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The murderous history of USAID, the US Government agency behind Cuba's fake Twitter clone



By Mark Ames
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NEWS

“In a number of countries, including Venezuela and Bolivia, USAID is acting more as an agency involved in covert action, like the CIA, than as an aid or development agency.” —[Mark Weisbrot, Center for Economic and Policy Research](#)

Last week, we learned from the [Associated Press](#) that USAID (United States Agency for International Development) — the government agency which manages billions in overseas “humanitarian” aid programs — plotted to overthrow Cuba’s communist regime via a covertly-funded fake Twitter platform.

The idea was to get Cuba’s youth to sign up for ZunZuneo (Cuban slang for the sound hummingbirds make—get it?) without anyone knowing about USAID’s involvement, get the kids hooked on pointless tweeting, collect all sorts of data on the users, and then rile them into an anti-regime rage — a “Cuban Spring” revolution.

Presumably the US government had been studying Twitter’s ability to supercharge its users with outrage vapors here in the Free World, where legions of credulous idiots spend their waking hours chasing the outrage dragon. It was only a matter of time before some DC spooks and Northern Virginia contractors would see the angles.

Of course, the ZunZuneo plan failed. ZunZuneo collapsed, a bunch of money went missing (likely into the coffers of the Castro regime’s state-controlled telecoms firm, or so they say), and the Communist Cuban menace still threatens the Free World’s slick underbelly.

What really seems to be weirding people out here is the shock realization that USAID — the nice, humanitarian, democracy-promoting arm of American idealism — also engages in sleazy regime-change and subversion. The sorts of nefarious covert activities folks normally associate with the CIA.

Not that this is news to PandoDaily readers, of course: Earlier this year, we broke [the story](#) about USAID co-investing with [Omidyar Network](#) in [Ukraine NGOs](#) that [organized and led](#) the Maidan [revolution](#) in Kiev, resulting in the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich. That revolution hasn’t turned out so well — thanks to the “success” of the USAID-Omidyar-funded revolution, there’s talk of the West going to war with nuclear-armed Russia, Ukraine is losing entire chunks of territory like the proverbial leper on a waterslide, Kiev is run by a coalition of [costume-party fascists](#) and a handful of [billionaire Mafia dons](#)—and Vladimir Putin has never been [more popular](#), or more tyrannical.

Given USAID’s “success” in Ukraine, perhaps we should be thankful that ZunZuneo failed as miserably and comically as it did.

For me, there wasn't anything all that surprising about the recent USAID revelations. I spent over a decade in Russia and the former Soviet Union, and witnessed for myself the good, bad and ugly that USAID funded—mostly the bad and the ugly. I assumed that most reporters already understood what USAID gets up to overseas, often alongside private nonprofits like those run by Soros, Gates, Rockefeller, Ford and more recently, [Omidyar](#).

The truth is, USAID's role in a covert ops and subversion should be common knowledge—it's not like the record is that hard to find. Either USAID has developed those Men In Black memory-zappers, or else—maybe we don't want to remember.

This selective amnesia doesn't do anyone else any good however, so I figured it might be useful to offer a brief look back at some of USAID's darkest, ugliest moments. It's important to note that not everything USAID does is patently evil — in fact, there are many programs that could even be described as good. But USAID, as with any agency of American power, is fully capable of and will continue to be an instrument of geopolitical and corporate force.

As Big Tech becomes increasingly intertwined with USAID's missions around the world — particularly as USAID's programs and language merge with the [lexicon](#) and interests of Silicon Valley (such as "[Global Development Lab](#)," USAID's new "[DARPA-like](#)" research arm) — now's a good time to refresh our memories about USAID's dark past.

I should warn you: some of what follows is horrifying.

1. Dan Mitrione and The Office of Public Safety (OPS):

“The precise pain, in the precise place, in the precise amount to achieve the desired effect.” —Dan Mitrione, USAID official

Of the many dark-red blotches in USAID's record, none compares to the agency's Office of Public Safety (OPS) program — and its most notorious official, Dan Mitrione.

Brief background: After the end of World War Two, America emerged as the de facto inheritor of the Europeans' empires, a role America quickly grew to enjoy. The Marshall Plan offered an imperial blueprint on how America's dominant wealth and aid could manipulate the internal political futures of our Allies like France and Italy, where American aid was key in keeping Communists from taking power.

