

US government hypocrisy undercuts demand for Snowden's extradition

Stephen Zunes | Aug. 29, 2013

Viewpoint

Reasonable people can disagree as to whether former National Security Agency analyst Edward Snowden should be celebrated as a whistleblower for revealing widespread U.S. government spying or whether he should be tried and punished for leaking classified documents.

However, the Obama administration's extraordinary hypocrisy in demanding his immediate extradition to the United States, despite the lack of an extradition treaty with Russia, while refusing to extradite far worse criminals to countries with which the United States has such treaty obligations, denies the U.S. government any credibility on the matter.

The Obama administration has gone to extraordinary measures to extradite Snowden to the United States, where he probably would be convicted and face life imprisonment. These measures have included canceling President Barack Obama's long-planned summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin and creating a major diplomatic crisis with Latin American nations by forcing Bolivian President Evo Morales' plane to make an unscheduled landing in July on the possibility that Snowden might have been on board. Members of Congress and leading pundits have called for even harsher actions against those nations offering asylum to Snowden.

However, there has been virtually no attention given in Washington or in the mainstream media regarding the Obama administration's effective granting of political asylum to a number of notorious terrorists, kidnappers and mass murderers.

In July, as the Obama administration was pressuring the Russian government to hand Snowden over, it was also pressuring the government of Panama not to turn over Robert Seldon Lady -- a former CIA operative -- to Italy to serve his eight-year sentence for kidnapping, for which he had been convicted in absentia. Lady was charged with organizing the February 2003 abduction of Islamic cleric Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, a resident of Italy, off a Milan street and clandestinely shipping him to Egypt to be tortured. Lady has admitted his responsibility for Nasr's kidnapping and subsequent months of beatings and other abuse, declaring, "Of course it was an illegal operation. But that's our job."

In response to an Interpol warrant requested by Italy, Panamanian officials arrested Lady upon crossing the Costa Rican border in July. However, the Obama administration was able to convince Panama's conservative semi-autocratic president, Ricardo Martinelli, to allow him instead to return to the United States to avoid justice, prompting strong protests from the Italian government. Despite a longstanding extradition treaty with Italy, a democratic country and NATO ally, Obama clearly feels under no obligation to bring such criminals to justice.

There is also the case of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, the former president of Bolivia, and his defense minister, Carlos Sánchez Berzaín, who were responsible for ordering the October 2003 massacre of indigenous protesters demonstrating against the government's U.S.-backed economic and energy policies. Using machine guns and

high-powered rifles, government forces murdered 67 people, including children, and wounded more than 400. This massacre only fueled an ongoing popular and largely nonviolent uprising, forcing the government to resign within days.

Sánchez de Lozada and Sánchez Berzaín fled to the United States. The U.S. Department of Justice granted Sánchez Berzaín asylum in 2008. The Obama administration rejected Bolivia's extradition request for Sánchez de Lozada in 2012.

Like Italy (and unlike Russia), Bolivia has an extradition treaty with the United States. Sánchez de Lozada negotiated and signed the treaty when he was president. His extradition is supported not just by the leftist government, but by Bolivia's conservative opposition as well. Indeed, Sánchez de Lozada's former vice president, Carlos Mesa, initiated the case. It was supported by a more than two-thirds majority in the Bolivian Congress, which was then dominated by Sánchez de Lozada's own political party and its allies. And the effort to bring these criminals to justice has been an international effort; one of the principal investigators is Thomas Becker, a young Jesuit-educated American lawyer and graduate of Harvard Law School.

However, Sánchez de Lozada has influential supporters in Washington. Top Democratic Party operatives such as James Carville, Stan Greenberg and Bob Shrum were hired as consultants in his 2002 campaign. His attorney was Greg Craig, who served as President Bill Clinton's assistant and special counsel.

The most notorious and long-standing case of the United States harboring violent criminals is that of Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban-born right-wing terrorist and former CIA operative. Posada Carriles is responsible for a series of terrorist bombings in Havana, including one that killed an Italian tourist; a plot to blow up a Panamanian auditorium filled with hundreds of students where Cuban President Fidel Castro was speaking; as well as the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airline in Barbados that killed 73 people. He has been indicted for a series of terrorist charges in several Latin American countries, but the Obama administration has refused every request to extradite him to face justice.

As journalist Blake Fleetwood put it, "Obviously someone is protecting him. We trained him. He's our boy. I think he's still a hero to some people [at CIA headquarters] in Langley ... there's a tremendous sense of loyalty to him. He did what we trained him to do."

In the twisted view of the Obama administration and its supporters, the refusal to extradite terrorists, kidnapers, murderers and other thugs is a sovereign right of the United States that should be beyond debate. By contrast, the failure of foreign governments to cooperate with the U.S. demands to extradite a whistleblower like Snowden is seen as so egregious as to prompt a series of major diplomatic crises.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that the Obama administration's hypocritical policies are not even an issue, at least in the United States. Unlike in Europe, Latin America and other parts of the world, these cases have not been in the news. It has not come up in congressional hearings or debates on the floor. Neither White House nor State Department officials have had to face questions from the media. It's as if there is a consensus that the United States does not have to play by the same rules as everyone else.

Until that consensus is challenged, the United States will have no credibility in its fight to extradite Snowden, or anyone else.

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