

Swans

Ruling-Class Peace?

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(*Swans* - April 7, 2014) Systemic violence is a uniquely defining characteristic of capitalism: a soul-destroying system that places profit before human need. By way of a contrast, nonviolent activism offers a potent force for helping foment a socialist alternative that favours the needs of the many against the misrule of the few. Far-sighted members of the ruling class, however, take great pride in (vainly) trying to stay one step ahead of those they wish to dominate, and it is with such thoughts in mind that the highly problematic International Center on Nonviolent Conflict was formed in 2002 (for an overview of my criticisms of this group see "Capitalising On Nonviolence"). Yet despite this Center being a creature of imperial discomfort born from within the heart of the US ruling class, they still receive vital ideological support from a handful of progressives and anarchists.

One such liberal intellectual who has done yeoman's services to publicly defending the reputation of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict is Professor Stephen Zunes, who is the longstanding chair (now co-chair) of the Center's advisory board. Therefore, in an attempt to undermine the logic of Zunes's many distortions, this article sets out to do just one thing; that is, to demonstrate how Peter Ackerman -- the founding chairman and primary financial beneficiary of this Center -- is without a doubt an enemy of all workers and individuals interested in promoting progressive social change.

A good starting place for examining Ackerman's problematic influence over ostensibly progressive politics is the succinct summary kindly provided by William I. Robinson, professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "That Ackerman is a part of the U.S. foreign policy elite," Robinson pointed out, "and integral to the new modalities of intervention under the rubric of 'democracy promotion,' etc., is beyond question." Fleshing out some of Ackerman's noxious ruling-class background, John Bellamy Foster, the editor of *Monthly Review* and professor of sociology at the University of Oregon, surmized in 2008:

Ackerman is not only a founding director of the [International Center on Nonviolent Conflict] 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 [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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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.

With regard to Ackerman's education, he obtained a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in 1976. Then, throughout the next decade he worked for Michael Milken's junk-bond dealers, Drexel Burnham Lambert. Having made his millions as Drexel's director of international capital markets, Ackerman has now decided to divert a sizable chunk of his ill-earned profits back into teaching the world how to be nonviolent. Such philanthropic largesse, however, does not prevent Ackerman from continuing to reap financial rewards through his commitment to exploiting workers. I say this because he is a board member of the New York-based upscale online shopping distributor FreshDirect, which is well-known for its commitment to union-busting, having achieved a degree of infamy for being "the largest nonunion grocery warehouse in New York City."

Sadly, FreshDirect has been able to recruit former environmental justice activist Majora Carter to the dark side in their battle against workers, an individual who is presently working against the interests of the residents of the Bronx who have spent many years committed to determined activism opposing the toxic activities of FreshDirect. The cynical exploitation of former environmental justice heroes like Majora Carter is par for the course for capitalists like Ackerman, and in 2012 Carter was named by Goldman Sachs as one of their "100 Most Intriguing Entrepreneurs." Fortunately, the Teamsters Local 805 is turning up the heat on Ackerman and his cronies by "teaming up with community organizations and progressive political leaders to win living wages, affordable healthcare and union rights for 1,200 workers at online grocery giant FreshDirect." None of this of course stops Ackerman from helping feed the poor through his service on the board of directors of the elite stronghold that is the Capital Area Food Bank.

Among Ackerman's other oligarchal interests, he is the primary financial backer of a political reform group called Americans Elect 2012, a "reform" group beneficently chaired by his good self. Little has been written about this group, although *Mother Jones* magazine did publish a short piece about them in late 2011 which gives a taster of what they stand for, the article being entitled "Meet the Political Reform Group That's Fueled by Dark Money." In his spare time, Ackerman also throws a buck or quite a few to the Free Africa Foundation, a US-based think tank whose Web site recently proudly listed 25 conservative financial donors. Well-known funders of this regressive think tank included David Kennedy (who is the former president of the Earhart Foundation -- a "key backer of neoconservatism" in the United States), Ed Crane (who the president and CEO of the Cato Institute), and James Pierson (who was the executive director of the now defunct John M. Olin Foundation).

With regard to Ackerman's *Alma mater*, the Fletcher School, from 1996 until 2011 he acted as the chairman of their board of overseers. In 2001 he resided on this board along with Lydia Marshall, who is a former managing director of the private investment firm Rockport Capital Incorporated (1997-99), a firm at which Ackerman currently acts as managing director. This is significant because Marshall is an important "humanitarian" activist who until her retirement in 2007 acted as the chair of CARE International, a group, which as I have demonstrated elsewhere, is well connected to "democracy promoting" elites; and in 1999, while being chaired by Marshall, Ackerman served on the board of directors of CARE's US branch. While there is no space here to develop a comprehensive critique of CARE's anti-democratic operations, Timothy Schwartz has already done so in his excellent book *Travesty in Haiti: A True Account of Christian Missions, Orphanages, Fraud, Food Aid and Drug Trafficking* (2008).