USAID grew out of programs like the Marshall Plan, but the agency itself wasn't established until 1961 under President Kennedy. Under Kennedy's reorganization, a police training program set up under President Eisenhower, the Office of Public Safety (OPS), was placed under USAID's authority. The OPS had been set up in 1957 to train friendly overseas police forces how to be more professional, more democratic, less corrupt, more like us — but in reality, the OPS was essentially a CIA proxy, headed by

an agent [named Byron Engle](#), its ranks covertly sprinkled with CIA spooks in hotspots across the globe.

Former New York Times correspondent A. J. Langguth wrote that the “the two primary functions” of the USAID police training program were to allow the CIA to “plant men with local police in sensitive places around the world,” and to bring to the United States “prime candidates for enrollment as CIA employees.” [[“Police Program is Called CIA Cover,” New York Times, May 7, 1978](#)]

Dan Mitrione wasn't a CIA man himself. Mitrione was a small-town cop and a family man from Richmond, Indiana, who joined the FBI, and was sent to Brazil in the early 1960s under USAID's Office of Public Safety to train the fledging democratic government's police force. A few years later, in 1964, a [US-backed coup](#) overthrew Brazil's democratically-elected president Joao Goulart, and installed a right-wing military dictatorship that ruled for the next two decades, with largesse from USAID's coffers, and vital training and equipment supplied by USAID officials like Mitrione.

By the end of the 1960s, when Mitrione left for Uruguay, USAID had trained over [100,000 of Brazil's police](#) in the dark arts of rule-by-terror; another 600 Brazilian police were brought to the US for special USAID training in explosives and interrogation techniques.

Brazil's military dictatorship murdered or disappeared hundreds of dissidents, and tortured and jailed thousands more. Among those tortured: a Marxist student named Dilma Rousseff, arrested in 1970 and subjected to beatings to her face that distorted her dental ridge, and electrical shocks from car batteries, resulting in the [hemorrhaging of her uterus](#). Today, Rousseff is Brazil's president — and she's not too [happy](#) about the NSA tapping her phones.

The junta also [murdered](#) one ex-president in a staged car accident in 1976. Another ex-president who allegedly died of a heart attack in 1978 is now [believed to have been poisoned](#).

With Brazil successfully pacified, in 1969 Dan Mitrione was transferred to a new hotspot: Uruguay, which was reeling under the increasingly popular left-wing Tupamaro rebels. After taking his post as the new head of USAID's police training mission in Uruguay, Mitrione secured a house in the capital Montevideo, and personally soundproofed the cellar. Mitrione thoroughly tested the sound-proofing by blasting Hawaiian music from a stereo in the cellar, and standing out on the street to listen; and later, by having one of his trainees fire a pistol inside his soundproofed cellar while Mitrione stood at different points on his neighborhood street.

Once satisfied, Mitrione began teaching human anatomy and the human nervous system to the elite Uruguayan police officials hand-picked by USAID for counter-insurgency training in America. Then — according to a CIA double-agent secretly working for Cuba, Manuel Hevia, and corroborated by journalist A. J. Langguth —

Cuban 'Agent' Says U.S. Police Aides Urged Torture

By ALAN RIDING

Special to The New York Times

HAVANA, Aug. 4 — A Cuban, who said that he had infiltrated the Central Intelligence Agency as a "double agent" and was sent to work in Uruguay, charged today that United States police advisers routinely recommended the use of torture for interrogation purposes there in the early 1970's.

Manuel Hevia Cosculluela, 44 years old, who said that he worked for the C.I.A. between 1962 and 1970, charged that an American official, Dan A. Mitrione, personally tortured four beggars to death with electric shocks as part of his interrogation course for Uruguayan policemen in 1970.

Mr. Mitrione, head of the United States Agency for International Development's public safety program in Montevideo, was killed by Uruguay's Tupamaro guerrillas following his kidnapping in 1970. At the time, the State Department denied charges by leftists that Mr. Mitrione had participated in torture.

But you ask me whether any American

Mitrione, was not part of 'our program' — he never referred directly to the C.I.A. — but had worked very closely with 'our program' in Brazil."

Mr. Hevia, who attended high school at Watertown, Conn., in the early 1950's and speaks perfect English, said that Mr. Mitrione's interrogation courses involved the use of electric shocks, special chemicals and modern psychological techniques against detainees.

Academic Approach to Torture

"The special horror of the course was its academic, almost clinical atmosphere," he said. "Mitrione was a perfectionist. He was coldly efficient, he insisted on economy of effort. His motto was: 'The right pain in the right place at the right time.' A premature death, he would say, meant that the technique had failed."

