

“Like his hero Eduardo Galeano,
Vijay Prashad makes the telling of the truth lovable;
not an easy trick to pull off, he does it effortlessly.”
– Roger Waters, Pink Floyd

Vijay Prashad

WASHINGTON BULLETS

“This book brings to mind the infinite instances in
which Washington Bullets have shattered hope.”

– Evo Morales Ayma, former President of Bolivia

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Vijay Prashad

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For Prakash Karat,
whose clarity
about imperialism
is my guide

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PREFACE

This is a book about bullets, says the author. Bullets that assassinated democratic processes, that assassinated revolutions, and that assassinated hope.

The courageous Indian historian and journalist Vijay Prashad has put his all into explaining and providing a digestible and comprehensive way of understanding the sinister interest with which imperialism intervenes in countries that attempt to build their own destiny.

In the pages of this book, Prashad documents the participation of the United States in the assassination of social leaders in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and in the massacres of the people, who have refused to subsidize the delirious business dealings of multinational corporations with their poverty.

Prashad says that these Washington Bullets have a price: 'The biggest price is paid by the people. For in these assassinations, these murders, this violence of intimidation, it is the people who lose their leaders in their localities. A peasant leader, a trade-union leader, a leader of the poor.'

Prashad provides a thorough account of how the CIA participated in the 1954 *coup d'état* against the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán. Árbenz had the intolerable audacity of opposing the interests of the United Fruit Company.

In Chile, Prashad shows us how the US government spent \$8

million to finance strikes and protests against Allende.

What happened in Brazil when the parliamentary coup removed president Dilma Rousseff from office in August 2016 is an example of the perverse practice of ‘lawfare’, or the ‘use of law as a weapon of war’. The same method was used against former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who suffered in prison for 580 days as a result of a trial in which the prosecutors did not provide concrete evidence – just ‘firm beliefs’.

Times have changed, and business is no longer carried out in the same way, but the underlying methods and responses of imperialism have remained largely unaltered.

Bolivians know this perverse politics well. Long before our fourteen years at the head of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, we have had to confront the operations, threats, and retaliation of the United States.

In 2008, I had to expel Philip Goldberg, the ambassador of the United States, who was conspiring with separatist leaders, giving them instructions and resources to divide Bolivia. In that moment, the US Department of State said that my claims were unfounded. I don’t know what they would say now, when the participation of the US embassy in the coup that overthrew us at the end of 2019 is so clear. What will future researchers say who take up the work of reading the CIA documents that are classified today?

The Monroe Doctrine and the National Security Doctrine attempt to convert Latin America into the United States’s backyard and criminalize any type of organization that opposes its interest and that attempts to build an alternative political, economic, and social model.

Over the decades, the US has invented a series of pretexts and has built a narrative to attempt to justify its criminal political and military interventions. First, there was the justification of the fight against communism, followed by the fight against drug trafficking, and, now, the fight against terrorism.

This book brings to mind the infinite instances in which

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Washington Bullets have shattered hope. Colonialism has always used the idea of progress in accordance with its own parameters and its own reality. This same colonialism – which puts our planet in a state of crisis today, devours natural resources, and concentrates wealth that is generated from devastation – says that our laws of *vivir bien* [‘living well’] are utopian. But if our dreams of equilibrium with *Pachamama* [‘Mother Earth’], of freedom, and of social justice are not yet a reality, or if they have been cut short, it is primarily because imperialism has set out to interfere in our political, cultural, and economic revolutions, which promote sovereignty, dignity, peace, and fraternity among all people.

If the salvation of humanity is far away, it is because Washington insists on using its bullets against the world’s people.

We write and read these lines and this text in a moment that is extremely tense for our planet. A virus is quarantining the global economy, and capitalism – with its voracious habits and its need to concentrate wealth – is showing its limits.

It is likely that the world that will emerge from the convulsions of 2020 will not be the one that the one that we used to know. Every day, we are reminded of the duty to continue our struggle against imperialism, against capitalism, and against colonialism. We must work together towards a world in which greater respect for the people and for Mother Earth is possible. In order to do this, it is essential for states to intervene so that the needs of the masses and the oppressed are put first. We have the conviction that we are the masses. And that the masses, over time, will win.

