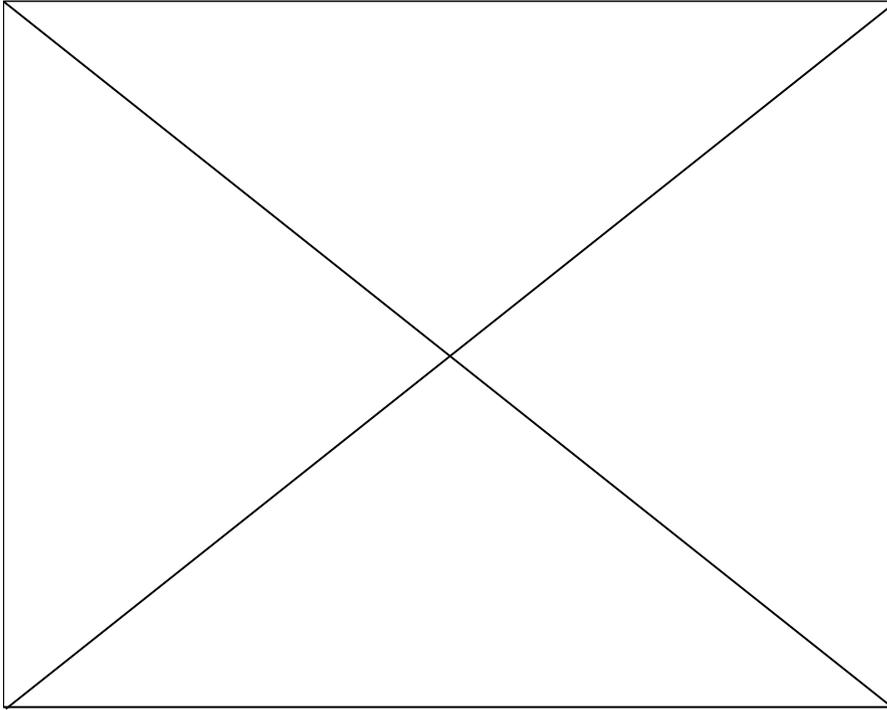


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African Dictatorships and Double Standards: Where is the International Criticism Over US-Allied Equatorial Guinean Leader Teodoro Obiang?

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As world attention is fixed on Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, there has been hardly any outcry from the international community about the dire human rights situation in another African country—Equatorial Guinea—where Teodoro Obiang has ruthlessly ruled for nearly thirty years. Obiang has been called the worst dictator in Africa, but since vast oil and natural gas reserves were discovered in the mid-1990s, he has become a close US ally. We speak with Ken Silverstein of *Harper's Magazine* and Frank Ruddy, who served as US ambassador to Equatorial Guinea during the Reagan administration. [includes rush transcript]

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Guests:

[Ken Silverstein](#), Washington editor of *Harper's Magazine*. He also publishes a blog on political corruption in Washington, D.C. called "Washington Babylon."

[Frank Ruddy](#), former ambassador to Equatorial Guinea under the Reagan administration.

Rush Transcript

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JUAN GONZALEZ: In recent months, world attention has been transfixed on Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe. Today, the United Nations Security Council is expected to vote on targeted sanctions on Mugabe and thirteen of his chief supporters.

Meanwhile, there has been hardly any outcry from the international community about the dire human rights situation in another African country, Equatorial Guinea, where Teodoro Obiang has ruthlessly ruled for nearly thirty years. In a recent election, his party won 99 percent of the vote.

Obiang has been called the worst dictator in Africa, but since vast oil and natural gas reserves were discovered in the mid-1990s, this small West African nation has become a close ally of the United States.

In 2006, the Bush administration reopened the US embassy in Malabo. When Teodoro Obiang visited Washington that same year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described him as a “good friend” of the United States.

Meanwhile, major oil corporations, including ExxonMobil, Hess, Marathon and Chevron, have been investing millions in the country. Equatorial Guinea has also benefited from ties to Washington banks and lobbyists. The D.C.-based Riggs Bank helped Obiang’s government hide hundreds of millions of dollars in overseas accounts. And John McCain’s chief adviser, Charlie Black, once ran a lobbying firm that represented Equatorial Guinea on Capitol Hill.