Mr. Hevia said that early in 1970 he was told by Havana to prepare to return. "The last time I talked to Mitrione was in his home one evening over drinks," he recalled. "He said that he considered interrogation to be a complex art. First you have to soften up the detainee with blows

less. No questions, just blows and insults. Then just silent blows."

C.I.A. Refuses Comment

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 4 — A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency, asked for a response to the charges made in Havana, said that the C.I.A. did not customarily comment on allegations about operational activities.

Many Previous Reports

After Mr. Mitrione's killing in 1970, there were many unconfirmed reports, circulated principally by leftists in Uruguay, that he had participated in the torture of political prisoners.

A recently published book, "Hidden Terrors," by A.J. Langguth, quotes Uruguayan police sources as having said that Mr. Mitrione helped supply torture equipment, offered the police suggestions on techniques and was present when suspects were tortured. It cites no direct evidence that Mr. Mitrione had taken part in torture, and said that prisoners' stories about his participation "usually were

Mitrione began performing gruesome live torture demonstrations on homeless beggars plucked off the streets of Montevideo. Four of Mitrione's human guinea pigs were tortured to death, including one woman — according to Hevia, testing on street beggars was something Mitrione learned to do while training Brazil's police.

In Langguth's book about Mitrione and USAID's torture programs, "Hidden Terrors," he quotes Hevia's eyewitness account of Mitrione's live torture demonstrations:

"As subjects for the first testing, they took beggars, known in Uruguay as bichicones, from the outskirts of Montevideo, along with a woman from the border with Brazil. There was no interrogation, only a demonstration of the different voltages on the different parts of the human body, together with the uses of a drug to induce vomiting — I don't know why or for what — and another chemical substance.

"The four of them died."

Mitrione taught local police specialized forms of electroshock torture, introducing wires so thin they could fit between the teeth and gums. He also demonstrated drugs that induced violent vomiting fits, and advised on psychological tortures, such as playing tapes of a woman and child screaming in a room next to the interrogation room, and telling the detainee those are his wife and child. And it was all done under the aegis of USAID.

Hevia eventually wrote about his experiences with the CIA, and gave [few interviews](#) about his experience serving as a Cuban double-agent inside the CIA, an assignment that brought him face to face working with Mitrione. In a 1978 [New York Times article](#), Hevia is quoted saying,

“If you ask me whether any American official participated in torture, I’d say yes, Dan Mitrione participated. If you ask me whether there were interrogations, I’d say no, because the unfortunate beggars who were being tortured had no way of answering because they were asked no questions. They were merely guinea pigs to show the effect of electric shock on different parts of the human body.”

Hevia made a point of not blaming Mitrione, who was “only carrying out policy.” But Hevia was clearly bothered by Mitrione’s cold, technocratic approach:

“The special horror of the course was its academic, almost clinical atmosphere. Mitrione was a perfectionist. He was coldly efficient, he insisted on economy of effort....A premature death, he would say, meant that the technique failed.”

In 1979, the Times’ A. J. Langguth, who had resisted believing witnesses’ testimony about Mitrione’s torture sessions until then, described in a wrenching Times article, [“Torture's Teachers,”](#) how he was finally forced to accept the awful truth after he was able to corroborate Manuel Hevia’s story:

We can read the accusations, even examine the evidence and find it irrefutable. But, in our hearts, we cannot believe that Americans have gone abroad to spread the use of torture.

Mr. Mitrione has become notorious throughout Latin America. But few men ever had the chance to sit with him and discuss his rationale for torture. Mr. Hevia had once.

Now, reading Mr. Hevia’s version, which I believe to be accurate, I see that I too had resisted acknowledging how drastically a man’s career can deform him. I was aware that Mr. Mitrione knew of the tortures and condoned them. That was bad enough. I could not believe even worse of a family man. A Midwesterner. An American.

Langguth — today professor [emeritus at USC’s Annenberg J-school](#) — quotes directly from Mitrione’s own words:

“When you receive a subject, the first thing to do is determine his physical state, his degree of resistance, through a medical examination. A premature death means a failure by the technician.

“Another important thing to know is exactly how far you can go given the political situation and the personality of the prisoner. It is very important to know beforehand whether we have the luxury of letting the subject die . . .

“Before all else, you must be efficient. You must cause only the damage that is strictly necessary, not a bit more. We must control our tempers in any case. You have to act with the efficiency and cleanliness of a surgeon and with the perfection of an artist . . .”