Evo Morales Ayma
Former President of Bolivia

Buenos Aires
April 2020

FILES

I make no secret of my opinion that at the present time the barbarism of Western Europe has reached an incredibly high level, being only surpassed – far surpassed, it is true – by the barbarism of the United States.

– Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 1955

Books and documents that detail the tragedies afflicted upon the people of the world surround me. There is a section of my library that is on the United States government's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its coups – from Iran in 1953 onward, every few years, every few countries. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports make up an entire bookshelf; these tell me about the roadblocks placed before countries that try to find a way out of their poverty and inequality. I have files and files of government documents that had investigated old wars and new wars, bloodshed that destabilized countries in the service of the powerful and the rich. There are memoirs of diabolical leaders and advisors – the complete works of Henry Kissinger – and there are the writings and speeches of the people's leaders. These words create a world. They explain why there is so much suffering around us and why that suffering leads not to struggle, but to resignation and hatred.

I reach above me and pull down a file on Guatemala. It is on the CIA coup of 1954. Why did the US destroy that small country? Because the landless movement and the Left fought to elect a

democratic politician – Jacobo Árbenz – who decided to push through a moderate land reform agenda. Such a project threatened to undercut the land holding of the United Fruit Company, a US conglomerate that strangled Guatemala. The CIA got to work. It contacted retired Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, it paid off brigade commanders, created sabotage events, and then seized Árbenz in the presidential palace and sent him to exile. Castillo Armas then put Guatemala through a reign of terror. ‘If it is necessary to turn the country into a cemetery in order to pacify it,’ he said later, ‘I will not hesitate to do so.’ The CIA gave him lists of Communists, people who were eager to lift their country out of poverty. They were arrested, many executed. The CIA offered Castillo Armas its benediction to kill; *A Study of Assassination*, the CIA’s killing manual, was handed over to his butchers. The light of hope went out in this small and vibrant country.

What other day-lit secrets of the past are sitting in my files and books? What do these stories tell us?

That when the people and their representatives tried to forge a just road forward, they were thwarted by their dominant classes, egged on by the Western forces. That what was left was a landscape of desolation. Humiliation of the older colonial past was now refracted into the modern era. At no time were the people of the Third World allowed to live in the same time as their contemporaries in the West – they were forced into an earlier time, a time with less opportunity and with less social dignity. Tall leaders of the Third World felt the cold steel of execution – Patrice Lumumba in the Congo (1961), Mehdi Ben Barka of Morocco (1965), Che Guevara in Bolivia (1967), Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso (1987), and so many others, before, after, and in between. Entire countries – from Vietnam to Venezuela – faced obliteration through asymmetrical and hybrid wars.

This book is based on a vast amount of reading of US government documents, and documents from its allied

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governments and multilateral organizations, as well as the rich secondary literature written by scholars around the world. It is a book about the shadows; but it relies upon the literature of the light.

‘BRING DOWN MORE US AIRCRAFT’

Estados Unidos: el país donde

La libertad es una estatua.

United States: the country where

Liberty is a statue.

– Nicanor Parra, *Artefactos*, 1972

What is the price of an assassin’s bullet? Some dollars here and there. The cost of the bullet. The cost of a taxi ride, a hotel, an airplane, the money paid to hire the assassin, his silence purchased through a payment into a Swiss bank, the cost to him psychologically for having taken the life of one, two, three, or four. But the biggest price is not paid by the intelligence services. The biggest price is paid by the people. For in these assassinations, these murders, this violence of intimidation, it is the people who lose their leaders in their localities. A peasant leader, a trade-union leader, a leader of the poor. The assassinations become massacres, as people who are in motion are cut down. Their confidence begins to falter. Those who came from them, organized them, spoke from them, either now dead or, if not dead, too scared to stand up, too isolated, too rattled, their sense of strength, their sense of dignity, compromised by this bullet or that. In Indonesia, the price of the bullet was in the millions; in Guatemala, the tens of thousands. The death of Lumumba damaged the social dynamic of the Congo, muzzling its history. What did it cost to kill Chokri Belaïd (Tunisian, 1964–2013) and Ruth First (South African, 1925–1982), what did it