AMY GOODMAN: Unlike with Zimbabwe, the political and human rights situation in Equatorial Guinea has received little media attention. When President Obiang’s party won 99 percent of the vote in disputed elections in May, no major US news outlet reported on the results.

The only recent coverage of Equatorial Guinea has centered on the trial of Simon Mann, the former British mercenary who was just sentenced to thirty-four years in jail for plotting to topple the government in 2004.

Today, we’re joined by two guests who have been closely monitoring the situation in Equatorial Guinea. Ken Silverstein is the Washington editor of *Harper’s Magazine*. Frank Ruddy served as US ambassador to Equatorial Guinea during the Reagan administration.

We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!* Ken Silverstein, can you set the stage for us? Explain what happened. Even where is Equatorial Guinea? And what happened in 2004?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Well, Equatorial Guinea is a small West African state. There’s an island off the mainland, and then there’s a small square of land on the continent itself. It’s a country that for years and years and years was just completely ignored. I mean, there was—the dictator before Obiang was in some ways even more ruthless, but no one really paid attention to what was going on there, and the United States closed its embassy in 1996, I believe, in part because of death threats against our then-Ambassador John Bennett, who I believe succeeded Frank.

And then, lo and behold, not long after that, American oil companies discovered vast reserves in Equatorial Guinea, and suddenly, ever since then, beginning with Clinton and then very, very quickly under Bush, there has been a backtracking, because \$5 billion—at least \$5 billion in American oil investments have poured into the country. And so, now Equatorial Guinea has become the third largest oil producer in Sub-Saharan Africa, major US investments, very close friend of the United States government, and so now there’s a little bit more importance given to Equatorial Guinea.

In 2004, there was a coup attempt in which a small group of mercenaries had hoped to quickly overrun the security forces. It’s a very small country. I mean, it really was straight out of *Dogs of War*, the Frederick Forsyth novel, where you had a small band that was going to seek to overthrow the government. And then, as you said, Simon Mann, who is alleged to have been the leader of the coup attempt, was just sentenced to thirty-four years.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, as I understand it, the country now has one of the highest per capita incomes, average per capita income in Africa, yet about 60 percent of the people, even in the major cities, don't have running water. Why has it gotten so little attention, in terms of problem countries in Africa?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Well, there's no question that a lot of it has to do with the relationship with the US government and the fact that the American media simply takes its lead in setting the foreign policy agenda from—you know, where the President points, journalists follow.

Now, it's a small country, admittedly. Also, we do have other big international issues going on. There's Iraq. There's Iran. We could list a few others. I'm not suggesting that Equatorial Guinea should be on the front page of the newspapers every day, but the fact that it's just almost completely ignored.

And as you mentioned in your introduction, we just—they just held these utterly bogus elections, you know, in which the opposition is completely shut out and the government wins 99 percent of the balloting. I mean, next to the elections in EG, Zimbabwe looks like Sweden. And yet, Zimbabwe, because the Bush administration has pointed its finger there and said, "Oh, you know, we cannot accept this situation," and, more importantly, because Zimbabwe is not a major oil exporter, in my view, anyway, this accounts for the rather obvious difference in coverage. I mean, the US is a friend of Equatorial Guinea; nobody really cares. The government doesn't say anything, and so journalists don't pay attention. And Zimbabwe, to the contrary, is considered an enemy, and there's a lot of uproar in the US government and also other Western governments, especially in Britain. And so, journalists pay much more closer attention.

I mean, it's sort of classic hypocrisy, and it's really embarrassing for the media to be so complicit in simply ignoring what is really one of the great tragedies of Africa. I mean, you've got a dictator who's been there for over thirty years. He's one of the—you know, total denial of human rights, total crook. He's been, you know, exporting hundreds of millions of dollars. His family has grown completely rich. Can't say it's a unique story, but it's certainly an ugly one that deserves some attention.

AMY GOODMAN: He's the wealthiest leader in Africa, has two mansions in Maryland here in the United States worth about a billion dollars. The oil revenues—rich in oil, Equatorial Guinea—going to, well, just him and his cronies?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Oh, you know, it's one of these situations where the overwhelming share of the money goes to Obiang, to his family and to his cronies. I mean, you're talking about—there are only half a million people or so in the country. There is a tiny, tiny, tiny elite. And I remember talking to John Bennett, the former ambassador before Frank, and I'm sure Frank knows much more about this than I do, but Ambassador Bennett said every single transaction in that country involved a cut to the president and the ruling family. I mean, in terms of monitoring the traffic at the port in Malabo, everything that came in and everything that went out, whether it was cement or foodstuffs or—you know, everything—everything that came in and out, there was a cut for the president and the ruling family.

