

Chapter Five

MERCHANT OF DEATH?

One way to delve into the innermost secrets of the Shadow Masters and the world's interlocked terrorist networks is to look at clandestine arms trafficking. According to the mainstream press, the most infamous gunrunner of them all is Victor Bout.

Corporate media defines Victor Bout as savvy, ambitious, modern-day, multinational entrepreneur. "He's good with numbers and knows how to seize opportunities when they arise. Bout has no known history of violence, and no political agenda. He loves his family. He's fed the poor. And through his hard work, he's become extraordinarily wealthy. Since the early 1990s, Bout's business acumen has earned him hundreds of millions of dollars."¹

What, exactly, does he do? "Victor Bout is the poster boy for a new generation of post Cold War international arms dealers who play a critical role in areas where the weapons trade has been embargoed by the United Nations. The story spans several continents and involves a large network of shady individuals, front companies and government officials; corrupt African bureaucrats and thieving East European military officials."²

We are told that he, more than most, has succeeded in exploiting the anarchy of globalization, making possible massacres on a scale that has stunned the world. Much of his personal history we are led to believe is unknown; much may be a figment of his own fertile imagination. According to a *Men's Journal* article, "Viktor Bout has been so good at concealing his past that American intelligence agents who have tracked him for years joke that his birth was an im-

maculate conception.”³ On paper, at least, it appears that Bout is one of the most amoral men alive. His colorful story piqued my curiosity and shortly after 9/11, I decided to investigate. My investigation would eventually take me to the four corners of the world and span almost a decade. The last leg of my exhausting journey took me to Bangkok, to KlongPrem prison, and to face-to-face meetings and interviews with the so-called Merchant of Death, Victor Bout. What I found out will forever help separate that which is fact from what is hearsay and fiction.

Victor Anatoliyevich Bout was born in Russia on January 13, 1967, in Dushanbe, now the capital of Tajikistan, in the far reaches of Soviet territory. His mother was a bookkeeper and his father an auto mechanic. He has one older brother, Sergey, who looks very much like him, born in 1961. After graduating from secondary school, Bout applied to the Soviet Foreign Ministry’s Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Unable to pass the entry exam, he was drafted into the Soviet Army. Upon completion of obligatory military service, he applied to the Moscow Military Institute of Foreign Languages, a four-year program that would have made him a Lieutenant upon graduation. However, instead of studying its full course, he was offered a shorter option – a year and a half of intense courses in Portuguese and a rank of Junior Lieutenant, followed by two years of obligatory service in Mozambique as a military interpreter.

But chance intervened with a sort of fumbling coherence, and the world and Victor Bout would never be the same again. I have learned that chance plays an important, if not predominant, part in human affairs. The fact that a man like Victor Anatoliyevich Bout should so much as go to Africa and to Mozambique, not to mention find himself in the position he currently finds himself in, locked up and in leg chains at the worst prison in all of Southeast Asia, is alone eerily intriguing. That in time he should ultimately owe his freedom to the very US government that has tried to put him in prison in the first place is breathtaking in its absurdity.

When Bout failed to catch on at Moscow State Institute of International Relations, chance reared its gangly head. There was a dearth of translators in Mozambique, so Bout was offered to do an accelerated, one-and-a-half year program, with an emphasis on one language – Portuguese, instead of a full four-year program in Moscow.

Upon completion of this program, Bout became a Lieutenant Junior Grade, after which he was posted as a military translator in

Mozambique on a two-year stint. At the end of this period, having shown his aptitude for languages and generally being considered a brilliant translator by his superiors, Bout was all set to finish his higher education, per the initial agreement with the government, by completing the remaining two and a half years of studies in Moscow. But the Soviet Union began its implosion, and Bout decided to forego the remaining years of his career. His life, and for that matter ours, was never the same again.

He speaks Russian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English and Farsi. According to investigator Ruud Leeuw, his IQ is said to be more than 170, putting him in the top .0002% (one in five million) of the world's population. I got in touch with Mr. Leeuw through his website.

After identifying myself, I got straight to the point.

"170 IQ. That's pretty high. How do you know this? Did you measure it yourself, or do you have a psychological-evaluation report on Bout?"

"Well, I don't really know myself. That's what they say. My interest in Victor Bout is limited; I am a photographer ... Contrary to the impression to what my website may give you ... I stumbled upon him while trying to research the history of certain aircraft ... keep track of those same planes ... and things took off. Do you know what I mean?"

"Actually, Ruud, I don't know what you mean," I persisted. "You are building a profile of a man. Your name appears on several official reports. Thus, you are a credible source for many people. Who told you Bout has an IQ of 170?"

"I think it was Richard Chichakli."

"Bout's former associate?"

"Exactly."

"So, you spoke to Chichakli."

"Not personally, but I read it in a newspaper interview."

"If Chichakli said it, why don't you source it? I mean, why didn't you put it in quotes, attributing this information to him?"

"I have no interest in conspiracy theories in any way, nor am I particularly interested in illegal arms trade. It's just a personal web page," he replied apologetically, clearly uncomfortable.

"And Bout is just an arms dealer, according to many." I hung up without saying goodbye. I was once again in the land of the Shadow Masters.

Now I am a Russian by birth, but consider myself a citizen of the world, with respect for sovereignty, self-determination and self-reliance. My life experiences have given me a strong appreciation of what man's freedoms and liberties are worth. Exiled as a child with my family from the USSR – because of my father's political beliefs – then coming of age in the West, becoming a citizen of Canada, marrying a Spanish lady and living in Spain and Italy for years, has given me an appreciation of the freedoms and unlimited opportunities that many take for granted. I understand the value of a free press, and of an educated, civically involved population, to the health of any nation-state.

As I pulled back the curtain during my research, the implausibility of it all amazed me, snapping me out of the thrall of the official story. For just as “legends” (cover stories/false IDs) are created for our own spooks, it seems that legends may also be conveniently created for our enemies'. Let's see, the good guys wear the white hats and the bad guys the black ones, right? Let's all hiss at the villain on cue ...

The *Guardian* of London, one of the UK's most prestigious newspapers, stated that Bout “holds at least five passports and uses as many as seven aliases. His aliases include Boutov, Butt, But, Budd, Bouta, all with Victor or Viktor as the first name. Two of his passports are issued in the names of Vadim Aminov and Victor Bulakin, according to inside sources in the British Foreign Service and the US State Department.”⁴ The insinuation is clear. The Merchant of Death, a most-sought-after international criminal, would certainly hide under false identities in order to avoid capture.

Stephan Talty writing for *Men's Journal* described the lead-up to Bout's 2008 arrest in Bangkok. “Snow drifted down from a malevolent black sky as a stocky, mustachioed man arrived at Moscow's airport on the evening of March 5.... He had chosen carefully among his five passports. The names on them varied, but they were all versions of his given one: Viktor Bout. He had spent years carefully blurring almost every trace of his past, but what is known is that he'd served in the Soviet military in the 1980s, working as a navigator, training commandos for its air force, and flying to Angola to act as a translator.”⁵

According to his publisher, Stephan Talty “is a widely published journalist who has contributed to the *New York Times Magazine*,

GQ, *Men's Journal*, and many other publications. Through Random House, I got in touch with him.

"Stephan, in your article for *Men's Journal* you wrote ..." I repeated the snow-drifted arrival described above. "Were you there? Did you see it yourself?"

"No, of course I wasn't there."

"Did you get it from the DEA?"

"It is a lead-in. Do you know what a lead-in is? I am setting the scene," he clarified.

"I know what a lead-in is. Except that when the first sentence is a fabrication, I might suspect that the rest of the article is too. Do you know what I mean?"

"Whom do you work for again?" he asked, his voice more cautious, edgy.

I ignored him. "You also say that Bout had chosen carefully among his five passports." I paused. "Where did you get this from?"

"What?"

"That he had five passports?"

"I got it from the DEA and from the Internet," came the reply.

"You did? And how do you know it's true?"

"Are you a conspiracy theorist?"

"No, I am a *coincidence* theorist. So, how do you know he has five passports?"

Silence.

"All right. One more question. According to your article, in the 1980s, Bout worked as a navigator, training commandos for the Soviet air force."

Silence.

"Let's do the math, shall we? He was born in 1967. If we take the 1980s as 1987 or 1988, Bout would have been nineteen, twenty, at most. Are you suggesting that a twenty-year-old was training elite commandoes of the Soviet armed forces?"

"Look, it's just background. We know what he is."

"Who is *we*, Stephan? The government, the mainstream press, your family, beer-drinking America, or people who work at Random House?"

"Look, if you want to find out more about Bout, talk to the DEA."

"I will, count on it. I wanted to know what you knew about Bout *before* writing an article on him. It is obvious, you don't know much." There was a click. Widely published author Stephan Talty had nothing else to add.

So, what's the real story with Bout's apparent numerous aliases and endless passports and why are the *Guardian* of London, *New York Times*, CNN, BBC and numerous other publications so diligently trying to ram their version down our throats? In fact, as I found out, he only has one passport.

The rest of the mainstream story is setting the scene, background noise made to appeal to the uninitiated and the gullible. A number of the supposed aliases attributed to Bout are variant spellings of his surname when the Cyrillic alphabet of Russian is transliterated into the Roman letters of English and most European languages. According to tradition, the evangelist Cyril, later St. Cyril, devised an alphabet adapted from the Greek in order to bring the Gospels to the mostly pagan and illiterate Slavic tribes. In Russian, the name is Виктор Бут.

Two letters are derived from Greek beta. By chance, the one most resembling English "B" represents the non-Greek sound of "V," while the "B" sound is represented by the letter beginning Bout's surname. "K" is "K" and "T" is "T." "P" represents the English "R" sound. (You are likely to recall the ubiquitous "СССР" [USSR] on tanks and athletes from the Soviet era.) So much for the consonants. With the knowledge that "O" is "O" and that "И" represents English "I," Bout's given name is discernible: Viktor, or the more familiar Victor, take your pick. Most sources seem to agree on this point.

His surname can be rendered as Bout, Butt or But, depending on the system employed. The spelling we see most often – Bout – results from the older, traditional system based upon French pronunciation. Beginning in 1996, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed to an Anglicized system, which, in a typically chaotic post-Soviet manner, lacked a uniform methodology. Thus Виктор Бут became DEA-invented Victor Butt. However, supplying an ordinary English pronunciation under any of the spellings doesn't approximate the Russian name, which has a "U" sound more like "put" than "but."

The fact is that the alleged arms dealer has had three passports: an old Soviet one, his first Russian passport as "Bout" in accordance with the former French transliteration rules, and a more recent Russian passport as "But" according to the newer rules. I think Bout is resigned to hearing his name mispronounced in English: "bout" as rhyming with "out." But I find it remarkable that "Butt" has not become the standard, given the demonization of the man himself and the common meanings of that English word.

The other two names ascribed to him by the intelligence agencies, Western governments and the mainstream press are the names appearing on US extradition request documents in its unsealed indictment of Bout: Vadim Markovich Aminov and Viktor Bulakin. These are the names of real people who lived and worked in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, at the same time Victor Bout was there. Aminov, the owner of a travel agency in Sharjah catering to Russians, for example, was overheard on a wiretap talking to Victor Bout.

Later on, the same voice was confused for Bout's voice, and Aminov's name was written into Bout's file as another one of his aliases. Aminov and Bout are two different people, the only similarity being that the two men spoke Russian and each wore a bushy moustache. Why was Aminov talking to Bout? Who knows? However, it is only reasonable for Aminov and Bout to have known each other, as most expatriates stay in touch with fellow countrymen in a foreign land, especially in a place as different as Sharjah is from Moscow.

In another interesting revelation, British military intelligence reported that Bout was stationed in Rome with the KGB between 1985 and 1989. I heard this information on CNN and, not too long ago, read it in Canada's flagship publication, the *Toronto Star*.

Now, let's see. Bout was born in 1967. In 1985, he would have been 17 years old. Is it reasonable to believe that a seventeen-year-old would be working for the KGB at its key European station? Hardly. Are we to assume that British military intelligence made a mistake, or, whatever its source, is this disinformation part of a farsighted policy initiative against Bout? And if not against Bout, then against whom and, most importantly, for what purpose?

What is known about Bout from mainstream press reports is that he is six feet tall, "stocky, and usually sporting a baseball cap and a bushy moustache." At least, that's how Interpol had described him in their Most Wanted files. In photographs taken during Peter Landesman's interview of him in Moscow in 2003, he is wearing an expensive olive-colored suit.

Douglas Farah is considered by many to be the foremost expert on Bout's illegal activities. He is co-author of a best-selling exposé on Bout, *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*, which certainly limits any suspense regarding its protagonist. According to Farah, Bout had been an instructor of elite Soviet commandos while a senior lieutenant in the air force. There is no evidence that he ever rose above junior lieutenant, and as I've

noted, twenty-year-olds did not train commandos of the Soviet military. Furthermore, the book is completely lacking in primary sources of information. There are no names provided. References are always made to “European, Pakistani, US investigators ... sources in the State Department ... contacts in the DEA ... government officials ...” Etcetera.

However, I decided to triple check. One can never be too careful. I sent Douglas Farah an email message on September 21, 2009.

Doug, this is Daniel Estulin, again. I would like to clarify a point in your book. You say, “Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Bout was an air force senior lieutenant training recruits for the GRU, the elite commandos of the Russian Air Force, on a military base in Vitebsk, Belarus.”

He was born in 1967. A copy of his latest passport is attached. If we do the math, he was barely out of his teens when he was purportedly training these commandoes. How do you explain this?

A few days later, I got a reply from Farah stating that the passport I sent him was “fake” and that Bout was “much older.”

Once I got over the initial shock, I quickly sent him another query. “Please forgive my ignorance. But, what makes you think the passport is a fake? The Russian government in Bangkok has vouched for it. Or are you suggesting they are in on the conspiracy? I am working on a deadest of deadlines for my book and would dearly love to hear back from you at your earliest convenience.”

I never heard back from Douglas Farah, Victor Bout-expert.

Historically, Soviet military intelligence oversaw the flow of Russian military hardware and military services to friendly revolutionary movements around the globe, especially in Africa and Central America, in accordance with its foreign policy objectives. According to one western intelligence official, “Bout’s military transport aviation regiment was disbanded in 1991, and essentially they went private.” Alla Bout, Victor’s wife, explained to me that when the two of them came back from Mozambique at the end of 1991, the Soviet Union had imploded. Bout’s junior lieutenant salary barely allowed them enough money to buy an extra cup of coffee.

Overnight, thousands of elite pilots and their crews found themselves out of jobs. The Soviet system crumbled into oblivion before their very eyes. But, out of disaster arose opportunity. Dilapidated weapons, rusting spare parts, jeeps, tanks and clunky Soviet air-

planes, which in most cases could be had for a price of a Mercedes 600, attracted an instant clientele of former Soviet republics, rebel leaders and guerrilla armies in far-flung nations. Tin-cup dictators with oversized egos and shining medals hiding behind tacky plastic shades were only too happy and eager to acquire Soviet surplus.

And, according to mainstream press accounts, Victor Bout, who for years was just an unknown face on the edge of wartime photos, was only too pleased to serve them. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “During the chaotic period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bout was among the Russian entrepreneurs who seized opportunities to make a fortune.”⁷

He allegedly started running guns to Afghanistan in the mid 1990s, and then discovered Africa. André Velrooy, a Norwegian journalist who investigated Bout’s activities for the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists’ special issue of November 20, 2002, stated, “He had access to what the African warlords wanted. The end of the Cold War resulted in a massive amount of surplus weaponry being dumped at often very low prices onto the private market.”

According to the UN investigators at that time, “Bout traffics exclusively in weapons bought in the former Soviet bloc, mainly Russia, Bulgaria and Romania,” using his expertise and connections to expand weapons trade in Angola. “Local carriers had the established routes and well-formed contacts in the area, but lacked capacity. Mr. Bout, through his numerous contacts in the ex-Soviet air force, was immediately able to provide the required capacity and, in return, took advantage of the established routes and contacts in the southern African region.”⁸

According to the British secret service, US State Department documents and Belgian police reports, often cited in the mainstream press, what made Bout’s network extraordinary was its ability to deliver both small-caliber arms as well as sophisticated weapon systems virtually anywhere in the world. His associates, ranging from former US military personnel and Russian officials to African heads of state and organized crime figures, gave him a lengthy list of buyers and sellers with whom to do business.

United Nations Resolutions 1521 and 1532, as well as the Angola Report of December 21, 2000 and Interpol intelligence documents, show Bout closely linked with several African dictators and rebel leaders, including the late Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, former Liberian president and accused mass murderer Charles Taylor,

former Zairian president Mobutu Sese Seko, Libyan President-for-life Moammar Gadhafi, Jean-Pierre Bemba, leader of the Congo Liberation Front, as well as the former leaders of Congo-Brazzaville and numerous others. It is said that it is next to impossible to pigeonhole his political affiliations, however. That's because he is completely apolitical. I disagree.