take to kill Amílcar Cabral (Bissau-Guinean and Cape Verdean, 1924–1973) and Berta Cáceres (Honduran, 1971–2016)? What did it mean to suffocate history so as to preserve the order of the rich? Each bullet fired struck down a Revolution and gave birth to our present barbarity. This is a book about bullets.

Many of these bullets are fired by people who have their own parochial interests, their petty rivalries and their small-minded gains. But more often than not, these have been Washington's bullets. These are bullets that have been shined by the bureaucrats of the world order who wanted to contain the tidal wave that swept from the October Revolution of 1917 and the many waves that whipped around the world to form the anti-colonial movement. The first wave crested in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and in Eastern Europe, and it was this wave that provoked the Cold War and the East–West conflict; the other wave went from Vietnam and China to Cuba, from Indonesia to Chile, and this wave engendered the far more deadly North–South or West–South conflict. It was clear to the United States, as the leader of the West, that no muscular conflict would be possible along the East–West axis, that once the USSR (1949) and China (1964) tested their nuclear weapons no direct war would be possible. The battlefield moved from along the Urals and the Caucasus into Central and South America, into Africa, and into Asia – into, in other words, the South. Here, in the South where raw materials are in abundance, decolonization had become the main framework by the 1940s. Washington's bullets that pointed towards the USSR remained unused, but its bullets were fired into the heart of the South. It was in the battlefields of the South that Washington pushed against Soviet influence and against the national liberation projects, against hope and for profit. Liberty was not to be the watchword of the new nations that broke away from formal colonialism; liberty is the name of a statue in New York harbour.

Imperialism is powerful: it attempts to subordinate people to maximize the theft of resources, labour, and wealth. Anyone who

denies the absolute obscenity of imperialism needs to find another answer to the fact that the richest 22 men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa, or that the richest one per cent have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people. You would have to have an answer for the reason why we continue to suffer from hunger, illiteracy, sickness, and indignities of various kinds. You could not simply say that there are no resources to solve these problems, given that tax havens hold at least \$32 trillion – more than the total value of gold that has been brought to the surface. It is easy to bomb a country; harder yet to solve the pressing problems of its peoples. Imperialism's only solution to these problems is to intimidate people and to create dissension amongst people.

But liberty cannot be so easily contained. That is why, despite the odds, people continue to aspire for alternatives, continue to organize themselves, continue to attempt to win a new world – all this despite the possibility of failure. If you do not risk failure, you cannot taste the fruit of victory.

On 2 September 1945, Hồ Chí Minh appeared before a massive crowd in Hanoi. He had never before been to the capital, but he was known by everyone there. 'Countrymen,' he asked, 'can you hear me? Do you understand what I am saying?' A few weeks before, in Tân Trào, the National Congress of People's Representatives laid out the agenda for the new Vietnam. At that meeting, Hồ Chí Minh said, 'The aim of the National Liberation Committee and all the delegates is to win independence for our country – whatever the cost – so that our children would have enough to eat, would have enough to wear, and could go to school. That's the primary goal of our revolution.' The people in Hanoi, and across Vietnam, knew exactly what Hồ Chí Minh was saying; they could hear him, and they could understand him. His slogan was food, clothes, and education.

