

By Dennis Loo

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Peter Ludlow has an essay over at *The New York Times*' series The Stone entitled "[The Banality of Systemic Evil](#)"

.” His title is a takeoff on the phrase “the banality of evil” made famous by Hannah Arendt’s description of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann in her much cited 1963 article “

[Eichmann in Jerusalem](#)

.” Arendt observed that Eichmann was just an ordinary man who committed great acts of evil by merely performing what is expected of him within an evil system. Evil, in other words, is not a maniac as someone like Hitler is usually depicted as, but a product of system’s logic. As Eichmann’s stated at his trial, “I was just following orders.”

Ludlow’s starting point is a recent *Time Magazine* cover story that notes that 70 percent of those 18-34 years old think Edward Snowden “did a good thing” in leaking information about what the NSA is really doing. As an example of those who think the very opposite to this, Ludlow cites comments by former UN Ambassador John Bolton, an infamous liar and neoconservative, instrumental in lying about the grounds for Bush’s invasion of Iraq as well as many other events, who [fumed](#) at Snowden’s actions back in June 2013:

"Number one, this man is a liar. He took an oath to keep the secrets that were shared with him so he could do his job. He said ... he would not disclose them, and he lied. Number two, he lied because he thinks he's smarter and has a higher morality than the rest of us. This guy thinks he has a higher morality, that he can see clearer than other 299-million 999-thousand 999 of us, and therefore he can do what he wants. I say that is the worst form of treason."

It’s true that Snowden *did* act out of a higher morality than that of the system that employed him. Bolton believes in a different standard for morality.

Let’s walk through Bolton’s two given reasons for despising Snowden. I want to use this

discussion as a basis for a wider ranging discussion. **Bolton is a useful idiot in this case: his logic, shared by the leaders of both the Republican and Democratic Parties and the dominant perspective in mainstream media (MSM) but they won't come out and be quite as blatant as Bolton**

First, Bolton calls Snowden a liar for violating his oath to keep the secrets his job required him to keep. Evidently, when you take an oath to uphold the Constitution this includes refusing to be a whistleblower when you learn that terrible lies and criminal practices are being carried out! This is particularly wonderful for Bolton to claim given his other comments about his own work and that of others who work in and for the government. Here is what [he said](#) in 2010 on Fox Network:

John Bolton: I want to make the case for secrecy in government when it comes to the conduct of national security affairs and possibly for deception when it's appropriate. Winston Churchill said during WW II that in wartime, truth is so important that it should be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies. [\[i\]](#)

Interviewer: Do you really believe that?

JB: Absolutely.

Interviewer: You would lie in order to preserve the truth?

JB: If I had to say something that I knew was false in order to protect American national security I would do it.

So Bolton is actually angry at Snowden for telling the truth, not for being a liar, since what he's really exercised about Snowden is that he didn't *continue to lie* about what he was doing. This, of course, makes Bolton's claimed anger at Snowden for being "a liar" simply dishonest. Lies, according to Bolton, in service to "national security"

are
lies but they're

necessary

lies. He and others - unlike that turncoat Snowden - are part of that “bodyguard of lies.” One of the bodyguards broke ranks; that is what rankles Bolton.

Second, Bolton says that Snowden “lied because he thinks he's smarter and has a higher morality than the rest of us... that he can see clearer than other 299-million 999-thousand 999 of us, and therefore he can do what he wants.” There are two ways to approach this. First, let's look at it from Bolton's own stated perspective based upon his own public comments in 2010 and 2013.

In the 2010 Fox News interview cited above, Bolton said that people in government *should* lie because they are operating in an “anarchic environment” of international affairs.

Interviewer: Why do people in the government think that the rules of society or the laws don't apply to them?

JB: Because they are not dealing in the civil society we live in under the Constitution. They are dealing in an anarchic environment internationally where different rules apply.