He is a Russian and he wears that distinction as a badge of honor. I can't really explain it. You have to be a Russian to understand.

What is undeniable, as Bout himself admits, is that in the 1990s Bout supplied arms to Ahmed Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Bout described Massoud "as a great friend with whom he had spent countless hours talking about the everyday." He sent an aircraft to rescue Mobutu Sese Seko, the ailing and corrupt ruler of Zaire, even though he had supplied the rebels who were closing in on Mobutu's last stronghold.⁹ Bout bought a Gulfstream One used by a Swedish expedition to fly to the North Pole.

It is said that Bout cleverly combined legal and not-so-legal airline activities, often carrying legitimate wares such as fresh-cut flowers and frozen crayfish from South Africa to Europe. According to Bout himself, he flew over 3,500 missions in Africa in one year. His most profitable enterprise was flying gladiolus purchased for \$2 in Johannesburg and resold for \$100 in Dubai. He transported United Nations peacekeepers from Pakistan to East Timor, and formed part of the logistics effort in Operation Restore Hope, the US-led military famine relief effort in Somalia in 1993. In 1994, his aircraft flew 2,500 French troops into Rwanda. In 1997, he transported ostriches from Johannesburg in South Africa to Saudi Arabia. Later that same year, he moved 50 elephants from South Africa to Angola in specially outfitted cargo planes. In 2000, acting as a broker, he rented out his crew that transported hostage negotiators to the Philippines, where European tourists were being held by the Islamist terrorist group Abu Sayyaf. And then, in typical Bout turnaround style, we are led to believe, Abu Sayyaf became one of his clients shortly thereafter.

I must admit that the notion of an amoral man selling death for profit is extremely unpalatable. The idea of living off someone else's misery, fueling conflicts the world over, makes me cringe. The first draft of this chapter was a scathing indictment of Bout, and of a world system that simply didn't care enough about the weak and the oppressed.

All I needed was one piece of evidence to put my mind at rest. One original source, one smoking gun, one voice recording, one fingerprint, one anything. Again, providence intervened in the most inexcusable way. I couldn't find anything plausible or tangible on Bout. "Where is the proof, damn it, Merchant of Death? Why can't I find it?"

Proof, irrefutable proof of Bout's guilt was nowhere to be found. Impossible! The man is guilty! He is a Merchant of Death. He sells arms. He profits from war. CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, BBC, *Time* magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* all say so! Initially, I was dumbfounded, then I got angry at my inadequacy, then mystified at what I was seeing, then puzzled, and finally extremely alarmed.

I had piles and piles of documents on top of piles and at the bottom of piles, filled with Bout's alleged crimes. While he apparently crisscrossed the globe igniting war and hatred, I toiled in reference libraries from Toronto to Florence and Madrid, searching in vain for primary sources of Bout's crimes. Government bureaucrats quoted intelligence sources, intelligence sources quoted government bureaucrats, UN officials quote intelligence sources, who in turn quoted UN reports. Where was the evidence? I was going out of my mind. "Intelligence reports show that Bout has ... delivery was made to ... people working for the Merchant of Death ... the first breakthrough came when one of his closest collaborators told the investigators that Bout ..."

Except that we have never found out what one of his closest collaborators told the government investigators, we have never seen his planes, nor him, anywhere near conflict zones, and intelligence agencies have never released their findings to the public. Even with the plethora of available technology, until his arrest in Bangkok in March 2008, few had ever heard his voice or seen him on video.

Where was the proof? I needed to finish my book; my publisher was threatening to cut one finger off for every extra week I took to hand in the manuscript. Once, he called me at 3:00 A.M., telling me I had one week to hand in the (I can't repeat what he said to me) manuscript. Still, I was looking for proof. I changed my phone number, moved houses, changed continents and finally moved to Thailand. I was determined to get the despicable Merchant of Death.

Lying in bed at night, I imagined Bout's fat cheeks laughing at me. "You will not find anything on me! I have it all hidden. I am an invisible man! They can't get me!"

I will get you. I promise you, Bout. Even, if I have to follow you to the ends of the Earth, I will find proof of your transgressions. We will put you in prison. You will not be a menace to society. I searched every sewer and every back alley, called back every favor owed me by people in high and not so high places. “Get me the evidence! Get me something, anything!” I screamed at one informant. But, the harder I searched, the more I was beginning to realize that I might never find one credible shred of evidence tying Victor Bout to even one of the crimes he was being accused of committing. As a last resort, I went back to the mainstream press and re-read everything I had compiled on him. There was a chance that in my haste, I had missed key evidence, overlooked key information. It had to be there!

According to an article in London’s *Guardian* newspaper, Bout “conducts his illicit deals from the privacy of a walled compound in the Gulf state of Sharjah,”¹⁰ the third largest emirate in the United Arab Emirates. “Walled compound.” Is it walled because Bout is a bad man and he needs to protect himself from people trying to catch him? Is that why he “managed his legal activities and clandestine deals” from a walled compound? What were they insinuating? Is it another case of numerous passports and aliases, of a bad man trying to avoid detection? A real life Jason Bourne?

In my efforts to get Bout, I travelled to Sharjah. Does the editor of the *Guardian* newspaper realize that every compound in Sharjah, and for that matter in the entire United Arab Emirates, is walled? It’s simply part of their culture and aesthetics. Are we to assume they are all criminals? Supporters of terrorists? Al-Qaeda lovers? Bin Laden followers?

Summarizing mainstream accounts of Bout, we receive the following picture. His private fleet of old Soviet Antonov cargo aircraft, employing over 1,000 air and land personnel, has been based in Central African countries, South Africa and the UAE of Sharjah, and his operations have prompted investigations in at least four countries – the United States, Belgium, Great Britain and South Africa.

“What do you know about Bout?” asked the man from BBC-4 *World Report*. Whitney Schneidman of the United States State Department, quoting National Security Agency signal intelligence and intercepts, replied, “They told me that Victor had a very efficient operation. They told me he had a great ability to move arms at will. It indicated that he had an ability to move money very quickly. He

was operating on a scale much larger than anybody could imagine. He has a fleet of forty, fifty, sixty aircraft.”

I did a double take. Wouldn't a man from the State Department, armed with NSA intelligence reports and working on capturing Victor Bout know the exact number of planes the Merchant of Death had at his disposal? Then, came the icing on the cake. I eagerly listened.

Schneidman: “He delivered vast amounts of weapons, he was very agile in his movements. He worked with a fax machine, a cell phone and pretty much that's it.” I was about to scream, but then, something occurred to me. What if *I* called the State Department and told them that my publisher had two cell phones, a fax machine and a Xerox machine in his garage. Would they be willing to put him away for a few months, at least, until I finished my book?

A man who is familiar with Bout's operation better than most is Lee Scott Wolosky, former National Security Adviser and White House counterterrorism official under Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. He is a partner at Boies, Schiller & Flexner LLP in New York, not to mention a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations, an American arm of the all-powerful Bilderberg Group.

“How many planes did Bout have in his heyday, Lee?”

“I'd say close to two hundred.”

“How many?” I thought I misunderstood.

“He was all over the place. Most of Africa, Middle East, South-East Asia.”

“Whitney Schneidman, in a BBC-4 interview said sixty, at most. What gives?”

“He scaled back, you know, after we really went after him.”

“But you didn't really go after him, according to the US government, until after 9/11, Lee. That's end 2001, beginning 2002,” I clarified. “When did he scale back?”

“Beginning 2002.”

“You mean, after moving back to Russia.”

“Russia was his headquarters, but he was all over the place.”

“Lee, according to a letter from the Russian government addressed to the Thai court in relation to his extradition hearing, Victor Bout travelled twice abroad since he relocated to Moscow. One trip to Montenegro and the other to China.” What did Lee Wolosky have to say to that?

“I can't comment on that.”

Okey dokey.

Each time he was subjected to scrutiny, we are led to believe by the press accounts, he moved his airfreight operations elsewhere. Andre Velrooy, expert on Victor Bout matters with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, claims that Richard Chichakli, one of Bout's many associates, said that he never saw him put his signature on a document. It makes one wonder which of the many aliases he would use if he did.

I called Chichakli in Moscow, where he has been residing in exile from the US since his escape from Syria.

"This is absolutely absurd," he replied in a thick accent. "I have seen him sign many documents."

"What name did he use?" I asked him, trying to catch Chichakli in a lie.

"His name, of course. Victor Bout."

In fact, I have personally seen Bout sign over a dozen court documents right in front of me, and seen his personal petitions to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. Of course, I might have just lucked out. In case you are wondering, his signature is small and scratchy looking. I would hate to have to read anything of his written out in longhand.

Of course, journalists representing the corporate press wouldn't know this, as I am the only Western media representative to attend all of Bout's court hearings. As is the case with the super secret Bilderberg Group meetings, I am the only Western face to report on the comings and goings of the Shadow Masters. Why is that?

Still holding the phone in my right hand, I pulled out one of my manila envelopes; it had "Belgium" written across the top in bold, blue letters. Putting the phone down, I checked the case file and went on-line to read the final report. "I finally got you, Bout. You are mine!" I thought to myself. I sent my publisher an email.

"I am on the home stretch. One more day!" I wrote triumphantly. Then, I read the report, and my blood went cold. Bout's involvement in the trade of war weapons was an illusion according to what I was reading, found groundless in the final summation of the Court, to be mere politics, after being investigated, tested, and then discredited by the Royal Court in Belgium in case number BR27.97.2780/97. What was truly painful to come to terms with for me was the fact that when the Belgian court asked for evidence, the US administration failed to produce any. Case closed. Bout is found not guilty.

But CNN, the *New York Times*, the BBC? I was speechless and utterly confused. The mainstream media, they said Bout was a criminal, a monster. I want to believe them! I must believe them! My book, I mean, I have to publish it! Give me my proof, I deserve my proof. I have worked very hard at this!

Still, I wasn't going to give up this easily. Something stirred inside of me. I recognized it right away. It was hope, the last thing to die. A man possessed, I went back to mainstream media reports.

A confidant of dictators, warlords and guerrilla leaders, Bout juggled a murky group of companies for much of the 1990s,¹¹ proclaimed the *Los Angeles Times* in 2004. Having a toehold in South Africa gave him access to Swaziland, a tiny landlocked country in Southern Africa where he registered a total of 43 aircraft, opening offices on August 20, 1997 of Air Cess Swaziland, an airfreight company that would later play an important role in the war in Iraq, proclaimed Ruud Leeuw who quoted the Center for Public Integrity, who in turn referenced Douglas Farah and the *Los Angeles Times*.

According to Bout himself, though, this is wrong. During his heyday in the mid 1990s, the maximum number of aircraft he had was 29, including three Mi-8 helicopters. The rest were old Antonov-8, Antonov-12, Antonov-72, Antonov-24, Antonov-32 and Il-76. In vain, I searched for the phantom 43, 60, 200 aircraft. They seemingly dropped off the face of the Earth.

The complexity of Bout's arms-trafficking networks and financial transactions, through myriad cut-out and shell companies, brokers, transportation companies, corporations, financiers and transshipment points, was intended to make transactions untraceable, proclaimed Douglas Farah on CNN. "In the murky world of arms trafficking, a Russian national has established himself as a premier player in Africa," Farah further asserted in the *Washington Post* in February 2002.¹²

Bout used the balmy Persian Gulf state of the United Arab Emirates as his primary location for several reasons. For one thing, utter lack of regulations related to weapons trafficking and aircraft registration put information about his clandestine operations on a purely need-to-know basis: No one asked and no one cared. For another, the Emirates are ideally situated for flight routes to Afghanistan and Africa, where Bout's business was growing exponentially.

Yet another attraction: The disintegration of the Soviet Union and opening up of borders turned the duty-free Emirates into the va-

cationland of choice for marauding hordes of *nouveau riche* Russians. Seventy years of Communist austerity overnight had been turned on its head. For decades of the Soviet Union's inexorable march under Communism, "the Russians," as they became known in the Emirates and beyond, had been weaned on a daily diet of potato and beet salads. Now, they were being treated to mouth-watering delicacies from the farthest reaches of the globe. The Russians responded in kind, helping to quench seventy years of hunger with mind-boggling consumption. Gluttony, in the early 1990s, becoming the primary cause of their hospitalization in Dubai. Bout saw the opportunity to multiply his wealth by catering to his countrymen's increasingly obscene and banal whims, selling them everything from Czar Nicholas II-shaped duty-free cellular phones to African-made gold plated statuettes of Lenin in a G-string.

BOUT'S ENTERPRISES IMPACT A WIDER CIRCLE

Initially, I thought that Western intelligence agencies were very slow to comprehend important connections between weapons trafficking, diamond smuggling and links to the financial apparatus of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, which were covertly interlocked with clandestine groups in Europe and in Israel. Following Victor Bout's associations led me to a network of Texas oil interests, Russian-Israeli mobsters, Muslim fundamentalists and off-the-book government black operations. After tirelessly investigating these links and trying to make sense of their interlocked relationships, I understood that Bout was only an example, a case study if you wish, of this underworld of the Shadow Masters. Something else has nagged at me, especially in the face of ever-mounting inconclusive evidence against the Russian arms dealer himself. Were Western intelligence agencies "very slow" to comprehend links between weapons trafficking, diamond smuggling and terrorism, or were these links and criminal synergies allowed to take place and flourish? Why is it being insinuated by Western governments and the official press that the Victor Bouts and his supporting cast of characters are so much smarter than the United States government, the FBI, the CIA, Interpol and the United Nations investigators? And to what end? Could the demonization of the Bouts and the bin Ladens and the Saddam Husseins of the world simply serve as an extension of someone else's foreign policy?

One discovery of note came about as a result of an arrest in New York City in August 2003 of a diamond dealer, accused as part of a weapons smuggling ring. This Israeli-American and Afghanistan-born diamond dealer, Orthodox Jew Yehuda Abraham, had business ties to the Saudi government and to the Saudi Royal family, as a provider of gems to many of its members.¹³ Abraham worked alongside Hemant Lakhani, an Indian-born Hindu clothing merchant from Mumbai's prosperous cloth-trading Kutchi Lohana community.¹⁴ Lakhani, as it turned out, was an arms dealer with links to al-Qaeda and the ruling elites of the United Arab Emirates.

During one of Lakhani's many trips to East Africa, he met a key international arms dealer, Sanjivan Ruprah, an ethnic Indian and a politically well-connected Kenyan businessman.¹⁵ Ruprah, in turn, was associated in the press with Victor Bout. I sent an email to Anil Padmanabhan, the journalist from *India Today* who had made this startling revelation, asking for confirmation.

In case you are wondering, I am still waiting. This doesn't mean that Ruprah is not connected to Bout. Simply, I couldn't find any credible proof of it. Bout categorically denies any dealings with him. In fact, he called Ruprah a "small time hoodlum." This doesn't mean I believe Bout either. The burden of proof is on me, and, to my chagrin, at this time I can't find any. Not black and white, anyway, just shadows.

For a long time, though, I was wondering where was the connection? The smoking gun? The fingerprint? Modus Operandi? How do we know these two are pals? I wonder if when he approached the FBI, Ruprah brought a letter of introduction from Victor Bout. And Bout claims not to have any business dealings with Ruprah. Farrah and co-author Stephen Braun, in turn, claim they are pals and co-conspirators.

Now I thought of the disastrous US proceedings against Bout in Thailand. In the multiple testimonies heard during the extradition hearing meant to back up the allegations, the agents of the United States government failed to deliver any evidentiary matter in support of the allegations upon which their request for extradition was based. Exhibits the American legal team produced included pictures of two cargo planes and Bout's alleged notes during the supposed meeting (more correctly, scribbled numbers and doodles on a 3x5 inch post-it).

The decision of the Thai court explicitly stated, on page 49, “Although the prosecutor’s witness, Mr. Robert Sahari Vazevit, the head of investigation and inquiry who collected evidence connected with the accused’s trade of war weapons, came to testify for confirmation, it is found that the witness is the officer of the United States who testified without any documentary evidence containing photographs or materials.”

Surely, the US government had more evidence than that? According to the DEA, Bout’s capture had cost the agency over \$30 million. Where was the proof of his guilt? If the DEA went into this operation without adequate proof, heads would roll, I thought. If Bout is guilty, the Drug Enforcement Administration had this one chance of nabbing him before he would disappear into the bowels of his Motherland. No proof. What’s going on?

My phone rang. I looked at the number flashing impatiently on the screen. 1-541- ... I didn’t need to see the rest. My publisher, surely, was ruining the day he met me. Please, I thought to myself, just a little more time.

Numerous open sources stated that Bout’s connections to arms deals were often obfuscated by a number of cut outs and middlemen, such as the aforementioned Sanjivan Ruprah. Ruprah was being called, by some, “window dressing” to disguise Bout’s association with the notorious Ukrainian-Israeli citizen, Leonid Minin, leader of the ruthless Odessa Mafia.

“Do you know him?” I asked Bout, sitting beside in court next to him. He, in four-pound leg irons over heavy wool grey socks, I in my multi-colored florescent socks and Pikolino runners.