I mean, when the money—I did a story at the *LA Times* when I was there, before going to *Harper's*, back in 2003 about the enormous amount of money that the president had under his direct control, and sometimes in his direct bank accounts at Riggs Bank, which subsequently was—went under and was bought by PFC. But, you know, there was no way to account for all this funding. I mean, based on this—I could never get a straight answer about what the president's salary was, or his son, who is the minister of environment and generally known as “the minister of chopping down trees.” That's the other major source of corrupt income in Equatorial Guinea, is logging, which the son controls. And then another son, I think, is at the—heads the oil ministry. I mean, every key position is held by the family of Obiang and the closest cronies, you know, whether it's the uncle or the brother-in-law or whatever. Those two figures, in fact, run the security forces, as I recall. So you've got a—I'm sorry, you've just got a situation where it's a tiny group, the money is going into their pockets. It's a clear situation where international attention is called for, and yet there is none.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to break and then come back to former ambassador to Equatorial Guinea, Frank Ruddy, who was the ambassador during the 1980s for President Ronald Reagan. Then we're going to talk about some of John McCain's campaign advisers. And finally, we'll be joined by Dennis Banks, the co-founder of the American Indian Movement. He has just completed, along with a number of others, a five-month walk, the Long Walk—the Longest Walk, from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, The War and Peace Report. We'll be back with Ken Silverstein and Ambassador Frank Ruddy in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: Our guests are Ken Silverstein, Washington editor of *Harper's Magazine*, and Frank Ruddy, the former ambassador to Equatorial Guinea under Ronald Reagan in the mid-1980s. Juan?

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, Ambassador Ruddy, you were there before oil was discovered in Equatorial Guinea, but Obiang was still there as the dictator back then. Could you talk about your experiences and how you've seen the country evolve once oil was discovered there?

FRANK RUDDY: Yeah, good morning. Yeah, happy to do that, yeah. There was no oil, and Obiang, while he certainly was not saintly at that time, there were some instances of torture and things like that. We had to write up an annual human rights report, and there were some abuses there. But once the oil came in, he changed completely. I mean, the whole regime changed completely. It was always a kleptocracy, but there was a lot more to steal once the oil was there. So it degenerated very quickly with the arrival of oil and with the greater opportunities.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the role of the oil companies, Ambassador Ruddy—the companies like Chevron, the companies like ExxonMobil—and the role they've played in shoring up Obiang?

FRANK RUDDY: Well, first of all, let me just mention to you that I used to be counsel for Exxon before I went to Washington in the '80s. I just want to make that clear.

But the companies themselves are looking for oil there, as they're looking for oil everywhere else. They're looking for a stable regime, so that they can do their business. And just how much they've had to do with carrying out some of these terrible policies of Obiang, I frankly don't know. Generally, I can speak—well, I can't speak for Exxon, but I can say that Exxon is not the kind of company that would willingly engage in these kinds of things, but they may have been manipulated. How much or at all, I simply can't say, because I don't know that.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, Ambassador, there's been a lot of attention, obviously, in recent years to the situation in Zimbabwe and the legitimate criticism of what is going on in terms of President Mugabe, yet, as we mentioned earlier, almost no attention to what's going on in Obiang's country and also to the degree that the President Bush administration has embraced this government. Your sense and your response to that?

FRANK RUDDY: Well, a couple of things. There's an interesting nexus between Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea in this recent Mann affair, in as much as he was more or less kidnapped—they use the word “extradition”—from Harare to Malabo. And, of course, there was a sort of an agreement there, obviously, and it wasn't done in the normal sense. As a matter of fact, the lawyer that the Mann family had chosen for—to defend Mann in Equatorial Guinea, someone named Ponciano Mbomio, was—received some death threats and actually was denied permission to exercise his profession in Guinea, so he can't represent him, and he's now a *desaparecido*—he's disappeared, and nobody seems to know where he is.

