

# ‘Alternate’ historians post-LKY : the “four tactics of mass distraction”

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## **‘Alternate’ Historians Post-LKY: The “Four Tactics of Mass Distraction”**

*By Kumar Ramakrishna*

### **Synopsis**

*As we enter the post-Lee Kuan Yew era, some “Alternate” historians and activists will seek to revise history in line with ideological and political concerns.*

### **Commentary**

THE 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Singapore’s independence from Malaysia, coupled with the passing of its first Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew, appears to have ushered in a period of national reflection. This introspection is apparent on two related fronts. First, some netizens, academics, civil society activists, former detainees as well as foreign observers have intensified scrutiny of the “Singapore Story”, the master narrative purporting to chronicle the country’s historical trajectory down the decades.

Second, some of these voices have questioned yet again if Singapore’s political system should be brought more in line with the Western liberal democratic model. On the one hand, what I have called “Alternate” historians and their sympathisers allege that the incumbent PAP government’s consolidation of power in the early 1960s was done through unethical means.

### **Alternates’ weak case**

In particular, they argue that Operation Coldstore, the internal security dragnet mounted by the Internal Security Council comprising Singaporean, British and Malayan senior government representatives on 2 February 1963, and which the Singapore Story portrays as having decimated the Communist United Front (CUF) in Singapore at the time, was unjustified.

This is because the action allegedly destroyed not an underground Communist movement that had infiltrated leftwing political parties such as the Barisan Sosialis Singapura (BSS), affiliated unions and other civil association, but a legitimate progressive leftist movement that could have challenged the PAP in general elections later that year.

The Alternates hint therefore that Singaporeans unjustly suffered a “path not taken”: a BSS-led Singapore under the potential premiership of the Barisan leader Mr Lim Chin Siong.

As I have argued however in my new book *Original Sin?* the Alternates have a very weak case. They display among other faults a generally poor grasp of the Communist mindset and tactics, and more egregiously, basically ignore the published admissions by leading Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) figures themselves of the existence of the CUF and how Coldstore decimated it.

In addition, some elements within the Alternate constituency employ what I term four tactics of “mass distraction” in order to conceal their argument’s weaknesses.

### **The online debates**

First, as the ongoing online debate clearly evinces, they employ disparaging comments against those mainstream historians who attempt to engage with their arguments. So blatantly obvious have been the personal attacks that fair-minded netizens have criticized this ploy, as I show in my book. Second, some Alternate historians distract readers from the substance of the mainstream historians’ counter-arguments by focusing attention instead on the latter’s institutional position.

This is really a postmodernist tactic in which the idea is to suggest that the mainstream historians, deliberately portrayed as “government stooges” or “bureaucratic scholars”, possess an inescapably pro-establishment ideological or political agenda. As I show in my book however, this is a simplistic view. Despite protestations to the contrary, moreover, some Alternate historians possess an unarticulated but deeply ideological and political agenda of their own.

A third tactic of some Alternates to distract attention from the weakness of their position is very serious actually: they appear to ignore facts that directly contradict their arguments. For example, on 18 July 1961, when Lord Selkirk, the UK Commissioner in Singapore, pointedly challenged Lim Chin Siong and his colleague Fong Swee Suan to say if they were Communists, the record of the meeting indicates that both men appeared embarrassed and failed to give a clear reply.

The reason is obvious: if they had said yes, they would have been arrested, as being a CPM member was illegal. The point is, some Alternate historians in writing about this famous meeting, completely ignore this extraordinary exchange. Readers should ask: is the omission because including it may have undercut the stock Alternate narrative that Lim and Fong were actually progressive leftists rather than Communists?

A final tactic of mass distraction of some activists associated with the Alternate historians is: when the argument is lost, shift the goalposts. It was reported in the media in January 2015, for instance, that one leading activist, perhaps facing up to the reality that Lim Chin Siong in particular was indeed a Communist – now declared that it did not matter whether he was one or not!

### **Mainstream historians’ arguments**

My book delves into this specific issue, drawing upon both declassified and still-classified sources. It reveals that by the 1980s Lim freely if privately admitted to his CPM affiliation. Some within the Alternate constituency contend that security statements by Lim may have been coerced.

However the book counters this, showing that the Singapore Special Branch and the successor Internal Security Department had to carry out their work based in part on such information, and could not take risks with the false testimony likely to have been induced by clumsy, coercive interrogation of Lim. The book even shows that Lim himself had apparently developed a cordial relationship with the authorities by the 1980s and even sought their help on occasion.

Hence what really drives some Alternate historians and their supporters is what is called *presentism* – an orientation to the past coloured by current ideological and political biases and concerns. Some Alternate historians appear to sift through the historical record purposefully to find facts that mesh with what they want to say. This, lest it be forgotten, is not history but propaganda.

Moreover, is it a surprise that some Alternate historians – despite assurances that they do not allow their “political intent” to overwhelm their “scholarship” – do precisely that, by so publicly championing the causes of former detainees and working closely with them on projects like the one that produced the Alternate history of Operation Coldstore in November 2013?

It is obvious that in the hands of some Alternate historians, as Foucault once suggested, history has become irredeemably partisan. Readers should thus be aware of this whenever they encounter the works of such Alternate historians in print or online.

Finally, mainstream historians like myself openly declare their “inherent subjectivity”. While “mainstreamers” are a loose coalition of scholars without a precisely formulated agenda, some would agree that the successful governance model that the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his first generation colleagues bequeathed us remains relevant. Tweaks are clearly necessary as a different, more cosmopolitan generation of Singaporeans mature politically and gradually wield influence in government, business and civil society.

Blind, uncritical imitation of the Western model however – as some Alternate historians and activists appear to crave - would be unwise. Evolutionary change, with one eye fixed firmly on Singapore’s unique geopolitical, demographic and sociocultural realities, remains the way forward in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era.

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