Mitrione took over the USAID police training program in Uruguay in 1969, and within months, the country was racked by allegations of widespread torture and police abuses. In 1970, Uruguay's Senate opened an investigation and [heard testimony](#) from tortured men and women who'd been subjected to electrocutions, genital mutilation and psychological torture.

As things heated up in 1970, Hevia was recalled back to Havana to end his years working as a Cuban mole inside the CIA. Before leaving Uruguay, Hevia had one final meeting with Mitrione:

“The last time I talked to Mitrione was in his home one evening over drinks. He said that he considered interrogation to be a complex art. First you have to soften up the detainee with blows and the usual abuse. The objective was to humiliate the victim, separating him from reality, making him feel defenseless. No questions, just blows and insults. Then just silent blows.”

In August 1970, Tupamaro rebels kidnapped Mitrione and demanded the release of 150 Tupamaro rebels in exchange for freeing him. Publicly, the Nixon Administration's position was not to negotiate with terrorists. Ten days after Mitrione was kidnapped, his dead body was discovered in the trunk of a car.

Recently declassified cables show that behind the scenes, the Nixon Administration pushed hard to free Mitrione, not through negotiation, but through threats of terror. Nixon's people pushed their Uruguayan counterparts to threaten to kill not only the Tupamaros prisoners in their custody, but also to hunt down the prisoners' relatives and kill them too. As reported in the National Security Archives, after Mitrione's body was discovered, Uruguayan authorities did exactly [as Nixon's people demanded](#):

The nine documents posted today by the National Security Archive contain evidence that the Government of Uruguay unleashed death squads activity in the wake of Mitrione's execution, and that the United States was aware of these extra-judicial operations.

* * * *

2. Other Offices of Public Safety (OPS's)

“At one time, many AID field offices were infiltrated from top to bottom with CIA people. The idea was to plant operatives in every kind of activity we had overseas, government, volunteer, religious, every kind.” —John Gilligan, director of USAID under Jimmy Carter [quoted in [William Blum's book “Killing Hope”](#)]

Multiply Dan Mitrione's story by all the other Dan Mitrione's working in all the other USAID Offices of Public Safety that we rarely hear about, and you start to get a sense of how small USAID's failed Twitter revolution in Cuba is by the agency's standards.

A few more examples of other USAID police training ventures through the Office of Public Safety:

— The Vietnam War: USAID trained police and ran civilian jails. USAID also participated in the “soft” side of the Phoenix Program — funding the failed [“Land to the Tillers”](#) program granting peasants small plots of land, a program that has a poor track record, but serves some important foreign policy/propaganda purpose every time it’s rolled out because it remains one of the most enduring boondoggles in the USAID kit.

-- Laos: In 1967, USAID Co-funded with the CIA a suspected private opium airliner, Xieng Khouang Air Transport. Later, as the CIA-backed Hmong were under attack from Lao Marxist rebels and North Vietnamese forces, USAID forcibly resettled Hmong families in the line of their advance to protect the pro-US government in Vientiane. According to Albert McCoy’s classic investigative book, “The Politics of Heroin,”

“Knowing that the Hmong fought better when their families were threatened, USAID ... seemed intent on keeping them in the area for a final, bloody stand against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao...Since USAID decided where the rice was dropped, the Hmong had no choice but to stand and fight.”

—Guatemala: By 1970, USAID trained over 30,000 Guatemalan police to suppress local leftists, according to [William Blum’s book](#) “Killing Hope.” Just over a decade later, Guatemalan death squads under US-backed dictator Rios Montt unleashed a [genocide](#) on the Mayan peasants.

According to Victoria Sanford's "Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala," USAID programs [supported](#) the death squads as they carried out the genocide:

Though the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) claimed complete dissociation from the army’s security operations (which were veiled in development language) in fact AID provided several million dollars to the army’s rural security.

...During the Guatemalan army’s successive campaigns of genocide against the Maya, international aid continued to flow into Guatemala. Whether by design or through willful ignorance, U.S. AID, U.S. Food for Peace, UN WFP, private voluntary organizations (now called NGOs—nongovernmental organizations), and the countries of Israel and Taiwan provided financial, technical, and material support to the Guatemalan army.

—El Salvador: According to NYU historian [Greg Grandin](#), in El Salvador, where 75,000 were killed between 1979 and 1992,

“[I]n the early 1960s agents from the State Department, Green Berets, CIA, and USAID organized two paramilitary groups that would become the backbone of that country’s death squad system.”

