writing in 2008 in response to Zunes' floundering defense of the ICNC, John Bellamy Foster points out that:

“[Ackerman is](#) not only a founding director of the ICNC and sits on the Freedom House board, but is also a director, along with the likes of Colin Powell, of the "imperial brain trust," the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR -- where [former CIA Director James] Woolsey is also a prominent member). Ackerman sits on the key advisory committee of the CFR's Center for Preventive Action, devoted to overthrowing governments opposed by Washington by political means (or where this is not practicable, using political low intensity warfare to soften them up for military intervention). The CPA is headed by Reagan's former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General John W. Vessey, who oversaw the invasion of Grenada. The members of the advisory committee of the CPA, including Ackerman himself, have all been heavily involved in helping to fulfill US war aims in Yugoslavia, and the Center has recently focused on overturning Chavez's government in Venezuela (see John Bellamy Foster, '[The Latin American Revolt](#),' *Monthly Review*, July August 2007). On top of all of this Ackerman is a director of the right-wing US Institute of Peace, which is connected directly through its chair J. Robinson West to the National Petroleum Council, which includes CEOs of all the major U.S. energy corporations. On the domestic front, Ackerman has been working with the Cato Institute to privatize Social Security. His colleague Woolsey is playing a key role in the Scooter Libby Defense Trust.”

Neither do we learn from Rosenberg about Popovic's other far from revolutionary commitments, such as his being the president of the Serbian-based free-market outfit the Ecotopia Fund: or that Popovic is also an associate of International Communications Partners, where he serves alongside a former general manager of the Oil Industry of Serbia, and the international banker/private equity expert, Nikola Zivanovic (who is the chair of the Ecotopia Fund).

Intriguingly, of the fifteen clients listed on International Communications Partners web site, one is a company called H Oil and Mineral Limited, a “specialist oil, gas and mineral exploration, development and trading company

external contacts”). These connections were previously explored in my 2010 article “[Mother Jones and the Defence of Liberal Elites](#).”

² Michael Barker, “[Blinded By People Power: Stephen Zunes on the Ousting of Dictators](#),” Swans Commentary, March 14, 2011.

of the H Oil Group.” At present they apparently seek “to acquire, or co-invest with our strategic partners, in oil, gas and mineral exploration assets throughout Africa,” with a primary focus on four countries, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Nigeria, and Angola.³

Given the high level of importance that the US 'democracy promoting' establishment attaches to manipulating foreign media systems --a subject I examined in depth within my [Ph.D. thesis](#) -- it is notable that both CANVAS cofounders are successful media capitalists. It is perhaps no coincidence that fellow media mogul and leading proponent of imperial nonviolence, Mark Palmer, thus played an important role in providing the ideological justification for the formation of CANVAS. Palmer did this by publishing *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), a book that has proved influential within US foreign policy circles.

In this book -- which Palmer makes clear is “Most of all, ... is about intervention” -- it is critical to recall that Palmer himself was a founding board member of the imperialist National Endowment for Democracy, and was vice chairman of Freedom House (an important funder of CANVAS's work) when he actually wrote *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil*.⁴ In essence, Palmer's book develops the idea that “democrats must develop the political and economic tools and techniques for the nonviolent overthrow of their oppressors.” In this light, he sees the US government as the natural ally of democrats, and seeks to refine what he refers to as the “misguided common wisdom” of the national security state which (he says) “gave rise to many of the great blunders of the cold war”: that is, encouraged the US to support dictator's not democrats. He suggests that: “By attempting to base US security on tyranny in other parts of the world, the practitioners of foreign policy common wisdom not only failed but also undermined American credibility worldwide.”⁵ The key then, in his mind anyway, is to utilize the power of nonviolence to strengthen US national security objectives, in a manner which has the additional bonus of providing

³ H Oil and Mineral Limited's management is currently headed by their emeritus chair, Jacques Hachuel -- a former co-founder of a major privately-owned mining and commodities company, known as Marc Rich and Company, which now goes by the name Glencore International. (Marc Rich and Company was founded by billionaire financier Marc Rich, whose long serving [personal lawyer](#) (1985-2000) was Lewis "Scooter" Libby -- Scooter being the Chief of Staff to US Vice President Dick Cheney in the George W. Bush administration.) Glencore's Director-General, Willie Strothotte, is the former chair now board member of Xstrata; while their CEO, Ivan Glasenberg also serves on Xstrata's board of directors where they sit alongside some of the world's most rapacious plunderers of Africa's natural resources. The two other members of H Oil and Mineral Limited's senior management team both formerly served as high ranking executives at the Spanish-Argentine oil and gas giant Repsol YPF.

⁴ According to a Beth Sims, the National Endowment for Democracy's “creation [in 1983] represented the culmination of efforts by a tightly woven group of intelligence experts, neoconservative ideologues, and representatives from the national committees of the two political parties, the AFL-CIO, and the US Chamber of Commerce.” “Founded in 1941,” Sims describes the closely affiliated Freedom House as “a neoconservative clearinghouse, research institute, and documentation center with a selective interest in international human rights and political freedoms.”