In any event, I think what Ken said—and you're lucky to have Ken, because he's so knowledgeable in this area—what Ken said is right, that the tradition there in Zimbabwe, since the time he was using his—Mugabe was using his ninjas—going back, you know, fifteen, twenty years—to carry out his will in Zimbabwe is something that's well known, and his abuses are well known, and he doesn't have much justification. A person who's probably not very popular with your audiences, the recently deceased Senator Jesse Helms, more or less predicted exactly what was going to happen with Mugabe in Zimbabwe. And unfortunately, what he said has come to pass.

In the case of Equatorial Guinea, the United States has acted shamefully. We have basically, for reasons of realpolitik, treated a dictator, a killer, a thief, with the greatest respect. Condoleezza Rice recognized him as such when she received him at the State Department as a great friend of the United States. And that, as an American citizen, as just a human being, disgusts me. He's not the kind of person that should receive any honors from the United States. He's a killer. He's a murderer. He's a torturer. And he's a thief. And he—

AMY GOODMAN: Do you, Ambassador Ruddy, have the ear of George W. Bush?

FRANK RUDDY: I'm sorry, I didn't hear that.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you have the ear of George W. Bush or Condoleezza Rice, as a former ambassador under the Republican President Ronald Reagan?

FRANK RUDDY: No, I don't. As a matter of fact, we're conservative, which is something that George Bush is not, so, no, we're not terribly welcome over in this White House. And that's too bad, because—but it's not something he doesn't know. You know, Bush is not a stupid man. I mean, he's aware of what's happening, and this is the decision they've made. They decided that the oil is worth it, so they're going to cast a blind eye to what's going on over there in Equatorial Guinea for the results. It's realpolitik. It's gone on for as long as there's been diplomacy and relations between states. It's disgusting, and it's sad, but it's—it is realpolitik. That's what the word means.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And, Ken Silverstein, can you talk to us about the role of Charlie Black, a chief adviser to John McCain, in terms of his role in Equatorial Guinea?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Well, his firm had the account for Equatorial Guinea. I confess I don't recall what Charlie Black's own role was. I remember that there was a woman named Riva Levinson who did a lot of work on behalf of Equatorial Guinea, and she was affiliated with that firm, but I think the client actually at the time was an oil company called Trident, which was subsequently bought up, but which had a big stake in Equatorial Guinea. So she was lobbying for the oil companies there. And then Riva Levinson went on to lobby for Ahmed Chalabi, as it turned out, and the Iraqi National Congress.

But Charlie Black's firm—Black, Manafort—it's had various names over the years, but it has always represented some of the world's worst dictators. It represented Mobutu in Zaire, Marcos in the Philippines, Jonas Savimbi in Angola, and it did represent at one point directly Equatorial Guinea, as well. There was a piece in *Spy* magazine many, many years ago in the 1980s, which was called "Voices of the Damned," and it was about sort of the most unethical foreign lobbyists, and Charlie Black's firm was rated the worst of the worst. I mean, you know, it had—*Spy* magazine used this sort of "bloody hand" ranking, and I think Charlie Black's firm had "four bloody hand" ranking, which was the highest of any of the firms. I mean, and that included, you know—I mean, he outdid someone like Edward von Kloberg, who had represented Saddam Hussein and Ceausescu in Romania and a number of other really horrible regimes. So the fact that Black, Manafort still took the prize really says something.

AMY GOODMAN: And his company's name?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Well, it's now called Black, Manafort, I think. It's changed over the years. It was Manafort—Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly. There have been partners coming in and partners going out. But, you know—and I think Charlie Black technically has, you know, disassociated himself from the firm, technically, during the campaign. I'm sorry, I lose track of, you know, the various firms, because actually it's Davis Manafort. It's Rick—now it's Davis Manafort. I guess that's because Charlie Black is gone. It's very hard to keep track. There have been four or five different names of this firm, because the partners change all the time. And then, when they go to work, as these are very, very powerful men, very powerful within the Republican Party, the various lobbyists who have worked at Black's firms, they then—when they go to work for a campaign, they like take a leave of absence, and then they go off and work for a campaign. So I think Charlie Black is actually on leave at this point.