“Know who?”

“Minin. Leonid Minin,” I repeated.

“This is an invention of people who want to see me behind bars. I don’t know the man.”

Bout, Minin, Ruprah, Lakhani, Abraham. Who next? On paper, they were all connected to Bout. What if they too were *permitted* to be connected to Bout and his empire as a result of someone’s farsighted policy decision? Still too soon to tell, I thought to myself.

But these seemingly interlocked relationships amongst allegedly some of the world’s most unsavory characters made me wonder: Was Abraham a cut out for the Saudi Royal family? If he was, then did

the Saudis act independently or as a secondary cut out for someone else? Was *the* supposed someone else a nation or an independent operator? After all, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates are the only three nations in the world to have officially recognized the Taliban. Pakistan's links to the Taliban and terrorism are well documented. I had been informed that the Emirates were being used as a money-laundering center by bin Laden, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It was quite a stretch to imagine the Saudis acting independently. But who were they covering for?

Ken Silverstein, writing for the mainstream *Washington Monthly*, stated in the magazine's January/February 2002 issue that Bout and Minin were longtime arms suppliers to former Liberian dictator Charles Taylor, and responsible for transforming his allies, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in Sierra Leone, from a rural army of 400 men in 1997 into a conventional army of 20,000 by 1999. As "Bout's man in Liberia," Ruprah aided Bout in his frequent dealings with Taylor. In return for his assistance, the RUF supplied Taylor with looted diamonds from areas it controlled. Bout and his associates were given Liberian diplomatic passports and, with Taylor's blessing and protection, they registered a number of their front companies in Monrovia, the Liberian capital.¹⁶

"How well do you know Taylor?" I screamed at Bout. He was in the visitor's area of prison, leaning against the glass, trying to make out what I was saying over the cacophony of other prisoners, who were also straining to hear what was being said to them.

"Have never met him. Wouldn't be caught in the same room with him!" he shouted back in Russian, pressing his face against the small opening.

He looked taller and thinner than his six feet, with a full head of short, brown hair parted strategically from left to right across his high forehead, dressed in a worn out, wrinkled, ill-fitted orange prison jump suit, brand new leg irons, and wearing a smile of apologetic self-protection. His gaunt, still youthful face was betrayed by several deeply imbedded lines around the eyes, eyes that didn't easily give away its secrets.

"Do you have a Liberian diplomatic passport as the mainstream media alleges?"

"How would I have a Liberian diplomatic passport if I have never dealt with Taylor?"

In 2005, the UN Security Council Committee on Liberia identified Leonid Minin as one of Victor Bout's closest associates and provided further personal details of the Odessa Mafia crime lord:

Minin, Leonid Efimovich
 Nationality: Israel
 Bolivian Passport: 65118
 Forged German Passports: 5280007248D, 18106739D
 Greek Passport: no details
 Israeli Passports: 6019832, 9001689, 90109052
 Russian Passport: KI0861177
 Arms dealer in contravention of UNSC resolution 1343 – supported former President Taylor's regime in effort to destabilize Sierra Leone and gain illicit access to diamonds

UN Security Council SC/8570, "Security Council Committee on Liberia Updates Freeze List"
 November 30, 2005

Born in Odessa in 1947, Minin immigrated to Israel in the 1970s and established a global web of companies, many of them discreetly incorporated offshore. Minin's primary business vehicle is Monaco-based Limad AG, which also has offices in Switzerland, China, and Russia.

Acting on a tip in Cinisello Balsamo, on the outskirts of Milan, Italian police arrested Minin in August 2000, writes investigative journalist Wayne Madsen, citing a PBS *Frontline World Report*. In his room, police found \$500,000 worth of uncut diamonds, a duffel bag filled with more than \$35,000 in American, Italian, Hungarian and Mauritian currency, and over 1,500 documents, in Russian, Ukrainian, French, German, Dutch, English and Italian, relating to Minin's wide variety of business operations. Specific findings included a record of a \$10,263.02 payment to Marc Rich, an international financier and reputed Russian-Israeli-American Mafia don, soon to be known for his 11th-hour pardon from President Clinton on charges of fraud and extortion.

According to Wayne Madsen's sources, "The pardon of Rich was urged in a phone call to Clinton by then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, as well as Shimon Peres and Ehud Olmert."¹⁷ Why, I thought to myself, was Rich, a reputed Russian-Israeli-American Mafia don, attracting so much interest from the Israeli government and the

President of the United States? Was he, too, a player, or was he being used as an extension of America's or Israeli's foreign policy? In what capacity did he serve the governments of Israel and/or the United States to warrant a Presidential pardon? Why would the President of the United States risk a historical rebuke to pardon someone with such a dubious reputation? Was the Israeli government a cut out or were they using Rich as a cut out for some unsavory black op?

As Madsen notes, "In 1983, a little known US Attorney for the Southern District of New York had urged jail time for Rich for racketeering. The name of that US Attorney was Rudolph Giuliani. Marc Rich's onetime lawyer was Vice President Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, Scooter Libby."¹⁸ Furthermore, *Forbes* magazine puts out a Russian edition; its Moscow editor, Paul Klebnikov, wrote about Rich's connections to Boris Berezovsky, a business partner of Neil Bush, and also discussed this in his book, *Godfather of the Kremlin*. On July 9, 2004, Klebnikov was shot and killed gangland style on a Moscow street. Marc Rich's oil company, Glencore, once shared a London phone number with one of Leonid Minin's companies, Galaxy Management.¹⁹ A world of Shadow Masters. A small world, indeed.

After an exhaustive investigation, the Italian police concluded, "Minin was the head of a Ukrainian criminal network associated with international drug and weapons trafficking, money laundering and extortion."²⁰ But, this was only the beginning of the story.

In February 2002, Belgian police arrested diamond- and arms-smuggler Sanjivan Ruprah for using a false passport. *Frontline*, in a special report on illegal arms and diamond trafficking in Africa, reported that Ruprah "was directly involved in the operations of Leonid Minin's arms sales to Liberia, and owns diamond mines in Liberia."²¹ A Bout-Minin link was confirmed by Bout himself, according to a *New York Times Magazine* article.²²

Bout claims his relationship with Minin is a fabrication, and that he never said he had any. Bout's wife Alla showed me an email from Peter Landesman, the author of the famed Bout exposé in the *New York Times Magazine*. It was sent before the article came out. Landesman apologizes ahead of time for the article's final version, pleading clemency and claiming that even though he wanted to write a true report on Victor Bout, his big, bad editor had other ideas.

His article was a hit piece, forever cementing Bout's reputation as a Merchant of Death. Incidentally, both Peter Landesman and Douglas Farah have landed juicy Hollywood option deals as a result

of their relentless Bout coverage. Landesman has produced a screenplay titled *Arms and the Man*. This work has been picked up by Universal studios, part of the Vivendi SA empire, one of the world's top media groups, and will be directed by Michael Mann, who has done such films as *The Last of the Mobicans* and *Collateral*. In Landesman's screenplay, Bout the bad guy is involved in a plot to steal plutonium from the Ukraine, but later turns into a good guy after his brother, Sergei, is killed. There is also talk of a video game based on the film.

Vivendi Universal was formed in 2000, "through the merger of Vivendi, a French multimedia group, and Edgar Bronfman's Seagram Co. Ltd. Seagram had, in 1995, bought MCA, including MCA's Universal movies division, with its 14.7% share of the US box-office market. Universal Music bought up PolyGram, and now owns the copyrights works by to Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, the Jackson Five, U2, Elton John and, among others, 50% of the "Gangsta Rap" label Interscope. In 2006, General Electric acquired an 80% stake, thus creating the current NBC Universal through a merging of GE's NBC unit and Vivendi's Vivendi Universal Entertainment group.

"Vivendi's boss Jean-Claude Messier himself was, from 1986-88, responsible for the French government's privatization program. Then, he joined the influential US-French investment bank Lazard Frères [a key bank in the Bilderberg Group power structure] before he took over the Lyon-based water utility Générale des Eaux, which he transformed into the Vivendi media group.

"The big media conglomerates share part of the business with the biggest military producers. Many of the games are based on Hollywood film scripts, like *Terminator* or *Mission: Impossible*, and rely on intellectual property rights sold or leased by the original film producers, who share part of the royalties income and have a lot of political clout."²³

Fact and fiction, real life and Hollywood, shadows and the Shadow Masters. The lines, at least in this tale are blurred on more than one occasion. Considering that Landesman and Farah are two of the more visible anti-Bout crusaders, could their Hollywood good fortune simply be a payoff for creating an erroneous illusion of Bout for public consumption?

Another project is an outgrowth of Douglas Farah's work *Blood from Stones*. The film will have a fictitious plotline sprinkled with factual information. Bout's character will take a back seat to former Liberian strongman Charles Taylor and his merry band of thugs.

“Why did you agree to the [Landesman] interview?” I asked Bout.

“It was Chichakli. For over six months he tried to convince me. I didn’t have a good feeling about it, but he insisted.”

“Did Landesman record the interview?”

He shook his head. “He took down notes.”

Good idea, I thought to myself. If you were going to write a hit piece on someone, don’t leave evidence behind. “Why didn’t *you* record it yourself?” I asked him incredulously.

“I trusted him.”

Can it really be that simple? I thought to myself.

“The exploits of Bout and Ruprah in [Africa’s] worst killing fields are the subject of numerous United Nations reports on mercenary activity, diamond smuggling and arms trafficking in Angola, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Uganda and Rwanda.”²⁴ According to UN investigators, “Ruprah was tied to the illicit diamond trade in West Africa and arranged for Bout to be paid for his weapons deliveries with diamonds from Sierra Leone.”

Even if we are to take this piece of evidence at face value without checking for primary sources, I thought to myself, we would have to assume that if the United Nations investigators knew, then, so did the US government. Yet, again, nothing of substance was being done. Bout was still active; the weapons were getting through, feeding some of the worst atrocities and abuses in human history. Why? Initially, none of it made sense, at least not until I understood the Shadow World of the Men behind the Curtain. You see, if what we are being told is true, that is, in a *real world*, a Victor Bout would not have existed, because governments have the diplomatic, financial and intelligence clout to eliminate the elements that threaten their sovereignty and the rule of law.

Unless, of course, “arms-for-diamonds” and other scenarios were being used as an extension of a farsighted agenda, designed from the behind the scenes at some of the most prestigious think tanks and foundations. Vivendi and General Electric, Lazard Frères and the Bilderberg Group. As I later discovered, this is exactly what was happening.

DIAMOND TRADING

Diamonds can be sold easily on the international black market, but the financial trails of the transactions are virtually non-ex-

istent, and undetected by international law enforcement.²⁵ Shockingly little is known about the political and criminal twilight world that conceals the commerce of international diamond trading. Diamond dealers the world over are known by the Hebrew term *yabalom manin*. Jewish diamond dealers strike deals based on a handshake and the Hebrew words *mazal ubracha*, or “luck and be blessed.” As with Islamic *hawalahs*, payments for diamonds are wired around the world through a variety of pass-through companies and middlemen.²⁶ Gems can be brought or sent halfway around the world for inspection without any guarantee of purchase. In this environment, your good name is worth everything. “Disputes are settled internally at peer-review courts. Wrongdoers face a penalty more serious than jail – expulsion from the diamond community.”²⁷

The Hasidic community in London’s Hatton Garden is considered one of the leading centers for diamond smuggling and money laundering. “The gem trade appeals to money launderers because, following the introduction of new banking regulations, it is one of the few remaining industries where large cash transactions can be carried out with complete anonymity. There is an environment of almost complete secrecy and it is a very cash-intensive marketplace. These are all things that money launderers find very attractive.”²⁸ One of Osama bin Laden’s top lieutenants, Wadih el Hage, now serving a life sentence for his role in the 1998 US Embassy bombing in Kenya and Tanzania, visited Hatton Garden to raise funds for al-Qaeda by smuggling tanzanite gems from Tanzania.²⁹

Such a means of raising funds points to another benefit of dealing in diamonds. They are very easy to transport, much more so than gold or even paper money. Gold, for example, has lately been selling for over one thousand dollars per troy ounce. Depending upon quality, a diamond may be worth several thousand dollars *per carat*. As one carat is one fifth of a gram, there are over 155 carats in a troy ounce. The value to any high-priced illicit trade of both diamonds and diamond experts is thus apparent.

Over the past decade, Israel’s intelligence agency responsible for counterterrorism and covert operations, the Mossad, has become aware that terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah launder money through diamonds in places like West Africa without detection by international financial surveillance authorities. These findings reveal additional background on terrorist links to diamond smuggling.

Lebanese Shiite immigrants, fleeing economic depravation, first arrived in West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century.³⁰ They were welcomed by the British colonial authorities, who saw in their arrival an opportunity to displace local merchants in commodity trade with the African interior. After diamonds were discovered in eastern Sierra Leone in 1930, Lebanese traders quickly gained control of this lucrative market.³¹ More recently, as the *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* of June/July 2004 reported, “The most lucrative source of funds [for terrorists] was the Lebanese diamond traders of Sierra Leone ... a number of powerful Lebanese gem merchants ... helped the brutal Liberian-backed Revolutionary United Front (RUF) sell diamonds from mines under its control.”

The United Nations Angola Report issued December 21, 2000 had first brought the issue of the “conflict diamonds” trade to the world’s attention. It detailed how, in many regions in Africa, civil strife has turned into all-out war over diamond-mining territory, gems that end up paying for African wars at the cost of millions of lives. “The proceeds from the diamonds are then used to buy illicit weapons and deepen the conflicts.”³² These arms, sold by shadowy merchants, have often ended up in the hands of child soldiers, as was the case in Sierra Leone and Angola, two of the leading employers of child soldiers in combat operations. To get these child soldiers to fight, the rebel forces fed them cocaine and amphetamines, thus negating whatever compassion the children might have felt for their victims; they played real soldiers “rampaging through the countryside, killing, mutilating, raping, and pillaging until they collapsed from fatigue and hunger.”³³

In the Congo, Hezbollah simply “muscled their way into the business and began purchasing diamonds directly from miners and local middlemen at a fraction of their market value.”³⁴ A glimpse into the scale of Hezbollah profits from the diamond trade came in December 2003, “when a Union des Transports Africains airliner loaded with Lebanese passengers crashed off the coast of Benin – on board, according to news reports and Western diplomats in Sierra Leone, was a Hezbollah courier carrying \$2 million.”³⁵

It’s important to understand that, although most experts mention al-Qaeda and Hezbollah in the same breath when terrorist links to the diamond trade are discussed, the *modi operandi* of the two organizations are quite different. Al-Qaeda, with its global reach, buys diamonds as a way of *hiding* money, whereas Hezbollah, a regional player in the Middle

East, is involved to *make* money. Terrorism truly has become a global enterprise, not only in matters of warfare but in the way these organizations tap into existing distribution routes and delivery systems.

Hezbollah is a Shi'a Islamic militia and political and paramilitary organization based in Lebanon, whose name is translated as "The Party of God." It grew out of a collapse of the Lebanese political system in the 1970s under the impact of the Palestinian guerrilla movement. A 1978 Israeli invasion was followed in 1982 by a full-scale Israeli assault aimed at driving out the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This resulted in more than 30,000 people losing their lives. In one of the most documented massacres of late 20th century, the Israeli army stood by as hundreds were massacred by Lebanese Christians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, where many Lebanese Shi'a had sought refuge. In this environment, Hezbollah emerged and grew.

DIAMONDS AND BIN LADEN

And that brings us to Osama bin Laden's connections to the Israeli diamond trade. Here is some information I received from one of my most trusted sources, showing some correspondence between him and one of *his* sources, referred to as ABC.

ABC: "On the last day of October 2001, Osama bin Laden finally realized that he was trapped between the Northern Front and the US forces. Traditional escape routes were all cut off. He called an old business partner, who whisked Osama and his party of 26 people to Africa on a private jet on November 4 [2001]. You may find it rather surprising, but you must understand that in the ancient middle eastern world of tradition and rituals, which may seem utterly absurd to a Western person, a business partnership is based on years of trust, and it is totally separate from political or national loyalties. This trusted ally was an Israeli.

"During Osama's exile in Sudan in the 1990s, he was clandestinely approached by Israelis who wanted him to take over the African diamond business from the Lebanese. Traditionally, Muslims were the guardians of the raw diamond trade in West Africa. They provided the logistics and the muscle. The Israelis' proposition to Osama was quite simple. They wanted for the wily Saudi to take the trade away from the Shiites. You see, the idea of suicide bombers from southern Lebanon being financed by the Israeli-run diamond trade out of Antwerp, Belgium, turned their stomach.

Osama was feared and respected by the terrorists. It would take a battle hardened bin Laden to get the job done.”

“Why would a Saudi terrorist want to deal with the Israelis.”

