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*Laura Bush puts
her foot in it*

How the U.S. Has Tried to Use Burma's Cyclone to Spy Out Ground for Intervention

By Peter Lee

America's persistent promotion of its anti-junta/pro-Burmese democracy agenda after the cyclone offers an illustration of the risks of a confrontational values-based foreign policy when the unexpected occurs.

In the case of Burma there were three unexpected events that altered the political as well as physical geography of the region: the immense catastrophe made pouring aid into Burma a humanitarian imperative; the junta revealed its ability to exploit the suffering of the victims as if it was another international commodity like jade or teak; and the ten-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) demonstrated its unwillingness to act as a vehicle for America's anti-junta policy.

China has taken advantage of the disaster to shed its role as sole public protector of the Myanmar junta. Now it has been encouraging Myanmar to internationalize and engage with ASEAN in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

ASEAN, apparently eager to claim a significant regional role for itself, has responded by positioning itself as the intermediary for foreign aid to Myanmar, setting up a field office and organizing a donors' pledge conference in Yangon, and participating in the "Tripartite Core Group" – an ASEANB/U.N./Myanmar aid coordination committee that will meet once a month in Myanmar.

Most significantly, ASEAN has stepped up to pre-empt the U.S. demand that

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Why Blacks Keep Quiet About Obama

By Kevin Alexander Gray

A lot of black people I know have hit the mute button. When Hillary brings up working class white voters. When commentators say we're in the post-racial era. Even when Barack had to kick his preacher to the curb. "Where were Obama's friends?" *The Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Henninger asked. Quiet, quiet, quiet.

The current undertone in the black cultural cosmos reflects the old adage, "If you can't say some good, don't say anything at all." The way to show racial solidarity? Shush up.

Black people always have to navigate race fear; the long Democratic primary season has just underlined that. Joking, comedian Jon Stewart asked Obama, if elected, "Will you pull a bait and switch and enslave the white race?" Kinda funny. Except that's precisely the sentiment that underlies white race fear. I've heard the same thing said in seriousness by more than one white person. "If Obama gets the White House what will they want next?" Or, "if Obama wins, blacks will think they're running things."

So, one argument for keeping quiet is to avoid confirming or fueling white racist suspicions. A caller on one of the radio shows I did after Reverend Wright's National Press Club appearance said, "[Obama] has to convince white folk that he's 150 per cent with them. So we should just all be quiet and let him do what he has to do."

Give a listen to the corporate media, and it's pretty clear what tune black voices are supposed to be singing. Obama is constantly called on to swear allegiance to America – to prove he isn't swearing allegiance to blacks. The other way to say that is he's supposed to swear allegiance to white, not black, America. Meanwhile, the back end of that deal is that black Americans are required to substitute Obama for real structural racial progress.

As in, "You got your nominee. See, we're not so racist or bad after all. Now shut up!"

I was talking on the phone to a friend the day after Obama denounced his preacher. She wasn't mad at either of them, just blue over "the whole mess." Like many others, she saw the media as the culprit for blowing the incident up, and wondered aloud if Hillary didn't have something to do with it. She agreed with Wright's politics, felt the hurt between the two men, and recognized that the over-expansive persona many black preachers carry around doesn't play everywhere. The Press Club is not a black church. On Obama: "Yeah, he saying what he got to say. He's a politician." And her advice to me? That I not write or say anything "that would give the other side anything to latch on to." In other words, the mute button, the race gag.

Wright was Obama's "fish." Or that's what we called it when I was coming up. It's the "bad nigger" that all "good blacks" would be wise to avoid: the latest Sistah Souljah or Willie Horton. Farrakhan didn't take the bait, so Wright got the hook. Before Wright, Chris Matthews and his cohorts dangled Jesse Jackson out there, often repeating the line that Obama "is not like Jesse Jackson," so as to make Jackson's name (and his politics, importance, "style" and period) a pejorative.

Who knows who will be the next black bogeyman? It could be Obama's fellow Chicagoan Congressman Bobby Rush; he was once a Black Panther. Or, Trinity church's new pastor, Otis Moss. He said that he likes slain rapper Tupac Shakur, whose mother was also a Black Panther. What about James Cone, "the source" of that "radical," "anti-white," "anti-capitalist" "revolutionary" "socialist" black lib-

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threatens the Myanmar regime the most – for independent foreign assessment teams to travel through the delta freely in order to determine the nature and extent of the crisis and the composition and distribution of aid, and perhaps provide the evidentiary grounds for humanitarian intervention.