AMY GOODMAN: From BKSH?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: OK, right, right. Black, Kelly, Scruggs & Healey, I think, is—yeah, right. Sorry about that. Davis—I get mixed up, because there are so many lobbyists around McCain. It's hard to keep track. Davis Manafort, these guys used to work with Charlie Black, I think, but now they have their own firm. Rick Davis was the campaign manager, and Paul Manafort, I don't believe has a direct role, but very close to John McCain. Yeah, I mean, there are just—you know, there are lot of firms and dozens of lobbyists who are surrounding McCain and who, you know, have very high roles in his campaign, just like his—

AMY GOODMAN: I just wanted to go for a minute, as we talk about Charlie Black's past in lobbying, to play a clip of John McCain being interviewed in June by Chris Wallace on Fox News.

CHRIS WALLACE: Let me ask you one last question. David Axelrod said you talk,—

SEN. JOHN McCAIN: Sure.

CHRIS WALLACE: —in a speech today, about changing the way Washington does business, but your campaign is run by two of the biggest lobbyists in Washington. How do you respond to that?

SEN. JOHN McCAIN: Look, those—they are not lobbyists. But the fact is, Americans care about my vision and plan of action for the future, that I can unite the country, that I can take on the challenges that are facing them now, which are enormous. And that's what elections are going to be about.

AMY GOODMAN: Ken Silverstein, your response?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Well, I mean, it's fairly ridiculous. I mean, these guys are lobbyists. They're still very plugged in. I mean, Charlie Black was caught making phone calls from McCain's bus on behalf of clients before he took this formal leave. I mean, it would be as if I took a six-month leave to explore my life's dream of becoming a painter and then was planning on coming back and started saying I was a painter, as opposed to a journalist. I mean, these guys are two of the most important lobbyists in town. The distinction they're making is ridiculous. You know, they're working for the campaign, and if the campaign wins, they're going to be much, much more effective lobbyists, and they will return to lobbying. And if the campaign loses, they'll still be important lobbyists in town; they just won't have the same access they might, because Obama would be president, as opposed to their guy, McCain. So, it's ridiculous.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to go back to Ambassador Ruddy. Stephen Zunes wrote an interesting piece called "African Dictatorships and Double Standards," where he talked about the power the United States has over Equatorial Guinea, as opposed, for example, to Zimbabwe. He first talks about the oil companies and said, "Though the Chinese have also recently begun

investing in the country's oil sector, U.S. companies ExxonMobil, Amerada Hess, Chevron/Texaco, and Marathon Oil have played the most significant role. A report by the International Monetary Fund notes that U.S. oil companies receive 'by far the most generous tax and profit-sharing provisions in the region.' Congressional hearings recently revealed how U.S. oil companies paid hundreds of millions of dollars destined to state treasuries directly into the dictator's private bank accounts. A Senate report faulted U.S. oil companies for making 'substantial payments to, or entering into business ventures with,' government officials and their family members."

And he goes on to say, "The irony of the relative silence of Congress and the Bush administration regarding the human rights abuses and the undemocratic nature of Obiang's regime is that, due to the critical role of U.S. economic investment and security assistance, the United States has far more leverage [over] the government of Equatorial Guinea than it does [over] Zimbabwe."

And he talks about how "Equatorial Guinea receives U.S. government funding and training through [IMET, which is] International Military Education and Training Program. In addition, the private U.S. firm Military Professional Resources Incorporated [MPRI]—founded by former senior Pentagon officials who cite the regime's friendliness to U.S. strategic and economic interests—plays a key role in the country's internal security apparatus."

What can the Bush administration do, given the amount of money—and Congress—that is going into, directly from the United States, Equatorial Guinea?

FRANK RUDDY: Well, I just have to bring up a little anecdote. When I was there, we had provided—the UN Navy had provided the government of Equatorial Guinea with a patrol boat, which they actually needed, because there are so many islands there. The very first act that they committed with that patrol boat that we gave them—within a day—was an act of piracy on the high seas. So that kind of gives you a flavor for the kind of government you're dealing with there.