ABC: “You see, neither Osama bin Laden nor the Taliban were anti-Jewish. In the case of the Taliban [mostly Pashtuns], the Pashtun tribe of Afghanistan is one of the ‘lost tribes of Israel.’ Their customs and names are identical to those of the Jews. As for the bin Ladens, the family is of Yemeni-origin and the man who started the dynasty, Mohamed Bin Awad bin Laden, was a contractor who became one of the wealthiest men in the world. Mohamed bin Laden had numerous wives, too many to count, as he always married into the people who lived in the places where he was working in order to become one of them and not be looked at as a stranger. As a result, the family construction empire routinely dealt with Jewish businessmen through Yemen for building materials and equipment. That’s how Osama’s father got rich. Since Saudis could have no direct dealings with the Jews, the bin Ladens used Yemenis, who lived alongside Jews in their Yemeni homeland.

“Once bin Laden wrestled control of the raw diamond trade away from the Shiites, he became an instant billionaire. The diamonds were sent from West Africa to the Russian Mafia through Osama’s trusted diamond courier, who used a very non-Muslim name of Cyril Jacob. The Mafia then sold them to the Jews in Antwerp.”

This information comes from a former US Naval Intelligence officer who has also worked for the National Security Agency, and maintains a network of contacts in the intelligence communities. In one of our conversations, he dropped this bombshell, citing one of his intelligence sources in Peshawar, Pakistan. This source was a “high value target,” someone recruited from a foreign intelligence agency. This source has not “come in from the cold,” meaning has not physically defected to the recruiting country; thus, if found out, the source will be assassinated.

This information from the source dovetailed very nicely with the activities of the Afghani Jew, Yehuda Abraham, president of Ambuy Gem Corp., his diamond business with the Saudi Royal family, his arrest for involvement in a Russian shoulder-mounted-missile-launcher smuggling ring including Hemant Lakhani, who in turn was linked to various client terrorist organizations. The multiple unrelated dots proverbially came together.

As you now may begin to realize, seemingly extraneous information acquires a degree of importance in our story: Abraham’s primary

clientele was the Saudi royal family. It was also discovered that Abraham was operating a *hawalah* – an Islamic money transfer network based on trust and a handshake – from his diamond business. It was that *hawalah* that was used to transfer money from weapons sales out of the United States without leaving a trace. Was Abraham being used as an extension of bin Laden’s “foreign policy”? If yes, by whom, bin Laden himself or by the United States government? And to what end? Were the United States government and the intelligence agencies on purpose “very slow” to comprehend the links between weapons trafficking, diamond smuggling and terrorism?

In light of this speculation, is it possible that Osama bin Laden was referring to al-Qaeda’s diamond-smuggling network during his interview with the Pakistani newspaper, *Ummat*? In it, on September 28, 2001, he noted that al-Qaeda uses “three alternative financial systems that are separate and independent,” adding that any attempt to remove them would not succeed.

In this context, it is surely no surprise that in the mid 1990s, the city of Dubai, al-Qaeda’s premier money laundering center in the Middle East, became a major rival to Antwerp, Tel Aviv and London as a leading diamond processing center, a business in which bin Laden later became heavily invested.

GOING GLOBAL

Al-Qaeda’s financial network was not limited to the Islamic world. The August 25, 2002 *Sunday Express* reported that al-Qaeda financial front men associated with the Islamic charity, Mercy International Relief Agency, had used Irish bank accounts to transfer money to Warsaw, Poland.³⁶ According to the official version of events, Tim Shipman, writing for the *Sunday Express*, stated, “Some of the fund transfers, picked up by National Security Agency and British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) intercepts, were likely used to fund part of the 9/11 attacks.”³⁷

An article in the *Moscow Times* on September 4, 2002, not only confirmed these findings, but also added a few precious nuggets of its own. “Victor Bout’s planes have been used to fly al-Qaeda and Taliban gold to Sudan in recent weeks. Several shipments of gold were delivered by boat from Karachi, Pakistan, to either Iran or the United Arab Emirates,” said the newspaper citing unidentified European intelligence officials. The report continued: “From there, the gold

was flown on chartered planes to the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, where al-Qaeda has broad business contacts.” Air Bas, one of Victor Bout’s flagship airlines, supposedly transported the gold.

“Not true,” said Bout. “I have never had business dealings with the Taliban or al-Qaeda.” I checked the primary source. As I suspected, it wasn’t the *Moscow Times*. The information came via Douglas Farah in the *Washington Post*.³⁸ I scanned the article for precise information. “Financial officers of al-Qaeda and the Taliban have quietly shipped large quantities of gold out of Pakistan to Sudan in recent weeks, transiting through the United Arab Emirates and Iran, according to European, Pakistani and US investigators.” Once again, those ever-handy “European, Pakistani, and US investigators.”

I skipped a paragraph. “Although it is not clear how much gold has been moved, US and European officials said the quantity was significant.” Are these the same officials who claim to have irrefutable evidence against Bout’s transgressions only to show up in Belgian and Thai courts empty handed, claiming the irrefutable evidence to be locked up in the DEA secure facility in New York? Thai courts didn’t buy it, neither did the Belgian justice system. Why should we?

Michael Chandler, a retired British colonel who led a UN panel on the Taliban and al-Qaeda, is quoted in Moisés Naím’s book, *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy*: “If you look at all the escapades of Bout and his associates, how easy it was for them to move weapons, get end-user certificates, and change aircraft registration, you get an amazing picture of how corrupt many parts of the world are.”

In their book, Farah and Braun excused US lack of early action against Bout: “The notion [in the 1990s] that transnational threats – the Clinton administration’s phrasing for terrorists, narcotics cartels, global organized crime, and other dangerous ‘non-state actors’ – might prove as dangerous as hostile nations was an idea still in its infancy.”³⁹ That much I could buy.

However, what I was unwilling to buy was the notion that for over a decade, a Victor Bout remained a step ahead of the supposedly helpless United States government, the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, Interpol and their hundred-billion-dollar budgets, with Total Information Awareness and Echelon’s global spy system. One man against the world.

“Why are we subtly being led down this path?” I kept asking myself. “Could the Bouts and the bin Ladens simply serve as exten-

sions of someone else's hidden agenda, were they part of the Shadow World where the Men behind the Curtain operate?" The question made sense. If the answer to the question is a "yes," as it surely is in CIA-trained Osama bin Laden's case, then the world we live in is indeed a cesspool of duplicity and lies and double-speak and secret government agendas, of changing loyalties, brainwashed black-ops agents, rogue dictators and telegenic villains who act as extensions of someone's foreign policy.

When the UN made its April 2001 report on the Democratic Republic of the Congo,⁴⁰ it cited how easy it was for Bout to run his operation from Burundi. Sounds great, except Bout's business was never registered in Burundi, according to the Ministry of Transportation's Database Records located in Bujumbura. Furthermore, I went online and with the help of GP Fleet's tracking and tracing fleet management technology, I double-checked Bout's business practices in Burundi. Nothing. Either Burundi and/or Bout deliberately erased all traces of his unwholesome business practices in the country or ... the UN was outright lying.

According to a January 2005 report of the UN Security Council, "Burundi has in the past served as a 'flag of convenience' for operators in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by issuing aircraft registrations for their planes and licenses for foreign pilots."

The term "flag of convenience" refers to aircraft registration in less scrupulous countries that allow circumvention of international regulations on air cargo. Many fly from airports like Burgas in Bulgaria, Ostend in Belgium and Sharjah in the UAE. These airports are known for their "lax oversight of airfreight operations." Additionally, airfreight documents do not require cross-referencing of the goods described in the arms export and import licenses. Arms shipments are often described as engineering, mining, agricultural or hospital equipment.⁴¹ One of the oddities of the freight business is that you are not required to specify the travel route, nor any possible subcontractors, nor the ultimate customer. In fact, it is not even necessary for an airplane to be physically present in a country in order for it to be registered there. No wonder outlaw Liberia is one of the behemoths of the business.

Once again, the message coming from the United Nations was crystal clear. It was not too difficult for someone like Victor Bout, with his shadowy connections, who excelled at getting around international rules and regulations, to go unnoticed and be one step

ahead of the UN investigators and governments alike in changing aircraft registration from one country to another, and then another.

I checked the April 2001 report on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The individual I was most interested in was Johan Peleman, listed as a technical adviser in Point 3. In fact, every damning UN report on Bout had Peleman as one of the authors. And only UN reports that involved Peleman incriminated Bout as a slippery, notorious arms-runner.

I called him, after an initial exchange of pleasantries and emails.

“Johan, this is Daniel Estulin. We spoke several days ago. You must feel good about Bout being finally in prison.”

He sighed. It was a prolonged sigh of a man who carried the weight of the godless world on his wide shoulders.

“Johan, I know you are busy, so I will get right to the point. How much money did you personally make from being Bout’s leading antagonist?”

There was a pause. It sounded like Peleman held his breath, and then he said, “I worked for the United Nations.”

“Are you saying you worked for free? If yes, what did you live on? I mean, what is the source of your income?”

Another pause. “I was getting a salary for my work.”

“Johan, in a *Groot Bijgaarden De Standaard* newspaper interview, you said that the operational budget of the UN panel on Liberia amounted to 1 million Euros and that you would never be given the same freedom of movement as you were enjoying whilst working on the report. You also said you went to Africa thirty times that year.”

“It proves that illegal arms trafficking was not a top priority for the Belgian Government,” he interrupted me.

“It also proves you had access to a fabulous trough of cash. You have done numerous reports for the UN and have been working with them for years. How much money did you make in the name of putting the bad guys behind bars?”

“You are dealing with—”

“Two million dollars,” I interrupted him. “Three, four, five?”

“This guy is the worst offender—”

“Six? Seven, Ten? Eleven million dollars? Ten years of going after Bout, Johan. How much money?”

“Bout deserves to be where he—”

“Thirteen? Fifteen? Twenty?”

“I wasn’t alone. We had staff, people working for us, researchers, investigators, secretaries.”

I was madly scribbling it all down. “Twenty million dollars, Johan! That’s a lot of money for staff and expenses. What kind of an operation did you people run at the United Nations?”

“You have any idea what it takes to track down someone like Bout?”

“I am beginning to,” I shot back. “By the way, do *you* have Bout’s story optioned to Hollywood as well?” No response.

“One last question, Johan. In your April 2001 Congo report you mention Bout doing business out of Burundi. I checked every available registry and guess what? Nothing. Can you —”

“I don’t have time for this,” he cut me off. “If you want to see the real story, go to BBC and watch their report.” He hung up.

I turned to the BBC page, found their *BBC World Report* on Victor Bout and pressed play.

Some three minutes into it, Peleman’s name came up along with the UN report on Angola dated December 18, 2000. According to the BBC report, “the name Bout became known to the general public in late January 2001.” Then, Peleman’s face appeared, cigarette in hand. “It was the first time Bout was mentioned in an official report as being a sanctions buster. What was different was that this report was sexy enough to be picked up by the media.” I bolted up in my chair. Come again? I was sure I misunderstood. I rewound the video and listened again. Yes, Peleman said “it was sexy enough.” How do you *sex up* a report? Well, actually, we know how. The Bush administration and the British did it as part of the campaign to scare the public into rubberstamping their illegal war in Iraq. Published by the British government on September 24, 2002, the September Dossier was part of a campaign by the Blair administration to bolster support for the 2003 Iraq invasion. It contained a number of later-proven-baseless allegations, according to which Iraq possessed WMDs, including chemical and biological weapons. A sexed up report, which led to a human carnage in Iraq.

HUNTING VICTOR BOUT

According to the August 17, 2003 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, during the final year of the Clinton administration, US intelligence began tracking Bout’s activities and his network, which

included the likes of Ruprah and Lakhani. In the summer of 1999, faced with multiple conflicts in West and Central Africa, the National Security Council authorized electronic surveillance of government and militia leaders in war zones like northeast Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Every morning, NSC officials cross-referenced transcripts of overheard telephone conversations with American satellite imagery and with field reports by British spies on the ground. The documentation was massive, without obvious patterns, until, finally, astute analysts noticed that every conflict had something in common: Victor Bout. Belgium already had an international arrest warrant out for Bout for money laundering and diamond smuggling. Clinton's National Security Council believed Bout was aiding terrorism. Landesman writes in the *New York Times Magazine*:

Gayle Smith, the National Security Council's (NSC) top Africanist, whose staff uncovered the Bout connection, sent an e-mail message to her fellow NSC members: "Who is this guy? Pay close attention to this. He's all over the place."

An answer was provided by a CIA aviation expert from Langley, who showed up at the White House with covert photographs shot at various African jungle airstrips between 1996 and 1999. The photos, according to a former White House official who studied them, show different Antonovs and Ilyushins, Russian cargo planes built to land on (and escape from) almost any surface. In the pictures, the planes' bellies are open. African militiamen in fatigues are off-loading crates of weapons. One photo shows a younger Bout standing before one of the planes. The White House official said the planes were traced to Bout.⁴²

At least on paper, it looked as if America was prepared to act. Smith and others took their information to Richard C. Clarke, then the chief of counterterrorism for the NSC. "Get me a warrant," Clarke responded, but US laws could not extend to Bout's foreign arms deliveries.⁴³

Clarke, of course, would have known this; then why the charade? Was this another case of powerful people playing games with us, dancing between raindrops perfectly content to hold our lives in the balance? What further complicated the issue was that the United Nations has no law enforcement powers: its investigators cannot subpoena, detain or arrest suspects. "Big arms are the province of individual countries, but no country is configured to deal with it be-

cause its jurisdiction stops at the border,” said Jonathan M. Winer, deputy assistant secretary of state for international law enforcement in the Clinton administration.

In addition to efforts of American intelligence, we were led to believe, “Bout’s clandestine activities in Africa were shadowed by the British MI6 on the ground,”⁴⁴ Interpol and United Nations inspectors. US and British intelligence had eavesdropped on his telephone conversations. Interpol had issued a “red notice,” requesting his arrest on Belgian weapons-trafficking and money-laundering charges.

Arms dealer Victor Bout, the Merchant of Death, allegedly the largest known illicit trafficker, sought by the International Community for feeding conflicts throughout much of the Eastern Hemisphere – was being squeezed, methodically ... until George W. Bush came into office and Iraq “happened.”

Then Bout was supposedly working for the Pentagon, and apparently had permission to fly into Iraq. I needed definitive proof, but at this point in my investigation, I was overwhelmed with research and underwhelmed with help. What’s more, I wasn’t about to take the media reports at face value. But the proof would have to wait. For now, I used open sources and mainstream press reports.

The storyline out of the corporate media camp was clean and simple to follow. Bout’s Texas-based Air Bas had rights to refuel at US bases in Iraq. One of Bout’s other airfreight companies, Airbus, was subcontracted through another firm called Falcon Express of Dubai, by Kellogg Brown and Root, then a subsidiary of Halliburton.⁴⁵ Before acquiring his fiefdom at the US Naval Observatory, former Vice President Dick Cheney was CEO of Halliburton.

I checked my Iraq timeline. Spring 2004 “roughly coincided with the early and still-disorganized stages of the Iraqi resistance. Utterly unprepared, coalition forces found themselves in a massive logistics crunch.”⁴⁶ Bush, Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle had promised a cakewalk, and told the world that grateful Iraqi people would greet American soldiers “with flowers and music.” They had lied.

Road transit became a living nightmare. American SUVs were picked off like flies by the insurgency. Someone thought of a Plan B to get supplies and ammunition to the troops. According to one contractor in Iraq working for Dyncorp, the Pentagon began leasing aircraft from just about anyone who had them, while simultaneously outsourcing convoy duty to private security firms in order to limit the exposure of American troops.

At least one company tied to Bout's network was hired by the Bush administration for the war effort in Iraq, reported Michael Scherer on September 20, 2004. "Records obtained by *Mother Jones* show that, as recently as August, Air Bas, a company tied to Bout and his associates, was flying charter missions under contract with the US military in Iraq. Air Bas is overseen by Victor Bout's brother, Serguei, and his business manager, Richard Chichakli, an accountant living in Texas; in the past, payments for Air Bas have gone to a Kazakh company that the United Nations identifies as 'a front for the leasing operations of Victor Bout's aircraft.'"⁴⁷

Mother Jones was being rather sparing with its information.⁴⁸ Chichakli, in fact, was more than a mere accountant. According to some sources he was an ex-CIA operative and a relative of the former president of Syria, Adib Shishakli, who after resigning the office of president in February 1954 lived in exile in Brazil, where he was assassinated in the town of Ceres on September 27, 1964.

Richard Chichakli became close to the bin Laden family while studying in Saudi Arabia between 1977 and 1986. Mohamed bin Laden, the patriarch of the family, had 52 children by a number of wives, and two of his wives were Syrian. The mother of Osama bin Laden is a Syrian, and the mother of Saad bin Laden, a half-brother to Osama whom Chichakli had met in Riyadh University, was also Syrian.

Saad bin Laden introduced Chichakli to the rest of the bin Laden family after the two of them became close friends, a relationship which was enhanced by their Syrian family background. All of that led to Chichakli getting liked and trusted by the mother, and subsequently by the other members of the family, including Salem bin Laden.