Remember that this is coming from someone whose most important career posting was to represent the U.S. at the United Nations, a body supposedly devoted to upholding international law. According to Bolton, people in government are telling lies for the nation's better interests and are making up rules that they view as superior to the official rules that govern everyone else. Foreign policy people don't use the ones that people are taught in school about how our system of government works, the ones articulated in newspaper editorials or what Presidents declare in their nationally televised speeches.

People in the U.S. government are, in other words, *elevating themselves above the group if they're doing what Bolton says they should* .

By his own words

, Bolton himself and the others like him who make up that “bodyguard of lies” are ergo guilty of “the worst form of treason.”

The other way to look at his comments is his claim that anyone who dares to depart from the group's behavior is guilty of the worst possible sin. If this were true, then humanity would probably never have survived as a species. We are not particularly fierce physically compared to other animals. We manage to be at the top of the food chain only because of our intelligence, creativity, and opposable thumbs. But these skills of innovation, discovery, science, art, development of weapons, and progress (however you define progress) can only occur because certain individuals come to see things differently from the average group member and struggled to popularize their innovations *in the face of group skepticism or hostility* so that this more advanced approach can be taken up by others and spread, elevating the survival prospects for everyone. Artists, inventors, scientists and scholars would be guilty of "the worst form of treason" because they broke ranks from groupthink. Whistleblowers would be traitors, which of course, is the stance that the Obama Administration takes towards whistleblowers and investigative journalists: they're all "the worst form of treason."

What Bolton is really arguing for, when you strip it down to its logical elements and lay bare in it that which is actually consistent and not self-contradictory, is this: those who rule must and should operate by a different set of rules than the *hoi polloi* and those rules dictate that there be group solidarity among the ruling elites to deceive the general public. Elites must act as if they know better than the rest of the people, because they do in fact know better than the people, but they must surround their actual beliefs and practices behind a curtain of lies.

If you look at what those who govern us from both major parties do, you can see that this is in fact how they operate. Bolton's not an accomplished orator like Obama but the two agree on the rules that they operate by. Obama knows better than the blunt-talking Bolton how to surround his policies with a bodyguard of lies that make his actions sound different than, and frequently exactly the opposite of what, they are.

What does this all lead to? If you regard the way that the existing system operates as terribly wrong, then the solution to this is not to try to convince those in power and those who aspire to power that they should see things differently. They will not take you seriously and will lie to you and tell you things that they think you want to hear, such as promising to change things from within because they share your dismay about how things are done now, so that they can get back to the business of exercising power in the interests of this exploitive system.

The bottom line is that all systems and the individuals within those systems are governed by system logic. To understand how those systems work you must pay attention to and probe them for their internal logic, not just their rhetoric but how they actually function internally and what the system's outcomes consistently are. Not all systems are governed by the logic of

having its bureaucrats and leaders carry out crimes. A system that is devoted to unleashing rather than suppressing the conscious dynamism of the people is distinguishable from a system that says it's for "democracy" but really wants people to be no more than at most endorsers of what those who really rule offer them. People actually participating in all the arenas of society – politics, economics, sports, arts, science, and so on – and actually making decisions about their lives and ours collectively would be dramatically different than the way that the current system operates.

In a just system, in contrast to our current system, the way that whistleblowers are treated would be dramatically different. In a system that does not rest upon exploitation and plunder and therefore does not need to lie constantly about what's really going on, whistleblowers would be genuinely protected and given full opportunity to tell what they know to the whole public unfiltered by a censoring mass media and censoring officials. That way, everyone can judge the validity of what they are saying and changes, where warranted, could be made.

I devote considerable attention to these questions in [Globalization and the Demolition of Society](#). While I cannot do full justice to the depth and complexity of these issues in one article, I am going to excerpt parts of that discussion here.