Beth Sims, “National Endowment for Democracy (NED): A Foreign Policy Branch Gone Awry,” A Policy Report by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs and the Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1990, p.9, p.67.
⁵ Palmer, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil*, p.xx, p.19, p.23, p.24.

rhetorical cover for imperialism.

Palmer's book is particularly relevant to understanding CANVAS's *modus operandi*, as within its pages he suggests that a "US Center to Oust Dictators" should be set up to lobby for and coordinate the newly emergent nonviolent stream of interventions pioneered by the 'democracy promotion' establishment. In this instance, Palmer clearly envisaged that such a group would be the political companion organization to Peter Ackerman's more theoretically inclined International Center on Nonviolent Conflict: Ackerman, as noted earlier, being an influential theorist of nonviolence and board member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and former chairman of the neoconservative stronghold, Freedom House. Indeed, Palmer points out how Ackerman's group (which was formed in 2001), actually co-sponsored a workshop with Freedom House which brought together "activists from sixteen countries, from successful campaigns and those still under way," to create what Palmer refers to as a *Two-Stage Campaign to Oust Dictators*.⁶

Yet although such imperial campaigns to oust 'dictators' clearly rely upon nonviolent activism, Palmer makes it abundantly clear that external support is just as critical, if not more so. Thus in his consideration of the ouster of Milosevic in 2000, he writes that after "NATO bombing clearly weakened his credibility," "a student organization called Otpor ("Resistance" in Serbian) picked itself up and brushed itself off-and proceeded to jump-start" a revolution.

"While their energy and ingenuity were entirely homegrown, their funding was not. Accepting support from any source, foreign or domestic, willing to provide it, Otpor and other oppositionists-including independent media, unions, and other pro-democracy groups-took up to \$20 million from Western sources. The latter included such organizations as the Open Society Institute, Freedom House, the American Center for Labor Solidarity, the Center for International Private Enterprise, the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe, the German Marshall Fund, the International Research and Exchanges Board, the International Foundation for Election Systems, Star-Delphi Women's Network, Network of East-West Women, the American Bar Association's Central and East European Law Initiative, World Learning, the US Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute. Numerous European funders and organizations also reached serious levels of participation, including the British Foreign Office; the German foreign ministry; all the German party foundations; the Netherlands foreign ministry; the governments of Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Greece, Hungary, Canada, Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Czech Republic; Press

⁶ Palmer, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil*, p.62, p.152.

Now (Netherlands); the Swedish Helsinki Committee; Norwegian People's AID; the Westminster Foundation; and others.” (p.181)

Learning from their experiences in Serbia, and wanting to spread their ideas further, CANVAS was set up -- and while (at best) a indigenous project in Serbia, it is clear that it is supporting US geostrategic interests. Further, on the central role of violence in precipitating the coup against Milosevic, Palmer adds: “Although it has become fashionable to give NATO bombers no credit for the collapse of the cruel Milosevic regime, few actions carry more weight than the willingness to go to war on behalf of another nation's people.”⁷

As mentioned earlier, Palmer, like Slobodan Djinovic, is well aware of the importance of controlling local media environments to enhance 'democracy', as following the fall of communism, Palmer co-founded -- along with the help of the right-wing Zionist Ronald Lauder -- a company called Central European Media Enterprises, which now describes itself as “the leading vertically integrated media company in Central and Eastern Europe.” Likewise, Palmer is the chairman of SignalOne Media, an organization which says it is busy “creating independent commercial television stations in emerging markets -- initially in the Middle East.” Notably, SignalOne's cofounder and CEO, Jim Hake, just so happens to be the founder of Spirit of America, a propaganda group that provides aid to the US military during their ongoing state led massacres in Iraq and Afghanistan. And not coincidentally, Palmer serves on Spirit of America's advisory board, while this group's three-person strong board of directors includes his 'peacenik' friend Peter Ackerman. (For a detailed critique of this organization, see [“Promoting the Real Spirit of America.”](#))

It appears that CANVAS's trainers, like their 'nonviolent' collaborators Peter Ackerman and Stephen Zunes, are acting as an integral part of the US government's imperial propaganda machinery. Indeed taken together they represent a sophisticated 'democratic' approach to global domination, exported in close coordination with US foreign policy elites disguised under the persuasive 'nonviolent' propaganda offensive. This of course is not to say that nonviolent resistance should not have a central role in any revolutionary struggles for social change, only that the twisted imperial-friendly narrative of nonviolence promoted by such individuals should be treated with extreme caution by all activists who wish to avoid being oppressed by US backed dictatorships *or* their latest equally toxic manifestation, US managed 'democracies.'

⁷ Palmer, *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil*, p.318.