Chichakli alleges that Salem bin Laden was ordered killed by George H.W. Bush in 1988 in order to protect his son George W. Bush, who had been stealing money from bin Laden funds in the United States. At the time, the fund was under the management of "Major" James Bath, a former National Guard major who had served with Dubbya and was the financier of the latter's oil-drilling ventures. Contrary to what has been written on the subject, Chichakli maintains, Salem was not killed in an ultra-light airplane that hit power lines in Texas; he was assassinated over the Mediterranean while headed to the US to revoke Bath's power as trustee over the bin Laden monies, when his BAC 1-11 aircraft was shot down over international waters by the Israeli air force at the order of Yitzhak

Rabin, then Minister of Defense. But, I am getting away from my story.

Douglas Farah has claimed that Chichakli used to sit around and eat sandwiches and sing songs with bin Laden and his siblings, back when Osama was OK.

I sent Chichakli an email.

I have some points that I need to clarify. Unfortunately, certain parts of your audio recording weren't very good.

1. Your relationship to the former president of Syria, Adib Shishakli.
2. Your relationship to the bin Ladens. There are several references in mainstream sources essentially stating the following: you "hung out with a youthful Osama and ran a free-trade zone in the United Arab Emirates."
3. Your relationship to Miles Copeland.
4. Were you working for the US intelligence, as has been suggested?

"I do not know Osama bin Laden nor I have met him, he lived in Jeddah and went to School in King Abdul Aziz University there, while I was in Riyadh and went to university in Riyadh, emailed Chichakli. "The 'hang out story' is a made up tale." He did acknowledged that *Saad* bin Laden had been present at his wedding on July 14, 1983.

I checked the original source for Osama bin Laden and Chichakli hanging out together. Douglas Farah, *Merchant of Death*, pages 53-56. Someone was obviously "wrong." But who?

Why would Chichakli make up a story of hanging out with the terrorist wanted for masterminding 9/11? Not a good way to make friends and influence people. On the other hand, if you are Farah and you are creating a background, "setting the scene" so to speak, linking Chichakli and Osama bin Laden and later Chichakli and Victor Bout would be ideal for negatively influencing people's opinions. Is this another case of multiple passports, walled compounds and phantom fleets all made to serve someone's far-reaching policy objectives?

Chichakli refused to comment on his relationship with US intelligence officer Miles Copeland, a key player in US intelligence operations in the Middle East, a veteran of Wild Bill Donovan's wartime

OSS, and a founding father of the CIA. I have been told by reliable sources that Chichakli was a close confidant of Miles Copeland.

On point one, he *is* related, though not immediate family, to former Syrian president Shishakli. Thus, a Victor Bout “accountant” was closely linked to the CIA, to the bin Ladens and to a former president of Syria. Of course, *Mother Jones* would have known at least some of it, had they dug a little deeper. It took me less than one hour to cross reference some of this information through several popular search engines, and a couple of emails to Richard Chichakli himself. Why, then, didn’t they?

Was Chichakli being protected as someone’s foreign policy asset through a publication that claims to be a non-profit “Foundation for National Progress”? In 1997, *Mother Jones* was given a \$3 million grant by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation “to establish a Center for Working Families” at the University of Berkeley. The Sloan Foundation’s board of trustees includes former chairmen of the General Motors, J.P. Morgan and Morgan Stanley corporate boards.

If Chichakli was being protected or being used as someone’s foreign policy asset, I thought, the corollary was clear: so was Victor Bout. Taking it one step further, if Bout’s actions were part of the plan, then the entire elaborate construct of smoke and mirrors could become visible as we followed its implications into a parallel world beyond logic.

“Why are you doing this?” asked my aunt, shortly before she died, the aunt who had clucked over the “terrible things” done to our family.

Because universal corruption and abuse of power and privileges at the deepest level of society must be exposed, even at the risk of one’s life. And because the notion of the Shadow Masters acting as our puppeteers is too unpalatable, too intolerable.

Perhaps the best response to my aunt’s question is another. What are the moral consequences of freedom?

BOUT-TALIBAN LINK

By Douglas Farah’s account, Victor Bout’s alleged dealings with the Taliban and al-Qaeda “were the subject of an ongoing, classified US operation that began in early 2000.” Aware of the lack of international instruments to prosecute Bout, the United States embarked on a campaign against him. “There was a concerted effort at

the tail end of the Clinton administration, continued into the Bush administration, to put him out of business,” Farah reported, citing another phantom former US government official “working out of the State Department.”⁴⁹ Hoping against hope for something concrete, I checked the article for names of real people. Nothing. It was the familiar Farah sleight of hand.

Of course, any investigator might check for himself. How many such officials could there be in the given time frame, you might ask? Try thousands.

The intelligence community claims to have known for a long time of Bout’s extensive ties to Afghanistan. For example, according to a 1998 Belgian intelligence report, one of Bout’s Boeing 707s with a crew from Switzerland and registered in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was “partially financed by Afghan generals.”⁵⁰ Unlike his relationships with other Afghan forces, Bout’s supposed links to the Taliban have been mostly unknown, even within the rank-and-file of international intelligence communities. According to Douglas Farah, they go back to August 1995, when the Taliban was in opposition to President Burhanuddin Rabbani’s government in Kabul.⁵¹

In reference to Bout’s supposed link to the Taliban, a PBS documentary on gunrunners stated that Taliban officials impounded “30-odd tons of AK-47 small arms ammunition” meant for government forces in Kabul. At the time, the Taliban had captured ten provincial capitals, but had not yet taken Kabul, and little more was heard about the event until after 9/11.⁵²

On January 1, 2002, the *Washington Monthly* shed additional light on supposed Bout-Taliban connections, saying that an apolitical Bout started selling to the Taliban while negotiating for the release of his plane and Russian crew in 1995. “When his plane was detained, he used the opportunity as a business introduction to the Taliban.”⁵³ The Center for Public Integrity website also reported, “Bout, together with Russian diplomats, met Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders to negotiate the release of the detained crew in Kandahar, but they were not successful.”⁵⁴

Bout doesn’t deny meeting Omar, quite the opposite. “Of course I met with him. This was my crew. I was responsible for them. But selling arms to the Taliban? Never.” According to Bout, Mullah Omar was simply awful. A leader without ideas.

Do I simply take Bout at his word? Of course not. But he may well have been telling the simple truth. I noted a grumble of resentment

in Bout's voice, and nary a trace of dissembling or guile. It sounded like the truth to me.

"What side are you on?" I have been asked repeatedly throughout my investigation.

I am on my side, gentlemen, and I represent those who have no voice. If anyone is apolitical, I am. Not amoral, but apolitical.

Bout's denials of his Taliban dealings are all lies, if we are to believe the "UN and US government officials." They apparently said Bout made a deal with the Taliban in 1996 in the UAE, one of only three countries in the world, along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which recognized the regime. "Starting in 1998, according to aircraft registration documents found in Kabul by Afghan officials, Bout's operation based in Sharjah sold the Taliban military a fleet of cargo planes that was used to haul tons of arms and materiel into Afghanistan."⁵⁵

Who made this statement? Douglas Farah.

Off went another email to Douglas Farah:

How many planes did Bout sell to the Taliban? The reason I ask is that the operation doesn't make sense. If Bout is a transporter, then his business is buying, not selling, planes to maximize profit through operations, unless the planes he sold were clunkers. In which case, why would the Taliban buy them in the first place? Also, I am somewhat uncomfortable with the following phrase: "Starting in 1998, according to aircraft registration documents found in Kabul by Afghan officials." It sounds too convenient. So, would it be too much to ask for you to explain, who were these officials, or in the absence of this information whom did they work for and how is it that a man of Bout's supposed talents for invisibility would leave incriminating documents to be found by Afghani officials who luckily for you, told you about them?"

In an email of September 29, 2009, Farah simply replied that it was "all in the book." No, I was asking precisely because it is *not* in the book.

Of course, really replying to nosy independent investigators may not be in the interests of someone's farsighted agenda.

But, there was more to the campaign against Bout.

On January 7, 2002, the German weekly, *Der Spiegel*, claimed that Bout helped arrange the sale of up to 200 Russian T-55 and T-62 tanks

to the Taliban. The tanks were alleged to have been transported by one of Bout's airfreight companies. Reportedly, undercover Russian SVR (intelligence) agents in Kabul discovered that Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency was also in on the arms-smuggling deal, a violation of UN sanctions against the Taliban.⁵⁶ The primary source on this information apparently was Stephen Braun, Douglas Farah's co-author on *Merchant of Death*.

As of this writing, NATO forces arguably control much of Afghanistan, and what isn't directly controlled is subject to constant surveillance by the most sophisticated detection systems known. Yet the tanks are nowhere to be found. Are they all in some Taliban caves? Or is this another case of missing WMDs? Have anyone tried calling Afghanistan's lost and found department? The serious accusations against Bout and his 200 tanks have lost all credibility, but this fact has been quietly swept under the rug.

According to intelligence sources in Ministry of Foreign Affairs Russian President Putin, in late February or early March 2002, reported to the White House that ISI agents known to Russian intelligence were connected to arms rings supplying not only the Taliban but also an offshoot of both the Chechen and al-Qaeda cells. President Bush promised to send an FBI team to St. Petersburg to further investigate, but that turned out to be an empty promise. The Russian intelligence was buttressed independently in August 2000, when a purchase order found during Leonid Minin's arrest in Italy showed that ISI ran guns for the Taliban, without any apparent help from Bout.

JUST ANOTHER V.P.

On December 14, 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* opened its morning edition with a startling story: "Air cargo companies allegedly tied to reputed Russian arms trafficker Victor Bout have received millions of dollars in federal funds from US contractors in Iraq, even though the Bush administration has worked for three years to rein in his enterprise."⁵⁷

The story continued with the *Times* reporters throwing one firebomb after another. "Planes linked to Victor Bout's shadowy network continued to fly into Iraq, according to government records and interviews with officials, even though the Treasury Department froze his assets in July [2004] and placed him on a blacklist for al-

legedly violating international arms sanctions. Largely under the auspices of the Pentagon, US agencies including the Army Corps of Engineers and the Air Force, and the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority, which governed Iraq until last summer, have *allowed their private contractors* to do business with the Bout network [emphasis added]. Four firms linked to the network by the CIA and international investigators have flown into Iraq approximately 195 times on US business, government flight and fuel documents show. One such flight landed in Baghdad last week. The list of the Bout network's suspected clients over the years includes the Taliban, which bought airplanes for a secret airlift of arms to Afghanistan. The Taliban was known to have shared weapons with al-Qaeda."⁵⁸

Initially, no other US mainstream corporate media came within shouting distance of this story with the exception of a veteran journalist, Mike Isikoff, of *Newsweek*. And he added one additional item: "The exact number of flights Bout-connected firms made into Iraq, 142 ... were contracted by Halliburton's subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR)."⁵⁹ As reviewers of the war-zone contracting have noted, Halliburton was then an oil-services company "that also provides construction and military support services – a triple-header of wartime spoils."⁶⁰ "Wartime spoils" have immensely profited the corporation that Vice President Cheney had headed.

According to the Center for Public Integrity, the Cheney-Halliburton story is the classic military-industrial revolving door tale. As Secretary of Defense under Bush's father, Dick Cheney paid Brown & Root services (later Kellogg Brown & Root, now KBR, Inc.) \$3.9 million to report on how private companies could help the US Army, as Cheney cut hundreds of thousands of Army jobs. Then Brown & Root won a five-year contract to provide logistics for the US Army Corp of Engineers all over the globe. In 1995 Cheney became CEO, and Halliburton jumped from 73rd to 18th on the Pentagon's list of top contractors, benefiting from at least \$3.8 billion in federal contracts and taxpayer-insured loans.⁶¹

According to the aforementioned *Los Angeles Times* article, "UN investigations and American officials have linked Air Bas, incorporated in Texas but based in the United Arab Emirates, and Irbis, a company registered in Kazakhstan, to Bout's aviation empire." Before 2001, Air Bas was called Air Cess.⁶²

When I was digging for evidence, I came across several pages of documents from intelligence files that indicated one of the Bout-

linked firms was drawing fuel from the Army as of March 10, 2004, and another as of April 5, 2004. Bout, again, I thought to myself, refueling at American bases? Through a captain in the US Army's special security unit stationed in Iraq who has followed my investigations for years, I was finally able to secure a copy of the fuel purchasing agreements with Air Bas, one of ... Richard Chichakli's companies!

What the Hell is going on? I thought. Chichakli? Air Bas is Bout's company. It is Bout, not Chichakli. Everyone from the United Nations to *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *Washington Times* to *Le Monde*⁶³ insisted on linking Bout's Air Bas activity in Iraq to US government lack of oversight regarding contracts after the Merchant of Death's assets had been frozen.

Douglas Farah made the Bout-Air Bas connection very clear in his *Washington Post*, September 23, 2007 article.⁶⁴ *Merchant of Death* co-author, Stephen Braun's August 13, 2007 *Washington Post* article clearly stated that "Bout's planes were used as what former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz described as second-tier contractors. The Army or the Army Corps of Engineers would hire KBR or other prime contractors to fly in supplies, and the firms would then hire Bout planes, either directly or through air charter services."

This too, was apparently a lie. Bout didn't fly anything for the United States government! Chichakli did. I held the agreement in my hand, signed on March 9, 2004. There was no doubt about it, Air Bas belonged to Chichakli. Then why, did the United Nations insist on freezing Air Bas assets as belonging to Bout? To muddy the waters further, several weeks later, I acquired Air Bas Jet Fuel identification card issued to the company by the Department of Defense of the United States.

The Center for Public Integrity, part of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, is a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC. Its work is generally considered authoritative, and I have cited their reporting on the meeting between Bout and Taliban leaders regarding his downed aircraft and crew. They stated categorically that "Air Cess, just like Air Bas, exists mostly on paper, but it has given Victor Bout the right to use the "N" number given to planes registered in North America, a vital advantage, especially when you fly illegal cargo and contraband" [emphasis added].⁶⁵

I Googled for their website, quickly found what I was looking for, clicked on the *supporting documents* section and waited. I became particularly interested in the extensive Leonid Minin documentation

they claimed to have accessed, since multiple corporate media reports claimed that Minin and Bout were partners in their arms-for-drugs-for-diamonds trade. To my chagrin, all Minin documents had been taken offline. I picked up the phone.

“What happened to the Minin archive in the documents section of your webpage?” I asked.

“Well, you see, we ... we had to take it down.”

“Why?”

“Ah, we didn’t have permission from the authorities.”

“Which authorities?” I insisted.

“I don’t know. You should speak to Alain Lallemand.”

“OK. Can I speak to him?”

“Well, he is not here. But I can give you a number to call.”

“I wanted to ask you about Victor Bout. I am working on a deadline, and unless I hand in my manuscript in the next few weeks, my publisher may do unseemly bodily harm to me.”

She laughed.

So did I. The mood had been set. It was time to sink the line.

“What’s so special about Bout’s passports?” I asked.

“He has two of them,” came the reply.

“Yes?” I asked expectantly.

There was a pause. Then I continued. “If you look closely, one was issued in 1998 and the other in the year 2000,” I said.

“Why would he change his passports so often?”

“Perhaps because he travels a lot,” I quipped, “and ran out of blank pages for stamps.”

“Or perhaps, he doesn’t want to be caught,” she replied significantly.

“With what?”

“You know what I mean,” she answered.

“No, actually, I don’t. Let me ask you another question. Under the subheading Bout Arms Transactions 1996-1998, there is a flow chart.”

“That’s Bout’s operation,” she clarified.

“How do you know this,” I asked somewhat puzzled.

“It’s from the UN report.”

“Do you know who wrote the report?” I inquired.

“Johan Peleman,” she said triumphantly.

“And the flow chart of Bout’s operating network is from the same report?”

“Exactly.”

Before saying goodbye, I had to know one more thing. “Have you actually seen the evidence purported to show the extent of Bout’s arms smuggling network?”

“No,” she said. “Just the flow chart.”

A few minutes later, I called and left a message for Alain Lallemand. That was many weeks before press time, and I doubt the man intends to get back to me. You see, the Belgian courts found a great part of Minin’s documents to be fakes. I am sure that’s why they were taken down. It had made someone important look bad and exposed their lies, and perhaps their true intentions. Someone was lining ducks up for a kill. I could smell it. In this business, one’s nostrils never quite adjust. Instead, they develop a kind of hypersensitivity – to the innumerable variations of the basic rotten smell.

It was the *sequence* of events that concerned me.

Zero, one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four, and so on. That is the Fibonacci sequence. Anyone might look and not see a pattern, but it is right there and staring one in the face (every third numeral is the sum of the previous two). I needed to see how each event was connected to the one before it. I pulled up everything I could on Bout, including the timelines of the corporate news stories on him, UN reports, government actions and announcements, not to mention an extensive file I had compiled on Internet traffic regarding Bout and the sites that most covered him. Who said what about him and when? What did a major announcement on Bout coincide with? That will give me the sequence, the pattern, that makes order out of chaos, I thought to myself.