In the brief window between Watergate and the Church Committee, Democratic Sen. James Abourezk managed to shut USAID’s police training program down. Which meant

that from then on, USAID would have to be a tad more subtle.

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3. Haiti:

After populist left-wing candidate Jean-Bertrand Aristide won the first democratic elections in Haiti in 1990, USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy began pouring funds into opposition groups opposed to Aristide. Noam Chomsky [writes](#):

Aid for “democracy promotion” sharply increased, directed to antigovernment, probusiness groups, mainly through the US Agency for International Development (USAID), also the National Endowment for Democracy and AIFLD (the AFL-CIO affiliate with a notorious antilabor record throughout the Third World). One of the closest observers of Haiti, Amy Wilentz, wrote that USAID’s huge “Democracy Enhancement” project was “specifically designed to fund those sectors of the Haitian political spectrum where opposition to the Aristide government could be encouraged.”

A few months later, in 1991, Aristide was overthrown in a coup.

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4. Peru mass-sterilization:

In the early 1990s, Alberto Fujimori won Peru’s presidency, and quickly imposed harsh shock therapy measures that impoverished millions. Peru’s impoverished masses weren’t responding to shock therapy the way Fujimori and the neoliberal consensus thought they should. So Fujimori — currently in prison for [crimes against humanity](#) — decided the only way to cut poverty among the indigenous population was to cut the number of poor indigenous people. Literally.

Between 1996-98, the Fujimori regime [forcibly mass-sterilized](#) some 300,000 women, mostly indigenous peoples in the Andes and Amazon regions. Fujimori’s mass [forced-sterilization program](#) is one of only two such national programs known since the end of World War Two. And yes, it received enthusiastic funding from USAID, which [donated](#) \$35 million to the program.

* * * *

5. Russia:

There were many ways to transform Russia in the 1990s, but thanks to funding from USAID, the path chosen was the most brutal and [disastrous](#) of all: Shock therapy, mass privatization, and the mass [impoverishment](#) of 150 million people. As [Janine Wedel](#) and my former eXile partner [Matt Taibbi](#) documented, [USAID funding and support](#) empowered a [single “clan”](#) from St. Petersburg led by [Anatoly Chubais](#), who oversaw

the complete destruction of Russia's social welfare system, and the handing over of lucrative assets to a tiny handful of oligarchs.

Under [Chubais' stewardship](#), Russia's economic output declined some 60% in the 1990s, while the average Russian male life expectancy plummeted from 68 years to 56 years. Russia's population went into a freefall, Russia's worst death-to-birth ratio at any time in the 20th Century — which is amazing when you think that USAID's privatization program had to compete with the ravages Hitler, Dzerzhinsky and Stalin wreaked on Russia.

USAID funded Chubais through public-private organizations and a [Harvard program](#) that was so patently corrupt, Harvard and its program directors including economist Andrei Shleifer were [sued](#) by the US Department of Justice for "[conspiring to defraud](#)" the US government (not to mention Russians). USAID also paid public relations giant [Burson-Marsteller](#) to sell the disastrous voucher program to the Russian public, in a mass media advertising blitz that [promoted Chubais' political party](#) on the eve of parliamentary elections. It was this [USAID funded privatization](#), and the USAID-backed Russia "democrats," which soured Russians on market capitalism and democracy (renamed "dermokratsia" or "shitocracy" in Russian).

Since Putin came to power and American influence waned, USAID and other privately-funded NGOs have focused on exposing widespread corruption and election fraud— areas that were of little interest to the same aid groups in the Yeltsin era.

* * * *

6. Palestine:

In 2006, the Washington Post revealed a covert \$2 million USAID propaganda effort to help the "moderate" Palestinian Authority's [election bid against Hamas](#):

The approximately \$2 million program is being led by a division of the U.S. Agency for International Development. But no U.S. government logos appear with the projects or events being undertaken as part of the campaign, which bears no evidence of U.S. involvement and does not fall within the definitions of traditional development work.

U.S. officials say their low profile is meant to ensure that the Palestinian Authority receives public credit for a collection of small, popular projects and events to be unveiled before Palestinians select their first parliament in a decade. Internal documents outlining the program describe the effort as "a temporary paradigm shift" in the way the aid agency operates. The plan was designed with the help of a former U.S. Army Special Forces officer who worked in postwar Afghanistan on democracy-building projects.

Yes, just another "temporary paradigm shift." Because as we know, under normal circumstances, USAID would never, ever act so secretly. That's not what USAID is

about. Just ask the users of ZunZuneo.

[illustration by Brad Jonas for Pando]



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