Until recently Ackerman has played a significant role in a privately-run group called Spirit of America, which ostensibly "helps American military and civilian personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as people who call to Americans for help in their struggle for freedom and democracy." Some defenders of the group misleadingly suggest that Spirit of America simply helps schoolchildren and the disabled through providing much-needed humanitarian support, but early (uncritical) reports on their activities, as reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, observed that the types of goods being sent overseas also included "bulletproof vests for Afghan police," and a prototype "handheld fingerprinting device which Iraqi soldiers... use[d] to assemble an insurgent database." During the several years that Ackerman resided as an active member of Spirit of America's three-person strong board of directors, former Republican presidential candidate John McCain acted as the group's honorary co-chair. Yet perhaps most notably was the presence of the former US Ambassador to Hungary (1986-90), Mark Palmer, on Spirit of America's advisory board during Ackerman's tenure.

Mark Palmer, like Ackerman, is positioned firmly within the heart of the US government's "democracy promotion" establishment, having been counted as a founding board member of the National Endowment for Democracy (a key nongovernmental agency that interferes in social movements globally). Palmer was also the vice chair of Freedom House when he wrote *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025* (2003) -- a book, which as Palmer puts it, is: "Most of all, ... is about intervention." It is not incidental that during his spell at Freedom House, Palmer worked closely with Ackerman. And while more blunt in his interventionist rhetoric than Ackerman, Palmer's book acted as a call to arms for the evolution of a more creative approach to national security. In his book Palmer outlines what he sees as a remedy to the widely understood limits of the military option. He thus argues for the need for a "strategic paradigm shift" (his words) and the adoption of "a better set of tools" to implement revolutionary warfare. These, Palmer says, "are primarily the implements and tactics of nonviolent protest, strike actions and boycotts, and what used to be called passive resistance." But unlike many other State Department pacifists, Palmer is well aware of how "a small application of military force, or even a credible threat to use it" when used in conjunction with "nonviolent" protests invests the nonviolence with real power. As he writes, occasionally "the tools of democratization will be drawn from military arsenals, to add elements of force to the nonviolent design."

Palmer considers the thorough-going integration of "democracy promoters" into US foreign policy as part of a much needed paradigm shift in international affairs. Amongst his many proposed solutions to resolving this conundrum, Palmer suggests that a "US Center to Oust Dictators" should be set up to lobby for and coordinate the newly emergent nonviolent stream of interventions being developed by democratic governments worldwide. Such a group would be the political companion organization to Ackerman's more theoretically inclined International Center on Nonviolent Conflict -- a group that Ackerman founded in 2001, and which subsequently co-sponsored a workshop with Freedom House that 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.

Palmer did not, however, put all his democratic eggs in one basket, and has been involved in numerous corporate enterprises that seek to profit from and "promote democracy" in poorer overseas countries. For example, Palmer was until recently the co-founder and chairman of SignalOne Media, an organization focused on creating "independent commercial television stations in emerging markets -- initially in the Middle East." This project then brings us full circle, as SignalOne's fellow cofounder and CEO was Jim Hake, the founder of the aforementioned Spirit of America.

One might add that Palmer continues to bolster his commitment to exploitation by serving on the advisory board of another neoconservative group known as The Democracy Project, whose stated "mission is to strengthen the institutions and conventions that support liberty and democratic rule at home and abroad." Of course when this group talks about promoting democracy, what they really mean is gutting democracy. Thus their primary objective seems to be to counter the type of reporting -- which they call "hate-filled tracts and pseudo-journalism" -- that casts America as "an imperial power bent on selfish domination of the world's peoples and resources" instead of as a "beacon of freedom and hope." The co-founder of this propaganda project is the infamous Winfield Myers, who presently acts as the director of Campus Watch -- a "blacklisting organization" created by pro-Israel propagandist Daniel Pipes "that targets [US-based] scholars with views perceived as not sufficiently sympathetic towards Israel." Ironically, Palmer's more rabid neoconservative friends at Campus Watch have in the past even targeted the work of professor Stephen Zunes, an individual who since 2006 has chaired the academic advisory board for Ackerman's International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, and as mentioned earlier is perhaps one of the most ardent defenders of the Palmer-Ackerman military-peace nonprofit complex.

The political clout of the military-peace nonprofit complex is growing apace, and too many people at home and abroad are in danger of being lulled and then crushed by an oligarchy capable of wearing both the iron heel and the velvet slipper. Such anti-democratic developments hold no surprises to opponents of the oligarchy, but apologists for the velvet slipper who seek to teach anti-democratic intelligence agencies about the power of nonviolent activism must be identified and excluded from further involvement with progressive social movements.

The history of the elite manipulation of social change has been well documented by popular writers like Howard Zinn, amongst many others, and to some extent even Jack London in his classic *The Iron Heel* (1907) gave a warning of how elites may act to defuse large-scale

revolutionary movements. Indeed, in his fictitious autobiographical account of a revolutionary, London described how when his revolutionary movement was on the brink of launching "a sudden colossal, stunning blow" to the entire North American oligarchy, their forthcoming revolution was postponed when the oligarchy caught wind of what they planned and pre-empted them. The oligarchy did this by "deliberately manufactur[ing]" the social conditions that would precipitate an isolated and containable revolutionary uprising that could be destroyed. Back in the real world it is perfectly understandable why elites should seek to manipulate progressive social movements. Now we just need to decide what actions we can take to protect our movements from such unwanted interventions.