“Fibonacci sequence?” asked a friend, dumbfounded. “Have you been reading Dan Brown?”

“True sequences don’t change. Neither do the patterns of human thought. I just need to find it,” I replied, absolutely sure I had walked through looking glass into a parallel universe of smoke and mirrors, but one where the actual outlines were still discernible.

Aside from his numerous qualifications for phantom journalism, Douglas Farah is a very intelligent man. He is closely associated with the Council on Foreign Relations, the US arm of the powerful and secretive Bilderberg Group, and the Hudson Institute, a neocon hotbed. The CFR boasts a membership of about 4,000. But its roster includes literally hundreds of powerful figures occupying key positions in the media – not merely writers, reporters, and news an-

chors who deliver the news, but also editors, publishers, and executives who define *what* news is and *how* it is covered. Just as significantly, the tiny CFR clique has for decades had a virtual stranglehold on the executive branch of the US government, as well as much of academia.

In his October 30, 1993 “Ruling Class Journalists” essay, *Washington Post* ombudsman Richard Harwood candidly discussed how the CFR dominates our news media. Harwood described the Council on Foreign Relations as “the closest thing we have to a ruling Establishment in the United States ... Its members are the people who, for more than half a century, have managed our international affairs and our military-industrial complex.” After listing the executive-branch positions then occupied by CFR members, Harwood continued: “What is distinctively modern about the council these days is the considerable involvement of journalists and other media figures, who account for more than 10 percent of the membership.

“The editorial page editor, deputy editorial page editor, executive editor, managing editor, foreign editor, national affairs editor, business and financial editor and various writers as well as [the now deceased] Katherine Graham, the paper’s principal owner, represent the *Washington Post* in the council’s membership,” observed Harwood. He went on to describe CFR representation among the owners, management, and editorial personnel for the other media giants – the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, NBC, CBS, ABC, and so on. These media heavyweights “do not merely analyze and interpret foreign policy for the United States; they help make it,” he concluded. Rather than offering an independent perspective on our rulers’ actions, the Establishment media act as the ruling elite’s voice – conditioning the public to accept, and even embrace “insider” designs that otherwise might not be politically attainable.

Back in 2003, when Douglas Farah was coming into his own, the Hudson Institute was heavily financed by Lord Conrad Black, the now disgraced former owner of the Hollinger Corporation. The Hudson Institute “has done more to shape the way Americans react to political and social events, think, vote and generally conduct themselves than perhaps any except the kingpin of the brainwashing establishment – Tavistock Institute of Human Relations itself.”⁶⁶ Hudson primarily specializes in defense policy research and relations with Russia. Might Victor Bout fall under this specialized category? Of course.

Furthermore, “most of Hudson’s military work is classified as secret. One of its largest clients is the US Department of Defense which includes matters of civil defense, national security, military policy and arms control.”⁶⁷ In the mainstream media, Hudson and the CFR are usually portrayed as having opposite viewpoints. However, they serve the same interests, and Farah’s job seems to be to lecture, travel, and issue reports on Victor Bout, Islam, Islamic terrorism, aviation, arms trafficking, diamonds, African politics, and whatever is hot in the media in such a way as to manipulate public opinion favorably to cartel interests.

But another apparent piece of the puzzle fell into place when I found a 2003 UN Security Council report on several violations of the arms embargo, first in Somalia implicating Air Bas in Bout’s aviation empire, and then in Rwanda where Air Bas was accused of supplying Hutu extremists with arms for carrying out the Rwanda genocide.

Just when I thought I had stumbled onto one of Bout’s transgressions, I drew another blank. The UN Security Council report was referring to Air Bass FZE of Sharjah, an entity utterly unrelated to Bout’s empire. How do I know this? The two companies incorporation documents. That didn’t stop Office of Foreign Assets Control to add Victor Bout and his onetime accountant Richard Chichakli to its Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list,⁶⁸ citing the aforementioned UN report as evidence. In the BBC-4 *World Report* special on Victor Bout, the host interviewed Adam Szubin, the head of the US Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

Voice over: “Finally, OFAC decided to put a bullet straight through Bout’s wallet. In 2005, his company assets were frozen and put off limit to others.”

Szubin: “If Mr. Bout had assets in the United States, they would have been immediately frozen.”

Did I hear right, did the OFAC man just contradict the BBC? Did Bout have assets in the United States or didn’t he?

“I never did any business in the United States,” Bout told me. “I have principles.” OFAC agrees, at least on the first point. Bout, to their chagrin, never did business in America. Here was a real *but* (not as in Victor But, but as in a simple, to the contrary, English “but”).

BBC program host: “How much money did you find, roughly?”

Szubin: “A close conspirator of his assesses that he lost in the region of six billion dollars in profit due to pressure that was put on him thanks to sanctions.”

Six billion dollars? In profit?

A good story. Yes, definitely a good story. True? No, most definitely not true, although it makes for compelling television. There is no arms surplus available for illegal trading in the entire world that comes close to even 10% of this number. How can my assertions be verified? A Thai court identified a US claim about the hundreds of surface-to-air missiles that Bout supposedly agreed to sell to the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) as “lacking foundation and credibility.” The excerpt from the Thai Court of First Instance verdict (page 48), as somehow translated from Thai into Russian and then back into English, is as follows: “...the accused was charged with selling the large quantity of war weapons and fighter aircrafts which have the large quantity and the price is too high to believe that it can be illegally traded. *It [the Court] is in doubt where to find the illegal source of large quantity of war weapons ...* [emphasis added].”

For example, it took nine years to officially deliver \$20 billion worth of arms in the Al-Yamamah deal between the UK’s BAE systems and the Saudi Arabian government, the largest arms deal ever contracted. If Szubin’s assertion is to be taken at face value and the US indeed denied Bout \$6 billion in profit, how much should he have sold in arms to make such a profit, and how on earth can such a quantity of arms be moved without anyone taking notice?

Furthermore, UN investigators examining bank records in the United Arab Emirates in 2001, a known terrorist money-laundering center, claimed they “found frequent money transfers between British Gulf and another Bout-linked company, San Air General Trading.”⁶⁹ This article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in late December 2004. Among its authors is Stephen Braun, Douglas Farah’s co-author on the *Merchant of Death*.

It took a little digging, but in the end, this too proved to be utterly baseless. Off went an email to Stephen Braun.

Hey Stephen.

My name is Daniel Estulin. I am working on a very tight deadline re. Victor Bout. I would like to clarify a point and would love to have your cooperation. In your *LAT* article you write that investigators found frequent money transfers between various Bout companies. Specifically, “payments for many of the weapons that went to Liberia through Victor Bout’s network in 2000 and 2001 were

directed to San Air's bank accounts." That's not what I found. Can you get back to me ASAP?

Did he? Of course not.

San Air USA was created in 2000 for Victor Bout in the US by Richard Chichakli. Apparently the plan was to manufacture panels for Russian aircraft, which business would provide a basis for Bout and family to establish a residence in the US. After Bout's application in Dubai for a US visa was rejected, the project died, and Chichakli dissolved the firm after a couple of years. Only Chichakli's name appears on the company documents, and it never did any business beyond maintaining a small banking account in Richardson, Texas.

San Air UAE, a completely different company, to which account an alleged payment from the Liberian Maritime located in the US was made, was founded by Andrei Semenchenko who has been locked up in a United Arab Emirates jail for the past eight years.⁷⁰ In fact, UAE-based San Air would have been "Sun Air" except for a typo in the incorporation documents, which turned it into San Air. The name remained unaltered on the books because Semenchenko did not have the money to correct the incorporation document.

Did Stephen Braun know this? If I found out, working on a limited budget, so could he. Furthermore, The US treasury's OFAC used the exact language stated in a UN resolution about Liberia to credit their action against Bout's 30 companies, as per UN reports S/2006/976 and S/2007/340. Is it the case of one hand washing the other? Another example of converging interests of the Men behind the Curtain?

In fact, as I discovered, none of the assets frozen by OFAC belonged to Victor Bout, but rather to Richard Chichakli. I have in my possession every financial transaction that took place through the 30 "Victor Bout" entities OFAC brags about freezing.

Furthermore, the 30 big financial entities, as described by OFAC, weren't big at all. In addition to Chichakli's aircraft brokerage business, there were six dormant corporations with no activities, one tax preparation office, one payroll and accounting practice, one used motorcycles dealership, two continued professional education providers with no activities, a home renovation venture, and a swimming pool cleaning service. The other named entities were either closed or dissolved, such as "Airbus Transportation," Chichakli's airline the US government contracted to service American forces in Iraq.

What I found telling, and at the same time disturbing, is that with all the extraordinary media hype that accompanied OFAC action against Bout, and to a lesser degree Chichakli, the latter was not, and still is not, listed as having any frozen assets in the United States. How do I know this? The US State Department is under obligation to report to the United Nations' Security Council the names of people who are sanctioned, and whose assets are frozen. Chichakli's name is not listed as a person sanctioned by the US government, yet his assets were reported as if they belonged to Victor Bout.

I asked Richard Roper, United States attorney in charge of the Chichakli case, why the government had taken over seven years as of this writing (9/15/2002 - late 2009) to investigate Chichakli without any charges or indictment brought against him. In context, the Enron investigation lasted slightly over one year.

"I can't comment on that," replied the US attorney, Richard Roper. Where have I heard that before?

The US Treasury ordered the freezing of Chichakli's assets and virtual termination of his right to work, live, or exist in the United States. The Treasury acted at the recommendation of the State Department, and in cooperation with the DOJ, the CIA, Homeland Security, and other departments in the executive branch according to the official statement released later by the US government. The cause of the action remains "SECRET" and the justification of the search warrant is forever "SEALED."

When I was searching for evidence against Chichakli, I came across an April 7, 2006 UN Security Council report pursuant to resolution 1521 concerning Liberia. The report started with a note from the Syrian Arab Republic: "We have the honor to inform the Committee that the Syrian authorities found, on 13 June 2005, the name of Mamdouh Chichakli, which appears in the above mentioned list [the assets freeze list], on the account of Amal Amin Sabagh, as guardian of the account. Accordingly, the Syrian authorities have frozen the assets of Mr. Chichakli and have blacklisted him.

I did a double-take. This didn't make any sense. The official United Nations report was stating in black and white that they had frozen the account of Chichakli's seventy-year-old mother, Dr. Amal A. Sabagh. What's more, the name blacklisted on the report, Mamdouh Chichakli, belongs to Richard Chichakli's dead father.

No, I thought to myself. This was no mere mistake. This was done on purpose.

If the United States government didn't have Chichakli on their list, why would Syria go out of their way and put him on theirs? Furthermore, whose assets did they freeze? What's going on? Chichakli left Syria almost 45 years ago; because of his past family history in Syria he surely wouldn't leave assets in a Syrian bank. If he had no assets in the country, then, what did the Syrian authorities find?

They found, according to the report, an "amount of monies not available." Why not available? Because Chichakli's assets in Syria amounted to *zero*. Therefore, Syria froze nonexistent Chichakli assets in the country he hadn't set foot in almost half a century. Interesting. Something else drew my attention to the UN report – the unsolicited, voluntary report by the Syrian government.

Syria and the United States government working together? What's the world coming to, I thought to myself. Paragraph 116 at the bottom of page 34 of the UN report clearly shows that Syria was not among the countries contacted by the UN panel on Liberia. Then, why are sticking their nose into someone else's business? What's it to them?

ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS

Chichakli might not have known anything about non-existing assets in a Syrian bank, but he knew plenty about Operation Blessing, televangelist Pat Robertson's "charity" in Africa, organized with the very same characters who were allegedly working hand-in-glove with Victor Bout.

To prevent him from talking, Chichakli maintains, the US government offered him a deal – his life back and witness protection in exchange for saying that he knew Victor Bout to be an arms dealer. Chichakli refused, offering to testify, without immunity, to what he knew, not what the government wanted him to say. He was refused. Then, on April 26, 2005 the government counterattacked, seizing all of his records and assets.

What did a God-fearing, Christian missionary like Pat Robertson do in Africa? Robertson's African Development Company apparently used the cover of Robertson's tax-exempt "Operation Blessing" to smuggle conflict diamonds out of civil war-ravaged Zaire, later renamed the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁷¹ Bout would have surely known this. So would have Chichakli. Africa was Bout's stomping ground for almost a decade.

Who was Robertson's partner? Mass murderer Charles Taylor, former Liberian strongman. The Robertson-Taylor Cayman Islands-based front company was called Freedom Gold, whose operations were overseen from Robertson's offices in Virginia Beach, USA. What's more, the US Special prosecutor for war crimes in Sierra Leone, David Crane, charged in May 2005 that Taylor was harboring al-Qaeda members and training rebels throughout West Africa in exchange for blood diamonds.⁷² Now, if you are the US government, having a Richard Chichakli shine the light of truth on the transgressions of the Bush government's favorite Bible thumper simply wouldn't do.

Chichakli was evidently ready to go public to show that Robertson was using his Operation Blessing, a supposed non-profit Christian-aid organization, not to provide aid to African victims of famine and war, but to transport equipment and supplies for his various diamond-mining ventures on that continent, and at US taxpayers' expense. This was later confirmed by Max Blumenthal, a highly respected journalist writing for *The Nation* magazine on September 19, 2005: "Far from the media's gaze, Robertson has used the tax-exempt, non-profit Operation Blessing as a front for his shadowy financial schemes, while exerting his influence within the Republican Party to cover his tracks." And all, of course, in the name of Jesus.

Chichakli needed to disappear. He was dangerous. Guantanamo was out of the question. He was too old to have been suddenly discovered as an al-Qaeda fighter. What did the United States government do? In July 2006, they renditioned him to Syria, where he ended up in the hands of Syrian intelligence agents. Impossible? Precedent setting case? Hardly. Ask Syrian-born Canadian Maher Arar, a telecommunications engineer, who was deported by the US government to Syria in 2002, where he was detained and tortured for almost a year. Despite a Canadian court ruling exonerating Arar of all charges and links to terrorism, the United States government to this day publicly insists that Arar is affiliated with members of organizations they describe as terrorist.

Intelligence sources have confirmed to me that the US government paid \$4 million to the ex-leader of the Syrian Republican Guard, General Adnan Makhoul, to have Chichakli liquidated in Syria. The US government representative who made the payment was a CIA operative working in Syria with diplomat status. But Chichakli, a former US Army intelligence officer, escaped. For the United States'

plans, that was a serious bummer. In fact, Chichakli's liquidation was taken for granted to such an extent that some of his confiscated assets began disappearing, even before he was renditioned to Syria. All in all, Chichakli states the FBI removed nearly \$500,000 in diamonds, jewelry, cash and collectible US notes of \$500 and \$1000 denominations. When Chichakli demanded to know their whereabouts, the FBI claimed that the assets in questions were delivered to OFAC. OFAC, in turn, claim not to know anything about them.

If I ever had any faith in the mechanics of the United Nations and their inner workings, after my Bout investigation that faith has been shattered forever.

Back in 2002, a 59-page UN Security Council report confirmed British Gulf International formed part of the Bout empire. The same UN investigators have also scrutinized British Gulf International's link with another airline that flew into Iraq, Jetline, and found them to be tied to Bout. The *Los Angeles Times* obtained Baghdad flight records, which clearly demonstrated that British Gulf also flew for KBR, Halliburton's subsidiary.

With the UN Security Council conclusions in hand, and the true ownership of Air Bas safely buried by the mainstream press, that made it a stunning four Bout air cargo firms working as subcontractors for the US government in Iraq at a time when Bout was apparently wanted for money laundering and arms smuggling by Interpol and the Belgian authorities, not to mention by the US government for his ties to the Taliban and al-Qaeda! How can any of this be possible, I thought to myself. Then, I remembered. I had stepped through the looking glass into a parallel universe were everything was in reverse. The universe of changing loyalties and black ops in the name of someone's far-reaching and farsighted foreign policy. For whom did all of these people work?

The mainstream press' timeline on the next series of events wasn't difficult to put together. "Soon after the *Los Angeles Times* story appeared, Senate Democrats asked the State Department's Richard Armitage and then Defense Department's Paul Wolfowitz to comment on the allegations. Neither knew anything, or so they claimed. Both, however, promised to look into the allegations."⁷³ Ironically, the final call on the contractors belongs to the Pentagon, and it was quite obvious that the State Department's inquiries, if they were ever made, were rejected.

