

Mahathir's secret deal with US military
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In 1984 or 1985, when I was an Asian Wall Street Journal correspondent in Malaysia, an acquaintance called me and said he had seen a US Army 2-1/2 ton truck, known as a 'deuce-and-a-half', filled with US military personnel in jungle gear on a back road outside of Kuala Lumpur.

Since Malaysia and the United States were hardly close friends at that point, I immediately went to the US Embassy in KL and asked what the US soldiers were doing there. I received blank stares. Similar requests to the Malaysian Defence Ministry brought the same response. After a few days of chasing the story, I concluded that my acquaintance must have been seeing things and dropped it.

It turns out he wasn't seeing things after all. In a new book, 'Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times', launched yesterday in Asia, former *Asian Wall Street Journal* editor Barry Wain solved the mystery.

In 1984, during a visit to Washington DC in which Mahathir met President Ronald Reagan, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and others, he secretly launched an innocuous sounding Bilateral Training and Consultation Treaty, which Wain described as a series of working groups for exercises, intelligence sharing, logistical support and general security issues.

In the meantime, Mahathir continued display a public antipathy on general principles at the Americans while his jungle was crawling with US troops quietly training for jungle warfare.

That ability to work both sides of the street was a Mahathir characteristic.

In his foreword, Wain writes that "while [Mahathir] has been a public figure in Malaysia for half a century and well known abroad for almost as long, he has presented himself as a bundle of contradictions: a Malay champion who was the Malays' fiercest critic and an ally of Chinese-Malaysian businessmen; a tireless campaigner against Western economic domination who assiduously courted American and European capitalists; a blunt, combative individual who extolled the virtues of consensual Asian values."

Wain was granted access to the former premier for a series of exhaustive interviews. It may well be the most definitive picture painted of Mahathir to date, and certainly is even-handed. Wain, now a writer in residence at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, is by no means a Mahathir sycophant.

Advance publicity for the book has dwelt on an assertion by Wain that Mahathir may well have wasted or burned up as much as RM100 billion on grandiose projects and the corruption that the projects engendered as he sought to turn Malaysia into an industrialised state.

Although some in Malaysia have said the figure is too high, it seems about accurate, considering such ill-advised projects as a national car, the Proton, which still continues to bleed money and cost vastly more in opportunity costs for Malaysian citizens forced to buy any other make at huge markups behind tariff walls.

In addition, while Thailand in particular became a regional centre for car manufacture and for spares, Malaysia, handicapped by its national car policy, was left out.

Unfazed and unapologetic

Almost at the start of the book, Wain encapsulates the former premier so well that it bears repeating here: Mahathir, he writes, "had an all-consuming desire to turn Malaysia into a modern, industrialised nation commanding worldwide respect. Dr Mahathir's decision to direct the ruling party into business in a major way while the government practiced affirmative action, changed the nature of the party and accelerated the spread of corruption. One manifestation was the eruption of successive financial scandals, massive by any standards, which nevertheless left Dr Mahathir unfazed and unapologetic."

That pretty much was the story of Malaysia for the 22 years that Mahathir was in charge. There is no evidence that Mahathir himself was ever involved in corruption.

Once, as Ferdinand Marcos was losing his grip on the Philippines, Mahathir pointed out to a group of reporters that he was conveyed around in a long black Daimler – the same model as the British ambassador used – that the Istana where he lived was a huge mansion, that he had everything he needed. Why, he asked, was there any need to take money from corruption?

Nonetheless, in his drive to foster a Malay entrepreneurial class, he allowed those around him to pillage the national treasury almost at will, which carried over into Umno after he had left office and which blights the country to this day.

Wain follows intricate trails through much of this, ranging from the attempt, okayed by Mahathir, to attempt to rescue Bumiputra Malaysia Finance in the early 1980s which turned into what at the time was the world's biggest banking scandal.

In the final analysis, much as Lee Kuan Yew down the road in Singapore strove to create a nation in his own image and largely succeeded, so did Mahathir.

Both nations are flawed – Singapore in its mixture of technological and social prowess and draconian ruthlessness against an independent press or opposition, Malaysia with its iconic twin towers and its other attributes coloured by a deepening culture of corruption that has continued well beyond his reign, which ended in 2002. Mahathir must bear the blame for much of this, in particular his destruction of an independent judiciary, as Wain writes, to further his aims.

Mahathir, as the former premier said in the conversation over his mansion and his car, had everything including, one suspects, a fully-developed sense of injustice. He appears to this day to continue to resent much of the west, particularly the British.

Wain writes exhaustively of Mahathir's deep antagonism over both British elitism during the colonial days and the disdain of his fellow Malays (Mahathir's parentage is partly Indian Muslim on his father's side), especially the Malay royalty.

That antagonism against the British has been a hallmark of his career – from the time he instituted the 'Buy British Last' policy for the Malaysian government as prime minister to the present day.

Robert Mugabe, in disgrace across much of the world for the way his policies have

destroyed what was one of the richest countries in Africa, remains in Mahathir's good graces.

Asked recently why that was, an aide told me Mugabe had driven the British out of Zimbabwe and was continuing to drive out white farmers to this day, although he was replacing them with people who knew nothing of farming.

That expropriation of vast tracts of white-owned land might have destroyed Zimbabwe's agricultural production. But, the aide said, "He got the Brits out."

For anybody wishing to understand Mahathir and the nation he transformed, Wain's book is going to be a must – but bring spectacles. The tiny type and gray typeface make it a difficult read. And a disclaimer: Wain was once my boss.

*Barry Wain's 'Malaysian Maverick: Mahathir Mohamad in Turbulent Times' (Palgrave Macmillan, 363pp) is **available through Amazon**. The above article first appeared in **Asia Sentinel**.*

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