Calls for humanitarian intervention in Burma predate by almost two years the current crisis and western fascination with extension of the “responsibility to protect” (R2P, as it’s known) mandate of the United Nations to Burma, as championed by France’s foreign minister and rabid humanitarian interventionist, Bernard Kouchner. In September 2006, the United States succeeded in placing the Burma question on the permanent agenda of the U.N. Security Council on the assumption (explicitly repudiated by China) that the regime’s internal repression created a threat to regional peace that mandated intervention by the UNSC. Even under relatively normal, pre-disaster conditions, the United States was already prepared to make the case for humanitarian intervention.

So, a pressing and pre-existing concern for the Myanmar government is to prevent an aggressive U.S. assessment team from making judgments as to whether

the Myanmar army’s cyclone response crossed the line from “inadequate” to “criminally mismanaged and justifying international control over the aid effort” or “crime against humanity requiring international intervention”.

A lot of attention has focused on the travails of the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) DART (Disaster Assistance Response Team) that has been cooling its heels in Thailand.

Very little reporting was devoted to the fact that an ASEAN ERAT (Emergency Relief Assessment Team) had already visited Myanmar in mid-May and reported to ASEAN in Singapore on May 19.

Now, ASEAN is dispatching its ERAT team to Myanmar for an in-depth one-month investigation, which began on June 1, that will presumably supply the professional and credible independent assessment of the situation on the ground that’s needed in order to extract aid from foreign governments and international NGOs – but not prepare an adversarial bill of indictment of the regime’s response to the catastrophe.

It will be interesting to see if the United States makes some moves toward conciliation with the Myanmar regime in order to get William Berger’s respected DART team into the delta, or decides to stick to its maximalist demands and use Myanmar’s exclusion of the team as a justification for opposing increased international aid.

If politics rules the day, that might place the United States in the awkward position of ignoring or badmouthing the ASEAN assessment in order to advance the narrative of criminal mismanagement by the Myanmar regime in the aftermath of the cyclone.

Given ASEAN’s active and apolitical engagement with the Myanmar regime, the question is, what political advantage can or should the United States salvage from the situation in Burma.

Prior to Cyclone Nargis, the Burmese opposition and the Bush administration had a full slate of counterprogramming prepared for May, as the junta proceeded with efforts to legitimize its rule with a referendum on a new draft constitution.

Scot Marciel was confirmed as the first U.S. ambassador to ASEAN (a China-free regional bloc considered more amenable to the U.S.A. than the UNSC on Burmese matters) in April 2008, with the express

mission of organizing ASEAN pressure on Burma. In an online chat from Kuala Lumpur on April 29, he framed the U.S. position on the referendum:

“The regime’s draft constitution lacks credibility, as it was drafted in secret by a hand-picked group. It is already clear that the regime’s constitutional referendum, scheduled for May 10, will be neither free, fair, nor credible.”

As the *L.A. Times* Calendar section reported, a full slate of Hollywood celebrity statements supporting the Burmese opposition – featuring Will Ferrell, Sylvester Stallone, Jennifer Aniston, Anjelica Houston, Judd Apatow, and others – began streaming May 1 on the us-campaignforburma.org site to raise public awareness.

On May 2, President Bush expanded U.S. sanctions to freeze for the first time assets of three state-owned Burmese companies.

The festival of anti-junta activity continued even after Nargis dramatically changed the Burma equation.

The Bush administration seemed captive to its own existing momentum, inertia, principles, or priorities and found itself unable to change gears to address the dilemma of how to deal with the Myanmar junta on disaster relief.

On May 5 – the first working day in Washington after the cyclone hit – first lady Laura Bush, whose primary public policy cause is Burmese democracy, announced that the president would sign legislation awarding Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi the Congressional Gold Medal to “let the people of Burma know that the United States is standing with them.”

There’s no indication that postponing the ceremony – and not sticking a finger in the junta’s eye in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone – was considered.

Mrs. Bush also put her foot in it by seeming to put the democracy agenda and anti-referendum talking points ahead of disaster relief, as the pro-dissident *Irrawaddy Times* reported:

“Much of the Burmese community was surprised and shocked by comments made by the U.S. first lady who said the United States will consider sending relief assistance to Burma only if the Burmese military junta accepts a U.S. disaster assistance response team to assess the scope of the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis. “Speaking on May 5

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