Wolfowitz finally responded when the pressure from Democrats in Congress became unbearable. In a January 31, 2005 letter to Wisconsin Democratic Senator Russell Feingold, Wolfowitz acknowledged that “both the US Army and the CPA in Iraq did conduct business with companies that, in turn, subcontracted work to second-tier suppliers, who leased aircraft owned by companies associated with Mr. Bout. However, spokesmen for the US Central Command and the Pentagon brushed off inquiries on the subject saying they knew of no contracts with Bout-related companies. At the same time, they stressed the need to understand how complex contracting arrangements were in Iraq. The Pentagon, a military official said, could not check out the subcontractors who actually flew the flights into Iraq and Afghanistan.”⁷⁴

If we are to believe the aforementioned reports from America’s leading corporate media publications, the consequences of Bout’s “far-flung operations” have been devastating both in human cost and for long-term US geopolitical interests. Yet, the Pentagon, the paragon of American military might, would not give the subject matter the time of day. Perhaps, I thought to myself, there are too many people who feel they need to keep Bout around to fly into the next Iraq or Afghanistan.

There was something else that caught my attention in Michael Isikoff’s *Newsweek* article. He stated that “it took the Bush administration until July 2004 to issue an Executive Order # 3348 directing the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) to finally freeze Bout’s assets in the United States and forbid American firms from doing business with him [emphasis added].” Furthermore, it took the US government *an additional nine months*, until April 26, 2005, to freeze US assets of the 30 Bout-related companies. There was only one way to interpret that – the Bush administration was stalling for time. There is only one way to interpret the media’s assertions regarding Bout’s assets. They lied, brazenly and blatantly. OFAC only has the power to go after Bout’s assets in the United States. Bout never had any assets in the United States, at least none that Farah, Braun or the United States government has been able to show belonged to Bout. The media knew that, of course, because we know. Someone was lining a duck up for a kill.

Indeed, “the move against Bout proved largely symbolic. During the time between the US designation and the UN listing, according to US and European intelligence sources, Bout revamped his operations,

moving aircraft registrations and incorporating new companies. As a result, most of the designated companies no longer have any assets to be frozen, and it will take months to identify the new companies and begin sanctioning them.⁷⁵ Who says so? You guessed it. Douglas Farah.

As I continued to uncover one startling fact after another, I asked myself the same, nagging question. If Bout was indeed a Merchant of Death, why was the United States government being “very slow” to act on comprehensive links between weapons trafficking and terrorism? Were these links and criminal synergies allowed to take place and flourish? With irrefutable evidence mounting in front of me, was it just possible that Victor Bout simply served as an extension of America’s foreign policy in Iraq, Afghanistan or Africa? How else could we interpret the stonewalling and the lies?

Needless to say, if we take this information at face value and try to rationalize it, none of it makes any sense, at least not in any world we know. Again, in the *real world*, a Victor Bout operation would not have succeeded because governments have the diplomatic, financial and intelligence clout to destroy the elements that threaten their sovereignty and the rule of law. And a Bout-Taliban link would certainly qualify as such a destructive element.

STILL HUNTING

The US government’s punitive actions “were based on Bout’s relationship with [then-Liberian president] Taylor, but, in announcing the OFAC action, the Treasury Department stressed another facet of Bout’s activities, noting that he made \$50 million in profits from arms transfers to the Taliban when the regime was hosting Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.”⁷⁶

Still, if we were to take the aforementioned US Treasury Department statement at face value, Bout was delivering weapons to the Taliban and al-Qaeda at the same time as the US government clandestinely contracted with him to work with American forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. How surreal is that? The Office of Foreign Asset Control, however, is based out of the Treasury Department, and Bout was being contracted by the Pentagon. Could this be a case of some remarkable incompetence in one department being utterly oblivious to what was going on in another department of the government?

This possibility loses credence with the addition of another strange coincidence. How could both the US State Department

and the British Foreign Office allow such a high-profile case to slip through their nets? Perhaps the real reason Victor Bout continued to enjoy relative immunity was his usefulness in Iraq. What else could explain the undeniable fact that the coalition partners, the United States and Great Britain showed him exceptional favors while he did some of the dirtiest jobs for them? One French diplomat complained that “the American defense forces are using Victor’s planes for their logistics.” Would that make Bout an extension of someone else’s foreign policy? You bet, it would. “Is that why the condemnation of his role in the diamond wars and other conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade is being silently repudiated?” poignantly asked the PBS documentary *Gunrunners*.

The period of supposed “action” against Victor Bout coincided with the first Sadr uprising. In April 2004, Shiite firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and his Jaysh al-Mahdi militia rose in revolt against the US-led coalition in Iraq. The US forces quickly lost control of the roads and faced a serious problem. Neither supplies nor ammunition were getting through. Even the heavily fortified Green Zone was suffering from a food shortage.

According to *Mother Jones* in 2004, “Air Bas has continued to fly US military missions into Baghdad as well as the northern Iraqi air base of Balad, according to refueling records kept by the Defense Energy Support Center (DESC). DESC notes that Air Bas flights have been approved by military commanders for official government purposes.”⁷⁷

Still, in the wider scheme of things, there was something missing. I scanned through Isikoff’s *Newsweek* article again and zeroed in on a paragraph I had previously underlined. “The firms were contracted by Halliburton’s subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR).” Then, I re-read the *Los Angeles Times* story. One of the paragraphs jumped out at me. “Among the firms holding US government contracts that officials said were using the network’s services: Federal Express.”

Federal Express, I must admit, clearly took me by surprise. Could the reference to FedEx be a mistake? Then, I found a reference to it in an Argentine publication, *Edicioni*, through the LexisNexis search engine: “A Federal Express official in the United Arab Emirates said Irbis was paid \$22,000 for each of its round-trip flights.” So, then, Bout was apparently cashing in through FedEx as well by flying shipments for the US Air Force.

I went back to the *Times* story. “KBR, formerly known as Kellogg Brown & Root, is a subsidiary of Halliburton, the Houston conglomerate.”

erate formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney and holder of a massive no-bid contract for reconstruction projects in Iraq. Under pressure to move quickly on the crisis in Iraq, officials have paid little attention to the welter of subcontractors and sub-subcontractors involved in the massive reconstruction effort.”

Back in May 2003, the CIA discreetly let it be known to the Pentagon that Bout’s firms were cashing in on US-funded reconstruction efforts, but, “the warning did not reach the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) until May 2004.”⁷⁸ Another coincidence, perhaps? No, simply a well juxtaposed lie, as we now know that Air Bas was a Chichakli company and not a Bout company. After conducting its own inquiry, the CPA allowed the companies to keep flying, “saying that only military officials could terminate their contracts.”⁷⁹ The CPA was washing its hands of the entire matter.

Going over the Bout-Bush-Halliburton-KBR-Cheney-private contractor story made me wonder. When did anyone in charge become aware that supposedly one branch of the US government was offloading millions of dollars to an individual whom the United Nations, Belgium, France and another branch of the US government was trying to put in prison? “After all, it takes an internationally organized network of individuals,” according to the United Nations December 21, 2000, report, “well-funded, well-connected and well-versed in brokering and logistics, to move illicit cargo around the world without raising the suspicion of law enforcement.”

The report was insinuating that Bout is larger than life, more powerful than any nation on Earth, destined to control the world, unless he is permanently stopped. The worse it looks (meaning the “sexier” the report), the better it sells. The more attention being paid to it by the mainstream press, the greater the media frenzy and the higher the ratings. Higher ratings attract advertisers willing to spend lavishly, knowing that the American people need a daily diet of ever-present images of suffering, malnourished and dead bodies as part of a glossy propaganda campaign beamed into every living room in America.

What was never explained in any of the hundreds of articles on Bout was the sources of the sophisticated weaponry that he sold. As a retired CIA whistleblower (who had run an illicit gun trade through members of the Pakistani intelligence in the Waziristan tribal autonomous area situated between Pakistan and Afghanistan) once told me, “You don’t just walk into a weapons factory and order 15 million rounds of ammunition.” We can surmise that much of this

materiel came from the old Soviet bloc, but at least its distribution has required the connivance of Western factions.

“When the Bush administration took over,” reported Peter Landesman in the *New York Times Magazine*, “National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice told US intelligence, as far as Victor Bout was concerned, to look but not to touch.”⁸⁰ According to former intelligence officer for the NSA, Wayne Madsen, “US intelligence agencies considered Rice’s move to call off all operations, aimed at Bout to be inexplicable, given Bout’s direct links to arms smuggling to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, as well as to other areas rife with Islamic terrorist groups.”

But, the Bush administration was not the only Western government covering up for Bout. In May 2004, the French government complained, according to a *Financial Times* article, that Washington and London were not supporting a move by the UN to freeze Bout’s assets for his role in supporting Liberia’s dictator Charles Taylor. Paris also alleged that the US and Britain were permitting Bout’s firms to operate freely in occupied Iraq, including his air cargo companies being involved in supplying coalition forces.⁸¹ When Britain appeared ready to agree to put the squeeze on Bout’s operations, the Bush administration pressured London to relent.⁸²

This was sheer madness. As I examined Bout’s supposed network of international criminals, I realized that Bout had merely become the fall guy for a criminalized political structure much larger, far more hidden and more dangerous, than Bout himself. Something else dawned on me about Victor Bout. He was nothing but a creature of the post-Cold War era, the personification of disorganized crime, the exploiter of chaos – he was well funded, well connected, well versed in brokering and logistics, a highly mobile global enabler, apparently loyal to no country and with only the unadulterated motive of pure profit in mind.

But just when I thought I had reached the end, the world was treated to spectacular scenes of Bout-inspired pandemonium during his high profile arrest in Bangkok in March 2008. No, I thought to myself as I boarded a Thai Airlines Bangkok-bound flight, the world had not heard the last of Victor Bout, nor of his ragtag partners in crime.

BOUT’S ARREST

Victor Bout, an alleged international arms trafficker was arrested at the Sofitel Hotel on Silom Road in Bangkok on March 6,

2008 along with his associate, Mr. Andrew Smulian, by six officers of the US government and three Thai officers following a long-term international sting operation involving dozens of US undercover drug agents and agencies, the Royal Thai Police, the Romanian Border Police, the Romanian Prosecutor's Office Attached to the High Court of Cassation and Justice, the Korps Politie Curacao of the Netherlands Antilles, and the Danish National Police Security Services. The operation included over 200 Thai special forces operatives who immediately locked down the hotel. Bout was the man the United States government wanted most after Osama bin Laden.

Jewel in the crown. Man behind the terror. Merchant of Death. The most unsavory character alive. High priest and the foremost representative of a global potpourri of scum. After years of retracing Bout's steps, one would assume the US government would have hit the ground running in their extradition request, in what many experts felt at the time was a mere formality.

According to the official March 6, 2008, court documents, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), announced the unsealing of charges against Viktor Bout, a/k/a "Boris," a/k/a "Victor Anatoliyevich Bout," a/k/a "Victor But," a/k/a "Viktor Budd," a/k/a "Viktor Butt," a/k/a "Viktor Bulakin," a/k/a "Vadim Markovich Aminov," an international arms dealer, and his associate Andrew Smulian, for conspiring to sell millions of dollars worth of weapons to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) – a designated foreign terrorist organization.

I'm not sure of the basis of much of this information, but I do know that during Bout's extradition hearing in a Bangkok courtroom, the judge asked the DEA officers if they knew who Bout was. "Of course we do," one man replied. "I have seen the film." He was referring to a Hollywood movie, *Lord of War*, a political crime thriller starring Nicholas Cage in the role of Victor Bout, Merchant of Death.

I carefully re-read the full complaint and over 800 pages of pertinent documents. According to the Complaint unsealed in Manhattan federal court:

Between November 2007 and February 2008, Bout and Smulian agreed to sell to the FARC millions of dollars worth of weapons — including surface-to-air missile systems (SAMs) and armor-piercing rocket launchers. During a series of recorded telephone calls and emails, Bout and Smulian agreed to sell the weapons to two confi-

dential sources working with the DEA (the “CSs”), who held themselves out as FARC representatives acquiring these weapons for the FARC’s use in Colombia.

In addition, during a series of consensually recorded meetings in Romania, Smulian advised the CSs, among other things, that: (1) Bout had 100 SAMs available immediately; (2) Bout could also provide helicopters and armor piercing rocket launchers; (3) Bout could arrange to have a flight crew airdrop the weapons into Colombian territory using combat parachutes; and (4) Bout and Smulian would charge the CSs \$5 million to transport the weapons. During one of the meetings with the CSs, Smulian provided one of them with a digital memory stick that contained an article about Bout, and documents containing photographs and specifications for the SAMs and armor-piercing rocket launchers that Smulian had previously said Bout could provide.

In between his meetings with the CSs, Smulian spoke to Bout over a cell phone provided to him by one of the CSs at the direction of the DEA. These conversations between Smulian and Bout were legally intercepted by foreign authorities. During one of these conversations, Bout and Smulian discussed the \$5 million delivery fee for the weapons. Bout also told Smulian, in coded language, that the weapons requested by the CSs were ready to be delivered. Subsequent to these phone calls with Smulian, Bout engaged in multiple recorded phone calls with one of the CSs, during which they arranged the March 6, 2008 meeting in Bangkok. According to the court documents, Bout and Smulian were charged with conspiracy to provide material support or resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization.

The following day, I watched a live press conference starring the lead prosecuting US Attorney, Michael J. Garcia, who said, “Viktor Bout and Andrew Smulian agreed to arm terrorists with high-powered weapons that have fueled some of the most violent conflicts in recent memory. Today, they face charges in the United States for agreeing to provide weapons to a terrorist organization that has threatened, and continues to threaten, American interests.”

“This arms trafficker was poised to arm a narco-terrorist organization, but he now faces justice in the United States,” said DEA Acting Administrator Michele M. Leonhart. It looked like Bout’s extradition was a foregone conclusion.

Remarkably, after 533 days, on August 11, 2009, Mr. Jittakorn Wattanasin, Chief Justice of the Thai court, rejected the United States plea to extradite him.

I called James Entwistle, deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Thailand.

“Are you familiar with the full set of documents presented in the case, signed by the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice?”

“Of course, I am.”

“Point “gg” on page 10 states that ‘On or about March 6, 2008, during a meeting in Thailand, after CS-3 explained that the FARC wanted to kill American forces in Colombia, Bout indicated that the fight against the United States was also his fight and that he intended to supply the FARC with arms.’ Do you have it on tape and if you do, can I hear it?” I asked him.

“I can’t comment on that,” he shot back.

Of course.

I called Michael A. Braun (no relation to author Steven Braun), a 34-year DEA veteran who had spearheaded the Bout hunt from the beginning. Since retiring from the force, he had joined Spectre Group International as its Managing Partner. Michael Braun appears to be a poster boy of 21st century law enforcement, a gun-wielding goon with a my-way-or-the-highway, end-justifies-means attitude. It seemed to me that nothing was out of bounds for this fellow, from lying to cheating to kidnapping witnesses to forging official government documents to bribing key witnesses, all in the name of law and order, or should I say, One-World law and order.

I introduced myself and asked him about Bout’s arrest.

“Do you know if the meeting was recorded?”

“I can’t comment on that,” he said decisively.

“What happened in court?” I asked him.

“We are mystified by the ruling, to be honest with you, Daniel.”

“Why is that?”

Michael Braun explained to me the dangers of international terrorism, and the FARC in particular, to world stability.

“But the people who were allegedly buying weapons from an alleged arms dealer were not FARC, but rather US government agents.”

“In the United States, you need to show the intent of sale to *alleged* terrorists. That’s enough.”

“Except, you were not in the United States, but in Thailand,” I shot back. “And in Thailand, according to the law, you have to actually *be* FARC to show intent, not someone masquerading as FARC.”

“There is no doubt FARC are terrorists,” he replied. Michael Braun clearly “missed” my point.

“When the DEA were planning this operation, why didn’t it occur to anyone to check the local laws? I mean it looks like someone wanted this man to get off.”

“I can’t answer that, Daniel.”

Then I asked a key question.

“Michael, why didn’t the US government agree to pay Bout the \$2 million advance he asked for? I mean it would be stupid for not to pay the money when you have the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to seize both 100 anti-aircraft missiles as well as Victor Bout. Don’t you agree?”

“Hello, hello? I can’t hear you.”

All right, I thought to myself, I will pretend you can’t hear me, and you can pretend that you would really love to help, except for the bad connection.

On September 29, 2009, I emailed Braun a list of 10 questions dealing with specifics of the case, explaining the urgency of the request due to a pending deadline.

Michael

I am sorry for the bad reception. I wanted to ask you a few questions and it would be great if you find a few moments to answer them. Thank you in advance. Hope you are well.

Most of my questions involved the obvious discrepancies discussed here. One was obvious, but not yet mentioned: *Why is the DEA involved in this case?* Another was so far from obvious that it may startle you: *How did Andrew Smulian end up in the United States?*

Failing to hear from Michael Braun, special agent in charge of the Victor Bout investigation, I sent him another email one week later.

Hi Michael

This is Daniel Estulin, again. I have a feeling you might not have received my email....

As you can see my questions are very case-specific. Again, I am working on the deadest of deadlines and need to hear back from you by Wednesday of this week, meaning tomorrow. My publisher has very magnanimously extended my deadline.

I would like to add another matter to this list.

About eight months ago, one of your men by the name of Derek Odney, an assistant US District Attorney, met with a former Russian officer, a specialist in nuclear technology who was working on

Bout's defense. The meeting took place in front of the US Embassy. This two-hour meeting was photographed by your people.