Yes, we do have—we do certainly have a lot of leverage with them, in one sense, in terms of the money that has been invested there and the controls that we have with various programs. On the other hand, to some degree it's a seller's market. There's a lot—there are a lot of countries that are vying for that oil. The Chinese, for example, are very interested in the oil in Equatorial Guinea, and they're not the only country, so that we have to be aware—and I think that's one of the military concerns that this country has, is that we have to be aware of who else is looking to that oil and who else is going to use it and what happens if they do get that oil, so that the leverage is not simply the kind of leverage we have in an ordinary country in a non-crisis situation. But with the oil crisis around the world today, it's not—we can cut off certain programs, we can do this and can do that, but the point is, they are able to kind of cock a snook at us and say, "Well, you know, if you want to do that, we have other people that can fill in and take your place very quickly." So it's not quite the leverage it might seem to be by just looking at our programs themselves.

JUAN GONZALEZ: And, Ambassador, in terms of these mercenary efforts that have— attempts to overthrow Obiang, any sense on your part where these are coming from, who is financing these efforts?

FRANK RUDDY: Well, if you read that—I don't know if you read that book, *The Wonga Coup*, written by that fellow, I think, from *The Economist*, about this most recent coup. Unfortunately, in that case, you didn't have a coup based on human rights or trying to set the situation right; you had a coup set on people who wanted to get control of that oil themselves. Unfortunately, the poor fellow that was in the middle that they would have set up as president, this fellow Severo Moto, is actually a decent guy. He probably would have been killed within a short time once they accomplished their aims.

But in terms of a movement on the part of the people, there hasn't—there really hasn't been an effective one. There's a fellow named Adolfo Obiang Biko—no relation to the president—who had tried—who was thinking about something and got himself arrested in Gabon. Some of his people got—were, over there, murdered, raped and mutilated. But there—believe it or not, there is not within the country itself the kind of grassroots dissatisfaction that kind of leads to a revolution.

And I think one of the reasons is—Ken alluded to the predecessor of Obiang, his uncle, who used to hold mass slaughters in the soccer stadium, accompanied to music of the Beatles. So this is a country that has faced terrible, terrible reprisals. It's kind of the poor man's Idi Amin, in terms of—he was, the uncle; it's a poor man's Idi Amin. And so, the country has this history of just such terrible killings and murders and mutilations that it seems to me that you just—until that sort of thing is forgotten and new leadership comes in, I just don't see any strong movement in terms of a revolution, of getting rid of this awful government.

AMY GOODMAN: Ken Silverstein, finally, the role of the former prime minister of Britain, Margaret Thatcher's son, Sir Mark Thatcher, in the attempted coup?

KEN SILVERSTEIN: Well, he was implicated in the coup as one of the financiers. I am embarrassed to say—and maybe you can fill this in—I don't recall whether he was actually—I know he was charged; I don't recall whether he was ever convicted. Nobody's ever really been pieced together exactly what happened and put together a list of exactly who was behind this coup. I mean, we do know that Severo Moto, the man that Frank alluded to, who I had met once—I traveled to Equatorial Guinea a few years ago and stopped in Spain and met with Severo Moto. I mean, we know that he was meant to be put in as head of the country and, I must say, would have been a far better man than the current president. But in terms of—I mean, there have been a lot of allegations made about who funded the coup, but I don't believe anybody has ever been convicted. Maybe, Frank, you can correct me if I'm wrong, or Amy or Juan. I don't know for certain. I know Thatcher's son was implicated. I don't know whether he was ever convicted.

AMY GOODMAN: Ambassador Ruddy?

FRANK RUDDY: According—again, I'm not a great authority on that, because it happened after I had left, but I did read *The Wonga Coup*, which is sort of interesting. It's a potboiler put

together in a short period on this particular coup. But I think what—I think Thatcher was charged, money was paid, and he was released. He was living, I think, in the South—I think it was South Africa.

AMY GOODMAN: Mm-hmm.

FRANK RUDDY: And money was paid. And I think he has been—you know, sort of that Scottish verdict, where they say “not proved” or something like that, as opposed to acquitted. But I think he’s off the hook. And was there another part to your question?

AMY GOODMAN: No, that was it. And I want to thank you both very much for being with us. I know, Ken Silverstein, you have to go. And, Frank Ruddy, you’re going on a trip. Frank Ruddy, former ambassador to Equatorial Guinea under former President Ronald Reagan; Ken Silverstein, Washington editor of *Harper’s Magazine*, publishes a blog on political corruption in Washington, D.C. called “Washington Babylon.”