

A Persian Gulf 'Hot Line' Proposed

With tensions again rising in the Persian Gulf, an accident or provocation around the narrow Strait of Hormuz could precipitate a war. In this memo for President Obama, 11 former U.S. intelligence officials urge a U.S.-Iranian system for communications – a “hot line” – in case of crisis.

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: Avoiding Spiraling Violence in the Persian Gulf

We write respectfully to call your attention to the clear and present danger of escalation in the Persian Gulf and to suggest ways to lessen that likelihood. There needs to be a reliable way for our Navy to communicate at a sufficiently high level with Iranian naval counterparts. Otherwise, incidents occasioned by accident or provocation can readily escalate in ways neither side intends.

This is not a new problem; others (notably former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen) have called attention to it in the past. We do so again because of the sharply increased tensions flowing from terrorist attacks like the one on July 18 in Bulgaria in which five Israeli tourists were killed.

It is not yet known who the suicide bomber was. Yet Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu immediately blamed Iran and Hezbollah for the attack, a claim that has not been substantiated, and threatened retaliation. Inside Iran, terrorist attacks have claimed the lives of five Iranian scientists over the past five years, with the Iranians blaming Israel.

The recent buildup of warships in the Persian Gulf has added not only to crowding, but also to a hair-trigger, volatile environment. On July 16, the U.S. Navy announced that a Navy refueling ship out of Bahrain, the Rappahannock, had used “lethal force” against a 50-foot pleasure craft, killing one Indian fisherman and seriously injuring three others.

The Navy said the fishermen had been given ample warning, but the three survivors insisted they had received no warning before being fired upon. And if that fishing boat had been an Iranian naval vessel?

As that recent shoot-up suggests, the waters of the Gulf offer the most likely locale for an incident that could spiral out of control. The navigable part of the Strait of Hormuz is narrow; it is an area where ships collide. In 2007, for example, the U.S. nuclear submarine USS Newport News collided with a Japanese

oil tanker in the Strait while the submarine was transiting submerged.

Two years later, the USS Hartford nuclear submarine and the amphibious USS New Orleans collided in the waters between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula while on routine security patrols in that crowded shipping lane. In January 2008, five Iranian boats swarmed three U.S. warships in the Strait of Hormuz.

The skies over that strategic area have also seen inadvertent tragedy. On July 3, 1988, the Aegis guided-missile cruiser USS Vincennes mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian passenger jetliner, Iran Air Flight 655 over the Strait of Hormuz, killing all 290 passengers. Iran Air Flight 655 was on a scheduled daily flight using established air lanes from Bandar Abbas, Iran, to Dubai, when the Vincennes mistakenly identified it as a fighter aircraft.

The Vincennes had sent a radio warning on the international air distress frequency, but gave incorrect altitude and position information on the plane. Thus, even if the Flight 655 crew were tuned in, they may have thought the warning was directed at some other flight. A U.S. Navy frigate, the USS Sides, reported that Iranian plane was climbing, not diving to attack, at the time of the missile strike.

Preventive Measures

At a press conference on July 2, 2008, the JCS Chairman, Admiral Mike Mullen, said that military-to-military dialogue could “add to a better understanding” between the U.S. and Iran. As far as we are aware, no such dialogue has been established.

Just before he retired, Admiral Mullen bemoaned the inevitable, and unnecessary, risk stemming from the absence of military-to-military ties: “We haven’t had a connection with Iran since 1979. We are not talking to Iran, so we don’t understand each other. If something happens it’s virtually assured that we won’t get it right, and there will be miscalculation, which would be extremely dangerous in that part of the world.”

The following two modest proposals could go a long way toward avoiding an armed confrontation with Iran, whether accidental or provoked by any who may actually wish to precipitate hostilities involving the U.S. in the area of the Persian Gulf.

- 1 Establish a direct communications link between U.S. and Iranian naval commanders in the Persian Gulf area and also between top military officials in Washington and Tehran, in order to reduce the danger of accident, miscalculation, or provocation.

2 Launch immediate negotiations by top Iranian and American naval officers to conclude an incidents-at-sea protocol.

A communications link has historically proven its merit during times of high tension between potential enemies. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 underscored the need for instantaneous communications at senior levels, and a "hot line" between Washington and Moscow was established the following year.

