

Protest letter of Roger Lippman for not request to proceed with the invitation of Mr. Michael Parenti (supporter of war criminal Slobodan Milosevic and genocide denier) as guest speaker for the Peace Center's 31 May fundraising event

Dear Colleagues,

As a peace and justice activist for almost 50 years, I am writing to encourage you to cancel the planned speech by Michael Parenti.

Parenti and his co-thinkers have, for nearly two decades, carried on a campaign of disinformation about Milosevic's aggressive wars that led to Yugoslavia's dissolution. Like Milosevic, they blame the victims, particularly the Muslim populations of the former Yugoslavia. In this campaign, they have constructed an alternative reality that reverses the facts. They deny Milosevic's killing and displacement of huge parts of the Bosnian population, creating large ethnically homogenous territories in order to seize Bosniak land. Milosevic conducted a similar campaign against the Albanian majority in Kosovo, with Parenti again in alliance with Milosevic.

Why do Parenti et al engage in this behavior? Some think of Parenti as an intellectual leader of the Left. But he is stuck with several fundamental misconceptions, which leave him incapable of comprehending what went on in Yugoslavia, especially since he is no expert on the subject.

Some of the attitudes underlying the positions of Parenti and his collaborators include:

The enemy of our enemy is our friend. The US was involved on one side, so we must be on the other. This simplistic reversion to Cold War thinking just doesn't work in today's more complex world - if it ever did. Now, we are going to have to think for ourselves. Regional fascists may run afoul of US interests, in places like ex-Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Iran, but that doesn't mean that progressive forces should act in solidarity with such dictators. A strong critique can be made of the Western role in Bosnia and Kosovo, but not by denying the guilt of the war criminals. The Left needs to develop a coherent and honest understanding of this issue, and not just leave that effort to liberals and imperialists.

Milosevic was the last defender of socialism in Europe, under attack by capitalists who wanted socialism dispensed with there once and for all. In fact, Milosevic fomented ethnic conflict to consolidate his own power. To finance his wars, he and his post-communist elite were plundering and selling off the social wealth created by working people during the Tito era.

The crimes committed against Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians were not that bad. "Only" tens or hundreds instead of thousands were killed, expelled, displaced, raped. Of course Parenti can't deny that these things took place, so he tries to minimize them, against all evidence, and blame the attacks on the victims. This is shameful, and a person engaged in such denial is not suited to be honored by a progressive organization. I'm not advocating censorship of Parenti, but that your organization consider the impact upon the survivors that such an

endorsement would have, and the attendant loss of respect for your group among those with humane values.

Those who blame the Milosevic forces are just propagandists for imperialism. The documentation by international experts, United Nations judicial bodies, human rights advocates, and more than a few anti-imperialists is vast and credible. It cannot be dismissed by allusions to US lies in justification of intervention elsewhere.

Of course, as in any war, there were people on both sides who did bad things (even in Vietnam). When one lacks a clear grasp of right and wrong, of victim and victimizer, those details can overwhelm the bigger picture. The Yugoslav wars may have been more complex than many others that the Left has had a position on. But never have I seen such a campaign of disinformation on the part of western Leftists as in this instance (though the Maoist endorsement of Pol Pot in the late 1970s comes close).

Parenti's position is not honest, and it is not radical. It is an abject endorsement of war crimes and war criminals by a mouthpiece for Milosevic. I hope Parenti's position on Milosevic's crimes will cause you, as it has caused me, to question Parenti's broader politics. He may not be "one of the nation's leading progressive political analysts," as you advertise, after all.

You have been barraged with disinformation from the likes of Diana Johnstone (another non-scholar of the situation) and with various other collections of lies from the 1990s that won't go away (such as the endorsement of the March 1999 CPM statement that was recently circulated by e-mail). I realize that it is difficult to become an expert on the issue, but a reliance on fundamental principles should guide you well: solidarity with the victims, no sympathy for the war criminals. Beyond that, I and others who have been engaged with this issue for many years will be happy to consult, answer questions, and refer you to our sources.

You will find the work of numerous scholars at the website Balkan Witness (which I have edited for 13 years). It is primarily focused on Kosovo, but it also includes a Bosnia section. In both conflicts we find the same cast of characters on the side of the war criminals - the perpetrators and the deniers/defenders/apologists. Please see <http://balkanwitness.glypx.com/>. It is firmly based in documented fact and eyewitness reports.

Regards,

Roger Lippman
Seattle