

Three Deadly War Myths

Exclusive: The U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have involved myths pleasing to Official Washington – about its own wisdom and the evil of the enemy – but these false narratives have caused President Barack Obama and other U.S. policymakers to base decisions on illusion rather than reality. Robert Parry examines three of these deadly myths.

By Robert Parry

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When a nation as powerful as the United States bases policy on bogus history, it can become a grave danger to others and to itself. Yet, that is what now goes on daily in Official Washington, with senior officials routinely citing false narratives and elite journalists accepting myths as truth.

Take for example one of the favorite “lessons” from the recent past: that in 1989, as soon as the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, the United States foolishly turned its back on that central Asian nation setting the stage for the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and for al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks in 2001.

This “history” was cited again on Wednesday by President Barack Obama’s nominee to be U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan C. Crocker. In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Crocker said the supposed U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan in 1989 had “disastrous consequences” and “we cannot afford to do so again.”

In other words, Crocker implied, the United States must stick with its current counter-insurgency war and the “nation-building” that goes with it, even if that requires the continued commitment of a large military force and the expenditure of billions of dollars each month.

The New York Times reported Crocker’s comments about the alleged 1989 abandonment without challenge, indeed, the Times hailed his testimony an “unvarnished assessment.” As for the senators, the Washington Post described Crocker’s confirmation hearing as “a virtual love-fest.”

No one wanted to suggest that Crocker might be lying. After all, he, along with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David Petraeus, walk on water as far as Official Washington is concerned. The trio is credited with another favorite Washington myth, the “successful surge” in Iraq, where Crocker served as ambassador while Petraeus was the military commander and Gates ran the Pentagon.

Official Washington also has bought into a third deadly myth, the certainty that Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi has American blood on his hands for his purported role in blowing Pan Am 103 out of the sky over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988, a terrorist attack that killed 270 people.

All three of these dubious certainties are cited in the major U.S. news media as flat fact

and thus a factor in determining war policy even though they are either untrue or in serious doubt.

Tom Hanks's History

Regarding Crocker's testimony about the Afghan abandonment, it is simply accepted in Washington's power circles that the United States did cut off assistance to the Afghan mujahedeen immediately after the Soviet army departed on Feb. 15, 1989. That "history" has even been popularized by Tom Hanks in the movie, "Charlie Wilson's War" and who would question Tom Hanks?

Defense Secretary Gates hammered home the same point in late 2009 as he sold the case for the "surge" of 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan. On a flight to the war zone, he told a group of credulous reporters "that we are not going to repeat the situation in 1989."³

But one has to assume that Gates and Crocker know the real history, that the United States did not terminate its covert support for the Afghan mujahedeen immediately after the Soviets left. In fact, we know for a fact that Gates is aware of the real history because he recounted it in his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows*.

Here's what the history actually shows: In 1988, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev promised to remove Soviet troops from Afghanistan and sought a negotiated settlement. He hoped for a unity government that would include elements of Najibullah's Soviet-backed regime in Kabul and the CIA-backed Islamic fundamentalist rebels.

Gates, who was then deputy CIA director, opposed Gorbachev's plan, disbelieving that the Soviets would really depart and insisting that if they did the CIA's mujahedeen could quickly defeat Najibullah's army.

Inside the Reagan administration, Gates's judgment was opposed by State Department analysts who foresaw a drawn-out struggle. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead and the department's intelligence chief Morton Abramowitz warned that Najibullah's army might hold on longer than the CIA expected.

But Gates pushed the CIA analysis of a rapid Najibullah collapse and prevailed in the policy debates. In his memoir, Gates recalled briefing Secretary of State George Shultz and his senior aides about the CIA's prediction prior to Shultz flying to Moscow in February 1988.

"I told them that most [CIA] analysts did not believe Najibullah's government could last without active Soviet military support," wrote Gates.

After the Soviets did withdraw in early 1989 proving Gates wrong on that point some U.S. officials felt Washington's geostrategic aims had been achieved and a move toward peace was in order. There also was concern about the Afghan mujahedeen, especially their tendencies toward brutality, heroin trafficking and fundamentalist religious policies.

However, the new administration of George H.W. Bush with Gates having moved from the CIA to the White House as deputy national security adviser rebuffed Gorbachev and chose to continue U.S. covert support for the mujahedeen, funneled primarily through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI.