To feed, clothe, and educate one's population requires resources. Vietnam's revolution meant that it would no longer

allow its own social wealth to drain away to France and to the West. The Vietnamese government, led by Hồ Chí Minh, wanted to use that wealth to address the centuries-old deprivations of the Vietnamese peasantry. But this is precisely what imperialism could not tolerate. Vietnamese labour was not for its own advancement; it was to provide surplus value for Western capitalists, in particular for the French bourgeoisie. Vietnam's own development could not be the priority of the Vietnamese; it was Vietnam's priority to see to the aggrandizement of France and the rest of the imperialist states. That is why the French – in cahoots with the Vietnamese monarchy and its underlings – went to war against the Vietnamese people. This French war against Vietnam would run from 1946 to 1954, and then the mantle of war-making would be taken up by the United States of America till its defeat in 1975. During the worst of the US bombing of the northern part of Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh went on a tour of air defences. He was already in his late 70s. His comrades asked after his health. 'Bring down more US aircraft,' he said, 'and I'll be in the best of health.'

Washington's bullets are sleek and dangerous. They intimidate and they create loyalties out of fear. Their antidote is hope, the kind of hope that came to us in 1964 as the Colombian civil war opened a new phase, and the poet Jotamario Arbeláez (translated by Nicolás Suescún) sang of another future –

a day
 after the war
 if there is a war
 if after the war there is a day
 I will hold you in my arms
 a day after the war
 if there is a war
 if after the war there is a day
 if after the war I have arms
 and I will make love to you with love

'BRING DOWN MORE US AIRCRAFT'

a day after the war
if there is a war
if after the war there is a day
if after the war there is love
and if there is what it takes to make love.

SOURCES

A book like this relies upon a wide range of sources, but more than that, it relies upon a lifetime of activity and of reading. Listing all the books and articles would surely make this book double its current size. I have been involved – in one way or another – in the left movement for decades, and in these decades have been active in campaigns against the criminal behaviour of imperialism. And I have been reading about this behaviour in pamphlets and newspapers for these past many decades. There is no greater clarity for a writer than being involved in the very process that they wish to write about; distance is useful, surely, but distance can also create a false sense of dispassion.

My first indelible memory of political activity comes from the US intervention in Grenada in 1983. Here was a small island nation in the Caribbean, with not even a population of 100,000, that had been experimenting with its own form of socialism through the New Jewel Movement. The United States government, rather quickly, developed a narrative that it fed to the corporate press, of Cuban involvement in the New Jewel Movement and in the government of its leader Maurice Bishop. This was likely true, but the point was not whether it was true; the point was to tar the New Jewel Movement with the brush of communism and Cuban as well as Soviet involvement. It is precisely what the US government had done to all revolutionary struggles in Central America and the Caribbean in this period, allowing the bogey of communism

to justify their support for the most wretched right-wing – often genocidal – forces in the region. My first essay for a newspaper was written on the US intervention into Grenada (it was published in my school's alternative newspaper, *The Circle*).

The first draft of history, the truism goes, is the media; like all truisms, it is only partly correct. In the case of imperialism, it is downright misleading. The corporate media in the West – and the media elsewhere that mirrors it – is not capable of writing the first draft of history because it is a part of the story. It takes dictation from the imperialist institutions, such as the CIA, and produces narratives that have varying degrees of truth to them, but which are almost always stories that are framed by what suits Western interests, rather than by the facts on the ground. To read the media about Grenada after the 1979 revolution was to take stenography from the US government. In 1979, for instance, the *New York Times* ran a story called 'Radical Grenada Symbolizes Political Shift in Caribbean' (20 August). The story was anchored by two paragraphs of quotations from John A. Bushnell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of Inter-American Affairs in the US government. Bushnell said that while the US government does 'not believe that Cuba is following some master plan for expanding its influence in the Caribbean', nonetheless 'there also appears to be a drawing together of young radicals and radical movements in the Caribbean, encouraged by the recent events in Grenada and perhaps also by Cuba'. Cuba, he said, is a 'patron of revolutionaries' and it comes to 'the aid of radical regimes'. There was no detailed account of the plans of the Bishop government; no voices from that government, nothing really about the Grenadian people's desperation for a different kind of future.

