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We can't trust White House Syria claims

Jim Bovard
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The administration needs to learn from the past and tell the whole truth.



President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry are adamant that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack on Syrian civilians last month. They have thus far provided the public scant hard information to back up their claims. Even Obama ally Sen. Tom

Harkin (D-Iowa) characterized the evidence in a Sunday Capitol Hill classified briefing as "circumstantial."

Perhaps the Assad regime did commit this brutal attack. But can we expect the U.S. government to be honest about an alleged atrocity which the president is invoking to sanctify his foreign policy?

History is not reassuring on that score. During World War II, the Roosevelt administration worked ceaselessly to present Soviet dictator Josef Stalin as a friendly quasi-democratic type - "Uncle Joe." However, in 1940, after the Soviets seized much of Poland, the Soviets executed 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals in the Katyn Forest in western Russia. When the German army discovered the mass grave site in 1943, the Roosevelt administration rushed to blame the killings on the Nazis.

Whitewashing the Katyn Forest massacre helped blindfold both American policymakers and the American public regarding the brutality of the Soviet Union. This deceit helped the Soviets cement control of Poland and other East European nations after World War II.

Last year, the National Archives finally declassified a thousand pages of documents that exposed the U.S. government coverup of Soviet responsibility. The Associated Press noted, "The White House maintained its silence on Katyn for decades, showing an unwillingness to focus on an issue that would have added to political tensions with the Soviets during the Cold War." The record showed that the U.S. had plenty of proof from 1943 onward that the Soviets were guilty. But when Polish-American radio stations in Detroit and Buffalo began broadcasting the details of the killings during World War II, the Roosevelt administration "brusquely silenced them," as historian Thomas Fleming noted in his book, *The New Dealers War*.

Last year's revelations happened in large part because of pressure from Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur, whose Ohio district includes many Polish Americans. It took 69 years for the U.S. government to disclose that it had deceived the American people regarding one of World War II's landmark atrocities.

If it takes as long to find out what the U.S. government knew regarding recent alleged Syrian attacks, we will not have the full story until 2082. And perhaps our descendants will not even learn the truth then unless there are members of Congress who bludgeon the facts out of the government's archives.

Despite the government's past deficit of candor, many Americans desperately want to believe the Commander in Chief. But the timing is awkward for Obama. Three months ago, a series of leaked documents on the National Security Agency illegal spying on Americans began hitting the newspapers. Obama sought to douse the controversy by publicly proclaiming that the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court is "transparent" - a bizarre characterization for a secret court which applies secret law and policies. He later ludicrously denied that the U.S. government has a "domestic spying program" (except for all those Americans' emails and phone records the agency copied and warehoused).

Is Obama more honest on Syria than he has been about the NSA? Perhaps the administration would label the answer to that question a "state secret." The Obama team has repeatedly invoked the "state secrets" doctrine in federal court to block exposure of its most controversial policies - such as the targeted assassination program that zeroes in on American citizens overseas. If the Obama administration feels entitled to withhold details on its killing of Americans, why should anyone expect full disclosure regarding a foreign regime's alleged killing of its own citizens?

America cannot afford another "trust me" war based on secret evidence.

Lies subvert democracy by crippling citizens' ability to rein in government. Citizens are left clueless about perils until it is too late for the nation to pull back. And regardless of Obama's lofty invocations, there is no such thing as retroactive self-government.