Yet, instead of the CIA-predicted fast collapse, Najibullah's regime used its Soviet weapons and advisers to beat back a mujahedeen offensive in 1990. Najibullah hung on. The war, the violence and the disorder continued.

Gates finally recognized that his CIA analysis was wrong. In his memoir, he wrote: "As it turned out, Whitehead and Abramowitz were right" in their warning that Najibullah's regime might not collapse so quickly.

Acknowledging a Fact

But Gates's memoir also belies the fiction that he told the reporters in December 2009 about the immediate U.S. pullback in Afghanistan once the Soviets left in February 1989. In his memoir, Gates acknowledged that the U.S. government did not depart Afghanistan immediately.

"Najibullah would remain in power for another three years [after the Soviet pull-out], as the United States and the USSR continued to aid their respective sides," Gates wrote. "On Dec. 11, 1991, both Moscow and Washington cut off all assistance, and Najibullah's government fell four months later. He had outlasted both Gorbachev and the Soviet Union itself."

In other words, covert U.S. support to the Afghan rebels continued for almost three years. The United States did not simply pull the plug in Afghanistan; instead it pressed ahead seeking a clear-cut military triumph.

Yet, with the false presentation of this history by Gates in 2009 and by Crocker in 2011 the real historical lessons also have been lost.

Those lessons are, first, that as difficult and repugnant as it may be, give-and-take negotiations and power-sharing with adversaries may represent the best possible outcome for a war-torn country like Afghanistan. And, second, an insistence on "victory" can result in a far worse outcome.

Yet, instead of absorbing those historical lessons, Gates, Crocker and other war hawks have used the myth of the premature Afghan pullout to guide the nation onto the same disastrous path that was followed in Afghanistan nearly two decades ago seeking victory through warfare.

Similarly, the myth of the "successful surge" in Iraq has clouded the judgment of Official Washington on Afghanistan, creating political pressure on President Obama and other decision-makers to pursue the supposedly victorious course charted in Iraq.

But the "surge" myth in Iraq is almost as flimsy as the "pullout" myth regarding Afghanistan.

Many of the key factors that led to the gradual decline in violence in Iraq predated the 2007 "surge," including the policy of paying off Sunni tribal leaders not to shoot at Americans, the Sunni disillusionment with al-Qaeda extremism, the killing of al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and the de facto ethnic cleansing of the major cities.

In other words, the Washington consensus crediting the "surge" and its architects for the eventual drop in Iraqi killing missed the more complex reality and may actually have contributed to more death and destruction by causing the Iraq "surge" myth to be applied to the Afghan War.

The "surge" myth also obscured a real lesson from Iraq, that once the United States agreed to

pull out its troops, the violence against U.S. soldiers dropped dramatically. It only has spiked recently amid suggestions from U.S. policymakers that they would be open to revising the status-of-forces-agreement to allow some U.S. military personnel to stay past the end of 2011.

The Libyan Myth

Today's third deadly myth is Washington's certainty that Libyan dictator Gaddafi was responsible for the Pan Am 103 attack and thus must be removed from power by force and possibly by assassination.

The alternative option of taking Gaddafi up on his offers of a cease-fire and negotiations toward a political settlement has been rejected out of hand by both the Obama administration and by nearly all the influential pundits in Washington, in part, because of the Pan Am case.

Repeatedly citing Gaddafi's killing of Americans over Lockerbie, the U.S. debate has centered on the need to ratchet up military pressure on Gaddafi and even chuckle over NATO's transparent efforts to murder the Libyan leader (and his family members) by bombing his homes and offices.

The Obama administration is sticking with this violent course of action even though Libyan civilians continue to die and the cutoff of Libyan oil from the international markets has exacerbated shortages in supplies, thus contributing to the higher gas prices that are damaging the U.S. economic recovery.

But President Obama apparently sees no choice. After all, the conventional wisdom is that Gaddafi is guilty in the Pan Am 103 case. All the leading U.S. news organizations, such as the New York Times, and prominent politicians, such as Sen. John McCain, say so.

"The blood of Americans is on [Gaddafi's] hands because he was responsible for the bombing of Pan Am 103," declared Sen. McCain, R-Arizona, after an early trip to rebel-held Benghazi.

