

# The American Interest

by Srdja Trifkovic

## Robert Hanssen and the New Meaning of Treason

A year ago, Robert Philip Hanssen apparently felt the need to explain to the Russians his motives for supplying them with thousands of top-secret U.S. intelligence documents over the preceding decade and a half. The veteran FBI agent wrote them a letter, confessing that he is neither insanely brave, nor merely insane, but “insanely loyal” to his adolescent ideal of becoming “a new Kim Philby.”

A degenerate, Stalin-worshipping British traitor, boozing his fugitive days away in a Moscow apartment block, seems an odd choice of a role model for an American teenager. But to spend the next 40-plus years acting out the fantasy, undetected and unsuspected—and then to confess it all to his invisible foreign contacts—is ridiculous. It sounds like a joke an overconfident Mr. Hanssen wanted to play on his paymasters. Hanssen appears to have been primarily loyal to his wallet—to the tune of \$1.5 million in used, small notes and precious stones, spread over 15 years.

In return, this counterintelligence specialist—whose job was to keep an eye on the KGB in America—provided top-quality goods. Just for starters, he identified three Russians working from the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C., who had been recruited as double agents by the United States.

News reports invariably referred to Hanssen as a “spy.” They are wrong: He is a traitor. A spy is an American stealing Russian secrets or a Russian stealing American ones. Rudolph Abel and Gary Powers were spies; the Rosenbergs, Alger Hiss, Aldrich Ames, and Hanssen were not.

The fact that the networks and big dailies avoided the word “treason” is not surprising: It is a word inseparable from notions of honor, patriotism, loyalty, and other reactionary leftovers from pre-post-modern times. Even FBI director Louis Freeh made the curious remark that Hanssen’s conduct “represents the most traitorous actions imaginable against a country governed by the rule of law.” Did he mean that, in a country governed by the rule of a dictator, such actions

would not have been so “traitorous”?

Espionage, the second-oldest profession, shares some basics with the oldest: deception and duplicity. Both call for similar talents, and top spies, like top prostitutes, may enjoy the aura of glamour tinged with danger. In certain temperamental types, both callings evoke a somewhat perverse excitement. Both spies and whores can be perfectly useful members of their societies—somewhat disresponsible, perhaps, but necessary nevertheless.

Treason, on the other hand, is more akin to adultery. Both involve betrayal and abuse of trust; unlike some adulterers, however, traitors are beyond redemption. Some apologists for Jonathan Pollard suggest that “treason” applies only to helping an enemy in time of war, not to “illegally helping an ally in peacetime.” This is the same as saying that an occasional tryst with one’s sister-in-law does not really count as “adultery.” A country that grants you the rights and privileges of citizenship also has an exclusive claim to your allegiance. This claim is doubled in the case of a Klaus Fuchs, who asked for and was given refuge from persecution by another government.

All traitors are bad, but not all are equal. As Rebecca West noted in *The New Meaning of Treason* (1964), the assorted would-be Quislings of World War II were at least open enemies of liberal democracy. Léon Degrelle, Anton Mussert, or Leo Amery were loath to burrow quietly into strategic spots so as to undermine their host society while professing allegiance to it. William Joyce, the Reich’s English radio voice, thought that Britain was right—albeit mistaken—to hang him. An RAF officer who had helped “Lord Haw-Haw” with his scripts (and got ten years for his efforts) burst out indignantly: “This just shows how rotten this democratic country is! The Germans would have had the honesty to shoot me!”

Communist traitors, by contrast, were sustained by their “ideology” of self-hatred masquerading as dialectical materialism. In England, they enjoyed a field day from the late 1930’s on, leaving a putrid trail that spanned five decades. Their elevated milieu, *savoir-faire*, and privileged status (Anthony Blunt), coupled

with their access to strategic information and personnel (Philby), made them truly lethal to the prospects for Britain’s moral recovery. Money was neither here nor there. The inherently corrupt nature of the game itself served as a self-justifying microcosm of the society at large: manipulative, materialistic, depressingly sterile. The reward of betrayal was in the act itself, in the quiet superiority of grasping the uselessness and absurdity of it all, while persevering in the act until the end.

Aldrich Ames’s stated explanation (“it was all a game anyway”) ostensibly corresponded to this model, but with him and Hanssen, we see a new type altogether. The contemporary American traitor does not even pretend that he cares about ideas. “Exploitable weaknesses” that used to set off alarms with seasoned CIA and FBI campus recruiters are pervasive. Today, they would have to include the very fact of coming of age under Bill Clinton or attending public schools.

As the American nation is reduced by its rulers to an ever more diverse “proposition,” there is precious little anchorage for loyalty and honor—let alone readiness to make a supreme sacrifice. “I couldn’t do that” increasingly begs the question, “Why not?” Why not sell neutron-bomb blueprints to Osama bin Laden if Clinton didn’t mind the Chinese getting them? Why not transact a little business with the bad guys if it is OK for Marc Rich to do so?

That which is not worth dying for is not worth not betraying. Opportunity to act now equals temptation, and nothing is wrong *per se*. Robert Hanssen is no Kim Philby; he’s just a modern American. <C>

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## POLITICS

## Billy in the Lowground

by Janet Scott Barlow

“You may look bad, Bill, but we look just plain stupid.” That was the wounded and furious summation of *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen upon Bill Clinton’s inglorious exit from the presidency. Many questions are raised by that single sentence from a lone writer, the first being: Who is the “we” Cohen referred to? His answer: We is “me and everyone else who has ever defended [Clinton].”