To get the point of view of the New Jewel Movement, its own newspapers were invaluable, as were the speeches of Maurice Bishop; Bishop spoke openly about the challenges in this small island and offered an expansive vision of what would be possible if the people found themselves truly to be in charge (these are

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collected in *Maurice Bishop Speaks*, New York, 1983). For a socialist account of the revolution, the first draft of history must be the records of the government (1979–83) and the words left behind by its architects. These offer the revolution in its own words. But a revolution – like the counter-revolution – is capable of being blinded by its own rhetoric, which is why its critics from the left are often invaluable guides to the revolutionary process. In the days before the internet, it was hard to follow these debates, easy to be swept away by the calumnies of the corporate media. But there were always solidarity platforms – such as the Ecumenical Program for Interamerican Communication and Action (EPICA) and TransAfrica – that produced their own dossiers and bulletins; these would be filled with newspaper clippings and documents of all kinds, a hodgepodge of essential information that would circulate among leftists who were in solidarity with experiments such as the New Jewel Movement and who were outraged by imperialism's antics. Such collections are key to the archive of a book such as *Washington Bullets*.

In 1983, the US invaded Grenada and swept aside the New Jewel Movement.

It was not until 2012 that the National Security Archive – a not-for-profit investigative project in the United States – was able to attain 226 documents, largely from the US State Department, about Grenada. These documents allow a meticulous researcher to piece together the story of how the US government conducted a hybrid war against the Maurice Bishop government and how it created the conditions for its invasion. A close read of these documents shows how obsessed the US government was with the potential for Cuban and Soviet involvement in Grenada, and how this motivated every negative policy decision of the administration of Ronald Reagan against the New Jewel Movement. The real first draft of history is this secret trove of documents, which come to light decades after the event. This book is written with these sorts of documents in hand, State Department and CIA materials that

are either available in the CIA's own digital archive, or through the National Security Archive, or else in the private papers of former State Department and CIA officials as well as US presidents. It takes a lot of effort to run down some of these papers, and even more effort to learn to read them carefully. These documents cannot be taken at face value because – as I have learned over the years in talking to retired CIA and State Department officers – there is a great deal of career-driven exaggeration. One has to sift through the information with care and diligence.

Nothing is as valuable as hindsight, and often the best hindsight comes in memoirs and in memories as well as in academic work. Maurice Bishop was killed, and Milan Bish – the key US ambassador – is now dead. But Wendy Grenade, who teaches at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill (Barbados), edited a book in 2015 called *The Grenada Revolution: Reflections and Lessons*, which had an interview with Bernard Coard, who was Bishop's deputy and would have Bishop arrested (how Bishop died remains a mystery); and two essays by participants in the revolution – Brian Meeks and Patsy Lewis. A book such as edited by Grenade presents an opportunity for participants to look back and offer their own context for the revolution, and it allows other contributors to assess the nature of the *coup d'état* against the New Jewel Movement. The kind of book you have just read cannot be written without reading the vast and important secondary literature, often the best place to understand the contours of the national liberation revolutions that provoke Washington's bullets.

Nothing has been as useful to me in writing this book as the conversations I have had with ex-CIA agents, people such as Chuck Cogan, Rafael Quintero, and Tyler Drumheller. John Stockwell's *In Search of Enemies* (1978) is a book designed to clear the conscience of a man who was disgusted by the work he had done. Stockwell was in Grenada just before Bishop was killed; he went to Trinidad and got the flu so was not present at the key moment when New Jewel was destroyed. When the US invaded Grenada, Stockwell

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said that US President Ronald Reagan ‘likes controversy. It makes him look like what he thinks is a leader.’ The US had exaggerated the Cuban presence in Grenada, Stockwell said, as a way to justify the intervention. He knew this stuff from the inside out. Without the input of people like Stockwell or Chuck Cogan, this sort of book cannot be written. Before he died, Chuck met me several times in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at a restaurant and would walk me through his work in the Directorate of Operations in the key years of 1979–84. I was then interested in the 1979 assassination of US ambassador Adolph Dubs in Kabul; Chuck would say, ‘Don’t touch that; it is too hot.’ But then he’d tell me another story, take me down the road into another US-made disaster. This book is peppered with insights I got from these men, who did nasty things, hated talking about them, but were honest enough to say towards the end of their lives that they had helped to make a mess of the world.