However, the reality of the Pan Am case is much murkier and some experts on the mystery believe that Libyans may have had nothing to do with it.

It is true that in 2001, a special Scottish court convicted Libyan agent Ali al-Megrahi for the bombing. But the judgment appears to have been more a political compromise than an act of justice. Another Libyan was found not guilty, and one of the Scottish judges told Dartmouth government professor Dirk Vandewalle about "enormous pressure put on the court to get a conviction."

Megrahi's conviction assuaged the understandable human desire to see someone punished for such a heinous crime, albeit a possibly innocent man.

In 2007, after the testimony of a key witness against Megrahi was discredited, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission agreed to reconsider the conviction as a grave miscarriage of justice. However, that review was proceeding slowly in 2009 when Scottish authorities released Megrahi on humanitarian grounds, after he was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer.

Megrahi dropped his appeal in order to gain the early release, but that doesn't mean he was

guilty. He has continued to assert his innocence and an objective press corps would reflect the doubts regarding his curious conviction.

Dubious Witness

The Scottish court's purported reason for finding Megrahi guilty while acquitting his co-defendant Lamin Khalifa Fhimah was the testimony of Toni Gauci, owner of a clothing store in Malta who allegedly sold Megrahi a shirt, the remnants of which were found with the shards of the suitcase that contained the bomb.

The rest of the case rested on a theory that Megrahi put the luggage on a flight from Malta to Frankfurt, where it was transferred to a connecting flight to London, where it was transferred onto Pan Am 103 bound for New York, a decidedly unlikely way to undertake an act of terrorism given all the random variables involved.

Megrahi would have had to assume that three separate airport security systems at Malta, Frankfurt and London would fail to give any serious scrutiny to an unaccompanied suitcase or to detect the bomb despite security officials being on the lookout for just such a threat.

As historian William Blum recounted in [a Consortiumnews.com article](#) after Megrahi's 2001 conviction, "The case for the suitcase's hypothetical travels must also deal with the fact that, according to Air Malta, all the documented luggage on KM180 was collected by passengers in Frankfurt and did not continue in transit to London, and that two Pan Am on-duty officials in Frankfurt testified that no unaccompanied luggage was introduced onto Pan Am 103A, the feeder flight to London."

There also were problems with Gauci's belated identification of Megrahi as the shirt-buyer a decade after the fact. Gauci had made contradictory IDs and had earlier given a physical description that didn't match Megrahi. Gauci reportedly received a \$2 million reward for his testimony and then moved to Australia, where he went into retirement.

In 2007, the Scottish review panel decided to reconsider Megrahi's conviction after concluding that Gauci's testimony was unbelievable. And without Gauci's testimony, the case against Megrahi was virtually the same as the case against his co-defendant who was acquitted.

However, after Megrahi's conviction in 2001, more international pressure was put on Libya, which was then regarded as the archetypal "rogue" state. Indeed, it was to get onerous economic sanctions lifted that Libya took "responsibility" for the Pan Am attack and paid reparations to the victims' families even as Libyan officials continued to deny guilt.

In April, there was some excitement over the possibility that Gaddafi would be fingered personally as the Pan Am 103 mastermind when former Libyan foreign minister Moussa Koussa defected. He was believed to be in charge of Libyan intelligence in 1988 and thus almost certainly in the know.

Moussa Koussa [was questioned](#) by Scottish authorities but apparently shed little new light on the case. He was allowed to go free after the interview. Very quickly the press interest over Moussa Koussa faded away, except for the recurring assumption in some Western press articles that he must have implicated Gaddafi.

Despite the doubts about the Pan Am 103 case – and the tragic human and economic toll from the Libyan war – the U.S. news media and politicians continue to treat Libya's guilt as a flat fact. It appears that no big-time journalist or important official has even bothered to read the Scottish court's bizarre judgment regarding Megrahi's 2001 conviction.

Instead, NATO's bombing campaign against Libyan targets continues, including the recent leveling of tents where Gaddafi greets foreign dignitaries and the destruction of Libyan TV.

Rather than making war policies based on serious factual analysis, the United States and NATO continue to be guided by politically pleasing myths. It is a recipe for an even-greater disaster and unnecessary deaths.

[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