Ah, already we’re getting somewhere, although it’s not where Richard Cohen would take us. For the fact is that Clinton defenders have never been only Clinton defenders. They are part of a larger collective and are identifiable as such. They are the liberal establishment, the media and political elite. And since the self-assumed intellectual superiority of every liberal elite precludes, above all else, stupidity, and—at the same time—the life’s purpose of all liberal elites is to point out the stupidity of others, it follows that the mother of all nightmares for any elite liberal is to find himself in Richard Cohen’s position, i.e., looking stupid. For eight years, liberals responded to the truism “We are known by the company we keep” by redefining Bill Clinton, at every turn, as worthy of association. They are now surprised to discover that Clinton’s behavior ended up defining them. What dopes.

But they are dopes in misery, nonetheless. And if it’s Bill Clinton who is responsible for their suffering, you can bet the Spode china it’s Bill Clinton who will pay. It is one thing to have adulterous sex in the Oval Office, to lie under oath, to suborn perjury, and to obstruct justice. It’s another thing altogether to make the Richard Cohens of the world look stupid. The first series of actions is debatable and therefore defensible, while the second part, the stupid stuff . . . well, you try that one, mister, and you’re dead meat.

There are *standards* at stake here, after all: You may be dishonest but not tacky; immorality is relative, but bad taste is not. Values come and go, but style is eternal.

Like no other figure in living memory, Bill Clinton brought into high relief the two opposing worldviews into which Americans are often divided. The first group is made up of people who believe that behavior is identity (a man who tells lies is a liar) and character is destiny (indecent people generate indecency). The second group believes that identity determines behavior (smart people don’t do stupid things) and destiny is a validation of character (a baby-boomer Democrat who rises to the presidency is, *ipso facto*, a person of positive substance). Within this second group there exists a subset, a collection of graying and bifocaled boomer hipsters who approach politics armed only with the standards of popular culture and the yardstick of celebrity. It is their self-appointed task to judge a given politician’s hip quotient—which, in the case of Bill Clinton, they immediately determined, in joyful delirium, to be quite as high as their own.

This hipster subset has been easily as affected by Bill Clinton’s ups and downs as have the two main groups. For them, Clinton was a gift straight from boomer heaven, what with his affinity for movies (not to mention movie stars), all the Elvis business, and, of course, that dumb saxophone. Through Clinton, the hipsters were able both to cling to their youth and to ease vicariously into a really cool middle age.

But despite all that clinging and easing, the hipsters are now suffering nearly as much as Richard Cohen. After projecting the image of their most desirable selves, both personally and generationally, onto Bill Clinton—after, that is, fishing for years in highly polluted waters—they are now shocked to discover that they have reeled in nothing but tin cans and old shoes. To them, it doesn’t much matter what Bill did. The important thing is that his image, and therefore their image, suffered in the process. On the day he left office, Clinton granted a presidential pardon to an unrepentant, tax-cheating, fugitive crook, and he hogged the limelight with a series of graceless speeches. Question: Which action was worse? Don’t laugh. If you once

believed that Bill Clinton was destined for presidential greatness because he shared your political origins (the 60’s) as well as your pop-culture fixations, it can be really tough (especially while surrounded by tin cans and old shoes) to weigh genuine corruption against absolute tackiness.

Mere weeks into the post-Clinton era, the resounding question from all elite quarters was “Will it ever end?” And with the dawn of each new day came the answer: Don’t hold your breath. Imagine, for instance, the shudder that went through the liberal establishment upon learning that the first media figure through which Bill Clinton chose to defend his last-minute presidential actions was that low-rent journalist and full-time sensationalist, Geraldo Rivera. Rivera’s scoop: Clinton was “bewildered,” “stressed out,” and, yes, “hurt.” Think of it: Just Bill and Geraldo, a couple of misunderstood guys feeling each other’s pain via cell phone. The unambiguous shabbiness of it was enough to give the entire liberal power structure a case of the vapors. (What? He’s calling Geraldo? Oh, God, you’re kidding, right?) In reality, of course, the only surprising thing about the Clinton/Rivera chat is the fact that America possesses technology sufficient to handle the simultaneous transmission of the world’s two most overheated egos (that is, the phones didn’t melt).

Bill and Hillary Clinton (and how can we discuss one without discussing the other?) are in a new and possibly deadly kind of trouble: Each is now afflicted with what was once the other’s problem. Bill’s problem is that he no longer holds elective office. Hillary’s problem is that she now does.

Bill Clinton sought the presidency because it is the world’s biggest stage. What is obvious now is that he regarded the stage as portable—something he could pack up and take with him, unfolding it for use as the spirit moved him for the rest of his natural life. That is such an exquisitely gauche assumption, such a traumatically embarrassing spectacle, that it has brought liberals, hipster subset and all, to a point of crisis. Without the mantle and the trappings of the presidency, Bill Clinton is just a deluded narcissist, preening for love and grubbing for money upon his imaginary stage. What the elites once saw as fascinating—the complex psychology