How do I know? Because several of your Embassy staff are my readers.

What I imagine you don't know is that the meeting was also audio- and video-recorded by the Russians. As it turns out, the Russian officer was a lot smarter than Odney because after two hours of beating around the bush, he was able to get Odney to say on tape that you (i.e., the US) will pay him (a Russian officer) any amount of money he wants if he just gets out of the way and lets you extradite Bout. If you have the proof that Bout is the Merchant of Death, why would you compromise the entire operation in this way?

Michael, my books are read by millions around the world and my interviews are heard by tens of millions. I would very much like to get your side of it correctly. If I can't, I will just have to work with the assumptions I have, based on available information or lack of it.

Hoping to hear from you.

Daniel Estulin

Author of *The True Story of the Bilderberg Group*

After more queries, I finally received a reply from Michael Braun, on October 16, 2009, tartly claiming that he dealt only with "professional journalists," not "conspiracy buffs." Ouch! He then wished me a "wonderful weekend," with "regards." Aaah, that felt so much better!

Having failed to get anywhere with former special agent Michael Braun, I contacted Andrew Smulian's lawyer, Mary Elizabeth Mulligan. She is a partner at the New York law firm Friedman Kaplan Seiler & Adelman LLP. The company's client-list reads like who's who of the rich and famous. Certainly, some of the most powerful of the Bilderberg Group heavyweights and Wall Street were at one time or another represented by Friedman Kaplan Seiler & Adelman: Bertelsmann, Lazard Frères, and MasterCard.

As Bout's and Smulian's cases are intimately linked, I sent Ms. Mulligan an email on October 12, 2009.

Hi Mary

My name is Daniel Estulin. I understand you represent Andrew Smulian.

I am an investigative journalist working against the dearest of deadlines on a book. One of the chapters deals with Victor Bout. I am in Bangkok, so I am very familiar with the case....

Amongst other things, I would love to find out how did Andrew make it to the United States?

Again, Mary, I am working on a deadline. My books on the Bilderberg Group have sold millions of copies around the world. My work is followed by tens of millions.

Let me know when it might be convenient to speak to you. If there is anything I can do to help you in your case from here, please let me know.

Daniel Estulin

In less than twenty-four hours, I received Ms. Mulligan's reply: "No comment." Hoping against hope, a couple of days later I tried another tack.

Mary

In the real world we would be playing on the same team. Your client and Bout are in the same boat, sort of. The difference is that Bout is going to go free and your client will be imprisoned, unless, of course he is a government agent.

Michael Braun, former DEA agent in charge of Bout's investigation and currently employed as a senior partner with Spectre told me he had nothing to say when I asked him how Smulian got to New York....

I have a lot of very valuable information to offer your client in his defense. Information, that will most surely get him off.

Needless to say, in the real world, a lawyer looking after the client's best interests would jump at a chance to talk to me.

Do you?

Hope you are well.

Daniel

I have not heard back from Mary Mulligan.

Andrew Smulian's first court appearance took place on March 10, 2008. Since then, there has been a virtual lockdown on any information about him. Bout has been in court over a dozen times in the same span of time, every one of his appearances followed by a media frenzy. Yet, the mainstream press has been suspiciously silent on Andrew Smulian. Why?

There was something else that bothered me about Smulian's camp. Why would a powerful Wall Street law firm defend the in-

terests of someone who is by most reports a penniless, low-life gunrunner, one of the “potpourri of scum” as Michael Braun called them. Compassion? Gosh, can you imagine! Were they actually planning on beating the United States government in court? Smulian was being accused of *conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization*. That’s at least a decade in the slammer, by my calculations. What if Mary Mulligan and her people were making sure he was safely delivered into the waiting arms of Uncle Sam? After all, if the entire Bout case is a farce, as has been shown thus far in Thai court and in my book, you wouldn’t want Smulian represented by an honest lawyer, truly working on Smulian’s defense. The fact that the United States government always knew that Bout, the so-called Merchant of Death, had no rockets to deliver to anyone, be it the FARC or Santa Claus, must forever remain hidden from the susceptible masses. Otherwise ... No, there won’t be an otherwise. That’s why one of Wall Street’s most prestigious firms is there, marking territory.

I gave it one last shot. On October 20, 2009 I emailed Brendon Robert McGuire, who has represented the US government in its proceeding against Smulian.

Hi Brendan

My name is Daniel Estulin. I am an investigative journalist working against the deadead of deadlines on my new book. One third of the book deals with Victor Bout and Andrew Smulian.

Since we haven’t heard anything about Mr. Smulian lately, I wanted to ask you if the US government and Smulian are negotiating a plea bargain?

Also, can you tell me when is Mr. Smulian’s next court appearance?

Finally, I would love to know how Mr. Smulian made his way to New York. If you have the time, I would love to interview you for my book.

Thank you ahead of time
Daniel Estulin

I wasn’t holding out much hope, but Mr. McGuire surprised me and responded the following day. He stated that Yusill Scribner, of the Southern District of New York US Attorney’s press office, was being assigned to assist me “to the extent possible.” Less than three hours later, I received a follow-up email from Mr. Scribner, supply-

ing the docket sheet and “waiver of indictment” in the case of US v. Smulian. He also asked for my phone number and a “convenient time” when we might be able to chat.

I replied immediately, hoping that my very relevant questions would for once, be answered.

Yusill

Thank you very much for your reply. Probably the easiest thing to do is for me to send you a list of case-specific questions re Smulian/Bout. Once I have your answers I will most definitely call you.

1. How did Andrew Smulian make it to New York?
2. How much of your success in Smulian’s prosecution depends on whether Victor Bout is acquitted or convicted?
3. Where are the weapons Bout and Smulian were allegedly willing to sell to the undercover DEA agents posing as the FARC?
4. Why didn’t the US agree to pay Bout the \$2 million he allegedly demanded as an advanced payment? Wouldn’t it make it easier to prosecute them both if you actually had something concrete to show as evidence? The reason I ask is that in a Thai court the US had no evidence of Bout’s transgressions. Doodles and a map do not count.

5. Why is the DEA involved in the case?

6. What is Derek Odney’s role in the case? The reason I ask is the following:

About eight months ago, Derek Odney had met in Bangkok with a former Russian officer, specialist in nuclear technology who was working on Bout’s defense. The meeting took place in front of the US Embassy. This two-hour meeting was photographed by the US people. What I imagine Derek doesn’t know is that the meeting was also audio- and video-recorded by the Russians. As it turns out, the Russian officer was a lot smarter than Odney because after two hours of beating around the bush, he was able to get Odney to say on tape that the US government will pay him (a Russian officer) any amount of money he wants if he just gets out of the way and let’s the USG extradite Bout. If the government’s case against Bout and Smulian is airtight, why would Derek compromise the entire operation in this way?

Furthermore, how can I arrange to see Mr. Smulian in prison for an interview? I emailed Mary Mulligan, but she is away on business until October 26.

Hope you are well.
Daniel

Six days later, I received the all-to-familiar reply: “No comment.” Also included was an invitation to “feel free to email or call” regarding any “follow-up.” How can I “follow up” on no information? That was the end of that.

All the detours had only led to one more “Dead end.... Road out.... Proceed at own risk.”

THAI FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Court’s decision was called “a bitter blow” by the US government, but seeing what transpired throughout the case, it could only have been expected. Most significantly, the Public Prosecutor states that the Defendant was allegedly “involved in conspiracy to commit crime with ‘FuerZas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejercito del Pueblo’ (FARC).” Unfortunately for the prosecution, this is a non-starter, because, as appears from the materials of the actual case-file, Victor Bout was not dealing with any real person from FARC, but rather with a group of agent-provocateurs (all of them American nationals, none of them Colombian).

Of course, as one would expect in a sting, it was not Bout who approached the phony FARC operatives in the first instance. The DEA ops masquerading as FARC first approached him, with offers to buy *a plane*. This was later presented as soliciting “portable anti-aircraft missiles and other war weapons.” And over the course of the Thai proceedings these morphed into “guided ballistic missiles,” as the latter description appears in the Public Prosecutor’s appeal.

What is absolutely clear is that Bout was not involved in a conspiracy to commit a crime with FARC in Thailand, as claimed by the Public Prosecutor, because *under Thai law* one can not enter a conspiracy with someone who is only *impersonating* a conspirator. Phantom FARC was joining phantom evidence, phantom journalism, phantom sources and not-so-phantom-but-equally-absurd walled compounds and multiple passports.

The Thai police from the Crime Suppression Division, acting on an explicit request of Mr. Derek Odney, one of the American DEA agents in Bangkok, have investigated Bout in connection with the Penal Code of Thailand, Section 135. They spent 33 days on their inquiry into the events, but were unable to discover sufficient evidence to prosecute Bout in a Thai court.

The actual points the Public Prosecutor appeals against the judgment of the Court of First Instance are haphazardly concocted of half-truths. The Public Prosecutor has claimed that all four counts of the offences alleged against the Defendant in the United States are also considered crimes in accordance with the law of the Kingdom of Thailand. Bout's defense team rather easily dismissed these claims.

Consider counts 1 and 2: "Conspiracy to kill US nationals" and "Conspiracy to kill officers and employees of the US." How was this to be done? Why, through the acquisition and use of the alleged missiles by FARC of course. But these counts fail for the reason discussed above: the alleged FARC conspirators were imposters.

Count 3, "Conspiracy to acquire and use anti-aircraft missiles," fails for the same reason, but also has an even more glaring defect. Though an offence under US law, which prescribes a sentence of at least 25 years up to life imprisonment, *no such or similar crime is defined in Thai law*. Can this really have been simply a bonehead move on the part of US authorities? The acts were committed in Thailand, Thai law does not prohibit the acts, case closed.

Count number 4, "Conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization," provides another interesting window on the case. This is indeed a crime under the penal code of both countries – the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand (Section 135 of its Penal Code). In fact, as noted, Thai authorities investigated the charges leveled against Bout there. Their investigation has led to no charges against him, but the extradition proceedings, now under appeal by the US, have made clear that the Thai judicial system stands ready to prosecute him under its own laws should appropriate evidence be found. Again, why would US officials not anticipate this?

The American agents were unable either to catch Victor Bout, the alleged Merchant of Death, red-handed with missiles destined for the FARC or to seize any single missile that could be traced back to him. When the US government went to court, not even one anti-aircraft missile was produced as evidence. Thai courts recognized the obvious: It is not possible to conspire to kill anyone with a missile if you do not have a missile.

The court proceedings in Thailand have been a disgrace. If only the American people knew what was being done in their name. The

Three Stooges could have done better on their worst day. Unless, of course, we are playing with a marked deck of cards, and the Victor Bout diversion is just another stop in the endless parallel universe of lies and deception.

There are too many unanswered questions in the whole scenario. Where are the missiles? Why did the US government go into court empty handed, asking the Thai court to take them at their word? Why didn't the DEA pay the \$2 million as Bout had allegedly asked when they had already spent in excess of \$30 million trying to capture him? The acceptance of the payment would seal his fate. Why didn't they trace the origin of the missiles? Why didn't anyone double-check the Thai laws for compatibility?

In the light of the above considerations, it is absolutely irrelevant if the FARC were indeed a truly political organization, or a truly terrorist organization, just as it doesn't matter if the Thai government recognizes the FARC as a terrorist organization or not. The logic of the case under Thai law, bound with total absence of physical anti-aircraft missiles, exonerates Bout and precludes his extradition to the United States. This is something that former DEA agent-in-charge, Michael Braun, apparently refuses to acknowledge.

How can the US government not have foreseen this? Another coincidence, perhaps? The mere fact that alleged FARC terrorists were proven to be true-blue American DEA agents and the mere fact that these American agent-provocateurs were not able to seize a single anti-aircraft missile alleged to belong to Bout are enough reason to dismiss the accusations against him and for the Thais to refuse the extradition request.

But, there is more. Just when it appeared the Thai courts might acquiesce and extradite Bout to the United States, the Colombian government, following the United States' official request, sent the Thai court a 607-point brochure on the dangers of the FARC. The Colombian Foreign Minister lecturing the Thai judiciary on the possible inadequacy of Thai laws? If you wanted to antagonize someone, can you think of a more ingenious way of doing it? I can't.

Then, there is the overriding question of morality. Does the United States, today, have the international moral authority to be taken at its word? Perhaps not.

Consider Dutch timber merchant, Gus Kouwenhoven, charged, at the request of the United States, with arms smuggling and war crimes in Liberia in the 1990s. The UN's Expert Panel Report on Sierra Le-

one alleged Gus Kouwenhoven to be “part of [former Liberian president Charles] Taylor’s inner circle, responsible for the logistical aspects of many of the arms deals.” On June 7, 2006, Kouwenhoven was sentenced in the Netherlands to 8 years in jail for arms smuggling. The allegations were later found to be groundless, when the UN Court of Appeal in The Hague acquitted Kouwenhoven of all charges on March 10, 2008, and sharply criticized the work of the prosecution. The Dutch government had already acknowledged that the Kouwenhoven trial was ridden with false accusations, bribing of witnesses, and gross mismanagement of justice by the Dutch courts.

Then, there is the case of United States vs. Cassin Abdullah Kati and Al Baraka International Foundation, who were sanctioned, persecuted, and prosecuted because the US government alleged to have evidence that these entities were spearheading terrorism and terror groups around the world. On September 3, 2008, the European Court of Justice ruled that the allegations presented as evidence by the US government were false. The European Court of Justice ordered the members of the EU to disregard the UN sanctions placed upon these entities.

And conversely, on October 27, 2009, the French courts convicted a power-elite-connected group that had flaunted a UN embargo, selling \$790 million dollars worth of arms into the Angola civil war arena between 1983 and 1998. The group included a son of the late French president Francois Mitterrand, Jean-Christophe Mitterrand; a “Russian-Israeli businessman,” Arkady Gaydamak; a French arms dealer, Pierre Falcone; and scandal-plagued right-wing politician and former French Interior Minister, Charles Pasqua. This was at the time and in the arena focused upon by UN investigator Johann Peleman. Yet with all the resources at his disposal, not one word appeared about these power-elite arms smugglers. Instead those resources focused strictly upon Bout, beginning his demonization.

At one point during Bout’s last court appearance in September 2009, against the guard’s objections, I moved to the front row and sat next to him, to his left. He acknowledged my presence with a nod. For several seconds neither one of us said anything.

“Victor,” I whispered, leaning my head in his direction, “if there is one thing you could wish for now, what would it be?”

There was a very long pause. “Home.” All traces of a smile left his lips.

The images were there, the indescribable moments remembered, but until this very moment, they had been pushed out of his life only to rise up and attack him whenever the memories refused to stay buried. He closed his eyes. How he wished for oblivion, for temporary reprieve, if only long enough to drown his sorrow and have the nightmare recede. A veiled, vacuous look passed his face and Victor Bout turned around and looked at me. Then, he smiled.

“Do you know that joke about the Moon and the Russian President?” he asked in Russian.

To his right, the Russian consul moved his large body sideways to hear it. Two Russian journalists walked in and sat in the last row, talking quietly.

Time is a true narcotic for pain. Either the pain disappears when it runs its course, or the person learns to live with it. The pain had not disappeared, but I could tell Victor Bout sensed that there was going to be an end to his confinement.

What a world we live in. Competing nation-state propaganda and psychological warfare operations tell us black is white and white is black, these lies and misdirections create gray areas, the operative realm of the Shadow Masters. For when governments operate in extreme secrecy, allowing their intelligence agencies to operate with impunity and beyond oversight, then the noble ideals of statecraft may be hijacked by the Men behind the Curtain, playing nation-states against each other in a Hegelian dance of conflict and resolution.

The terrorist attacks on American soil in 2001 were nurtured by a far greater menace than simple blind hatred acted out by Islamist insurgents from their Afghani and Pakistani hideouts. These acts come from beyond the two-dimensional landscape of opposing sides presented daily by the pundits and talking heads. These shadow plays disrupt our lives with blatant corruption, loaded agendas, and continually spin us from one “crisis” to another. This aberration, like a hidden monster, drives many acts, whether ushered from right-wing Christian fundamentalist groups, oil company board rooms, Wahhabi mosques, lobbying firms and think tanks in Washington and New York, private banks in the emirates of the Persian Gulf, Hasidic-run “blood diamond” centers in Europe and New York, or arms depots of the former Warsaw Pact.

This sinister influence is confirmed by an epic number of “coincidences,” and documented connections, among the CIA, the United Nations, the DEA, the FBI, Interpol, Belgian and British authorities, the United Nations, Christian fundamentalists and Russian-Israeli mob interests. The engine driving many world-changing events is not ideology, not religion, not politics and certainly not patriotism. And money does seem to motivate many players – willing pawns of those who lust for control of humanity’s future.

Once any large-scale military venture, be it “legitimate” or terrorist, acquires significant *funding*, greed will compete to supply its needs.

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