How can the people exercise real political power over decisions that affect their society and world? Since representatives are a necessity for many decisions, the nature of such a real democracy would have to include at least two specific elements in order to amount to something more than what we ordinarily (or invariably) see in governments: first, the pay and privileges of representatives would have to be the same as that of ordinary citizens (so that the privilege of public service would be not one that can be pursued for personal gain); and second, the populace would have to be consistently well-informed about the cardinal issues of the society so that they could exercise choices sensibly rather than being objects to be manipulated. Both of these outcomes are unimaginable short of a revolutionary change in the society. This point bears repeating: short of a revolutionary reconstitution of the society that directly involves the masses of people in effecting such change, talk of democracy will carry as much real meaning and accurately describe the policy-making process as well as the myth of Santa Claus explains the appearance of gifts on Christmas morning. (GDS, Pp. 251-2)

But running a society solely by "experts" would not result in a good society because of what this would mean: the subordination and dependence of the broad ranks of the people. Mass participation in the cardinal questions of society represents something vitally important in and of itself, because popular participation means that people are involved in the processes that

affect them. Moreover, their involvement is necessary if the historic inequalities between those in leading positions and those who are the ruled are to be eventually overcome.

How do we handle the contradiction between those who lead and those who are led? Having explicitly acknowledged the distinction between leadership and the led, you must still confront the problem of how you can prevent those who lead from using their positions to deceive the led and perpetuate and even expand the gap between themselves and those they lead. Simply declaring that “the people” are in charge and creating all kinds of institutions and procedures that are supposed to ensure that they are “in charge” do not prevent privilege and domination from occurring. Declaring that a pit bull is kid friendly does not make it so. De facto power can override de jure power at any time. (p. 255)

Proper leadership commits itself to raising the level of understanding of the led so that the led can increasingly become leaders themselves. For a kind of mass participation to prevail that will eventually supersede the very word “democracy,” two things must happen: leaders must play a larger role in leading others in ways that raise the led’s grasp of what is going on in the society as a whole, and the led must resist the temptation to settle into lives of indifference. Instead, the led must themselves become masters of their and our collective fate. (p. 259)

What so infuriates Bolton about Snowden’s actions was that Snowden refused to join him and the others in lockstep conformity to the illegal, immoral, and unjust practices and utter [contempt](#) that those in authority have for the mass populace. Snowden, instead, took the path of most resistance instead of the path of least resistance, abandoned a cushy job and risked his life:

[Asked](#) what led to the moment where he would engage in his act of whistleblowing he said, “I don’t want to live in a world where everything that I say, everything I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of creativity or love or friendship is recorded. And that’s not something I’m willing to support; it’s not something I’m willing to do; and it’s not something I’m willing to live under.”

Snowden added that anyone who opposes this would have an “obligation to act in a way they can.” He watched and waited. He hoped some figure in a position of leadership would act to “correct the excesses of government” but that was not happening.

Even if Snowden *had* been only one of 300 million, it still would have been right for him to do what he did. And because of what he did, he precipitated a change that would not have occurred had he not acted. The 70% of 18-34 year olds who said he did the “right thing” would not have happened because they would not have known in the first place but for Snowden’s revelations that the NSA and Obama were scooping up everything and lying about it.

Further, as Kevin Gotzstola [reported](#) on August 9, 2013:

[O]n July 10, [a poll](#) [July 20, 2013] (also conducted by Quinnipiac) found a “a massive shift in attitudes” as 40-45 percent of voters considered government’s anti-terrorism efforts to go “too far in restricting civil liberties, a reversal from a January 14, 2010,” poll by Quinnipiac where 25-63% said “such activities didn’t go far enough to adequately protect the country.”

Snowden decided that he had to act, even though he knew exactly what retaliation was in store for him because he had worked within the intelligence community and knew how they operate and think towards dissent and critical thought – that is, they make no bones about adhering to “due process” and the First Amendment, they’re out to get rid of dissenters. That’s their way. There is another way and what we need now is more people who are willing to step away from the lockstep groupthink that authorities want to preserve as a prerequisite that their rule and this system’s injustices can continue. As those relatively small numbers of people step away from the stifling conformity to immoral policies happens, the basis for more and more people to do likewise grows dramatically. This isn’t just hype. This is how social dynamics work. This is how history is made.

¹ The Churchill quote verbatim is “In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”