

Book Review: Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II, Updated Edition, by William Blum

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21/01/2015

In *Killing Hope*, William Blum aims to provide a comprehensive account of America's covert and overt military actions in the world, all the way from China in the 1940s to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and – in this updated edition – beyond. Julia Muravska is disappointed by some shallow characterisations and concludes that academic readers may not be satisfied by Blum's analysis.

Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II. Updated Edition.
William Blum. Zed Books. 2014.

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“US foreign policy has no moral factor built into its DNA,” and it would be a mistake to search for one.

This conclusion, made in the latest edition of William Blum's *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (p. 390), is one with which a number of pundits would likely agree: it is dangerous and unrealistic to expect nation states' foreign policy to be driven by “values,” which are best left to aid and development spheres. In order to reach this insight, Blum examines nearly 50 years of the United States “intervening all over the world” to combat the permanently McCarthy-ist phantom of “International Communist Conspiracy” during the Cold War (p. 19).

Blum presents 55 specific cases of American endeavours — stretching from the Seychelles to Albania — to “overthrow foreign ... governments, most of which were democratically elected” (p. 390). These are heavily and meticulously footnoted, substantiated by sources drawn from contemporary media outlets, de-classified archival material, and field research that yielded “personal experience” and “observations” (p. 423). This compilation is a poignant reminder of just how seductively easy it could be for policymakers, and their “foot soldiers” in the intelligence and military worlds, to convince themselves that they alone bear the responsibility for safeguarding the highest societal “goods” of liberty, freedom, and security. This sense of entitlement then easily yields a catch-all justification for whichever means such vanguards may deem necessary to preserve these ideals — even if their methods run counter to the very values they seek to protect. Therefore, most of *Killing Hope* provides a thorough chronicle of just how the Land of the Free sought to safeguard its Cold War-era supremacy.

However, the last chapter of *Killing Hope*, entitled “The American Empire Post-Cold War” (which constitutes the “update” in this updated version following the 2003 edition), elicited a deeply indignant response from your reviewer. It merits mention 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. More importantly for the present review, the style of the last section in the 2014 edition reads more like a series of hastily penned notes than academic discourse or historical narrative. Thus, the chapter is peppered with unsubstantiated claims and colloquialisms, largely lacking any analysis of the facts presented, while neglecting to provide any logical (and, indeed, rhetorical) transition between them.

Nevertheless, much more infuriating is Blum's somewhat patronising characterisation of those he deems to be ignorantly or mercenarily adherent to the US-led Western capitalist model. For instance, in Blum's view, the “Eastern European mentality” has ostensibly blinded these post-communist societies to the evils of “what they may

see as Western benefits flowing automatically from the market's 'invisible hand'" (p. 387). Never mind that living standards have skyrocketed in "these Eastern countries", as Blum refers to them, since they have transitioned from planned economies and joined the European Union, while their societies are now characterised by democratic participation, rule of law, and a respect for human rights. Their sin, in Blum's eyes, is becoming "honoured members of NATO, proud possessors of a couple of billion dollars worth of useless military hardware which they were obliged to buy from multinationals" (p. 387). Again, this conclusion appears to be so self-evident as not to require any explanation or factual substantiation (which multinationals, exactly? "Useless" on what basis?).

The "Bosnian Muslims," whose "military capabilities" were "enhanced" by the US/NATO 1994-1995 bombing campaigns to the detriment of "the Serbs," are castigated, as well. In particular, Blum appears to fault them for the fact that throughout the 1990s "most senior leaders of al Qaeda have visited the Balkans, including bin Laden himself" (p. 388). Kosovo's declaration of independence is described as "so illegitimate and artificial that scores of the world's nations still have not recognised it" (p. 389). Moreover, citing an unnamed *New York Times* article "on an inside page" of the June 17, 1993 issue, in the "very end" of which this titbit was ostensibly buried, the author claims that the "United States sabotaged" the 1992 Lisbon "agreement between the Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs for a unified state" (p. 389). In Libya, as Blum would have it, "assorted Middle East jihadists" were able, thanks to NATO and the United States, to "battle the government and forces of Muammar Gaddafi" on the ground, while Washington and its "main Mideast allies" have kept these unspecified "jihadists" in "the ball game" of the Syrian civil war (p. 389).

It is hardly surprising then, that when we come to the Ukraine crisis of 2013-2014, the "United States working closely with the European Union" is blamed for sparking a "vicious civil war in the country" (p. 390). Your reviewer will not address this claim here, as it is best left to political scientists, international relations scholars, historians, and experts on the region and on Ukraine specifically. Suffice it to say that Blum relies on 24-hour international news channel *RT* to make his case. Yes, that would be the state-funded, Kremlin-backed *RT* (rebranded from the original *Russia Today*) whose *raison d'être* is, in the [words of President Putin](#), is "to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams." It could also be pointed out that the channel is facing sanctions by the UK media regulator Ofcom for violating impartiality rules in its coverage of the Ukraine conflict, but that would likely be dismissed as imperial censorship by Blum.

Yet, perhaps the most troubling aspect of Blum's work is his clumsy identification of Ukraine's 2013-2014 Maydan protests with the Occupy Wall Street movement. In particular, the author likens the appearance of Senator McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland in Kyiv to a hypothetical scenario in which President Putin would have "flown in to the 'Occupy Wall Street' protests ...and offered support to the protesters in their demands for very basic changes to American society", naturally eliciting the ire of the Obama administration (p. 389). What seems to be missing from the picture is the recognition that Ukraine, actually, is a sovereign state. By implying that American "intrusion" into its affairs was akin to Russian intervention in US domestic affairs, Blum legitimises the cynical and, indeed, imperialist claim that Ukraine is an integral component of Russia's ring-fenced sphere of influence, if not of Russia itself. A more gentle interpretation would be that, plagued by the primitive "Eastern European mentality", Ukrainians were manipulated by the United States and the European Union into turning their backs on their Big Brother. This claim is so blatantly ignorant of Slavic history and Ukrainian politics that its examination would require much more time and space than is available here. In his frothing critique of the West, Blum has consigned Ukrainian sovereignty and its people's right to self-determination to a mere mirage produced by devious US manipulation.

Yet, *Killing Hope* also inadvertently exemplifies its central tenet—blind ideological adherence is as seductive as it is dangerous. The author's view of US foreign policy as mercilessly and resolutely opposing the slightest challenge to American dominance (and usually through sinister, covert means whilst keeping its populace in the dark) is so deeply entrenched, that it keeps the author from recognising the complexity of the post-Cold War world. Furthermore, he also neglects to situate the majority of his historical narrative in its proper Cold War context, that is, an existential conflict between two fundamentally opposed models and ideologies expressed through superpower

rivalry and confrontation. An appreciation of this bi-polar system and its nuances would have provided *Killing Hope* with the much-needed historical framework—which revolved around *two* dominant actors vying for supremacy. It would have also helped the reader understand what drove the US foreign policy decisions that today's citizens find so morally repugnant

A work that truly does justice to this subject—and faithfully catalogues many of the evils examined by Blum—is William Keylor's *A World of Nations: The International Order Since 1945*. With the second edition published in 2009, Keylor, a highly-renowned historian with an illustrious academic career, is careful to avoid ideologically-tinged interpretations of US foreign policy during the Cold War, but is unsparing in his detail. Another nuanced examination of more recent American military intervention is Robert Litwak's *Regime Change: U.S. Strategy Through the Prism of 9/11*.

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