That direct link played a crucial role in preventing the spread of war in the Middle East during the Six-Day War in early June 1967.

Another useful precedent is the "Incidents-at-Sea" agreement between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, signed in Moscow in May 1972. That was another time of considerable tension between the two countries, including several inadvertent naval encounters that could well have escalated. The agreement sharply reduced the likelihood of such incidents.

We would regard with suspicion any who would oppose such common-sense measures to prevent escalation. A number of U.S. commanders in the Persian Gulf have favored such steps in the past, according to press reports. And, as indicated above, Admiral Mullen appealed explicitly for military-to-military dialogue.

The U.S. military's feasibility analysis regarding an incidents-at-sea agreement is now with the Senate Armed Services Committee. At a bare minimum, such an agreement should be concluded as expeditiously as possible. We strongly urge you to marshal White House pressure behind getting that done.

If this promising initiative is delayed or tabled, we respectfully suggest that you consider ways to use your executive power to implement whatever steps might be possible to establish direct communication channels with appropriate Iranian authorities immediately.

For Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

Kathleen Christison, former CIA analyst

Ray Close, former CIA Chief of Station, Saudi Arabia

Phil Gerald, former CIA operations officer

David MacMichael, former history professor, CIA analyst, and estimates officer, National Intelligence Council

Tom Maertens, former Foreign Service Officer and National Security Council Director for Non-Proliferation

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer and CIA analyst

Elizabeth Murray, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East

Paul Pillar, former National Intelligence Officer for the Near East

Coleen Rowley, former FBI Special Agent and Minneapolis Division Counsel

Lawrence Wilkerson, Col., US Army (ret.) and former Chief of Staff, Department of State

Ann Wright, Col., US Army Reserve (ret.) and former Foreign Service Officer

The Deep Mystery of American Murders

The mystery of why America suffers so many murders both in small numbers and large continues to defy an easy answer. But the diverse explanations may themselves be a clue, since the United States has a certain mix of factors that can explain a lot, writes Michael Minch.

By Michael Minch

Can anything be said in the wake of the most recent murderous eruption, this time in Aurora, Colorado? On one hand, many people jump forward quickly with new laments, calls for greater gun control, appeals against such control, and frankly, everything we've heard so many times before.

Others, on the other hand, are offended by the very idea that we would try to answer the question of why such violence occurs. To suggest that explanations might exist, seems, for them, a move toward affixing blame somewhere close to their own values, interests, and lifestyles. They are people who tell us that murderers alone are to blame for murders. Period. This view is a preemptive strike against calls for, and criteria of, accountability and moral maturity.

I believe there are six variables that exist in unique combination in the United States that collectively make gun violence the national disgrace it has become. These variables are closely related, but distinct. Together, they form a deadly cocktail of death and grief.

We have a freakishly high rate of ownership (still more guns than people) compared to all societies not engaged in explicit sub-state war. Guns are also bizarrely easy to acquire in the U.S. The majority of Americans want better (and

yes, this means “more”) gun control. NRA “leaders,” the radical zealots and rhetoricians who pull us deeper into a culture of death, are out of step with the country.

The bumper sticker reads, of course, “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” But the other one reads with equal truth and clarity, “As a matter of fact, guns do kill people.” I don’t know about you, but I would rather have a psychopath coming at me with a bat or knife, than a gun. I’d even prefer facing a sidearm with a small clip instead of a military assault weapon. This commonsense may be coming more common, the NRA-inflicted radicals notwithstanding.

Second, we not only live in a society with many guns and easy access to them; but we are embedded in a culture that tells us, daily, that guns have a glorious history of serving as problem-solving tools, and that violence is often needed to solve our problems.

The United States is infamous for its violence. We have prosecuted, joined and promoted many wars in our short history, we lead the world in arms manufacture and trade, we spend nearly as much on our military than does the rest of the world combined, and we have approximately 1,000 military installations outside the U.S. around the globe. It is embedded into our collective consciousness that guns solve problems, and that we Americans are a pragmatic, problem solving, “can do!” people.

Third, and much related to the variable above, we valorize violence. Violence not only solves problems, so our teachers, textbooks, memorials, and politicians tells us, we engage in particular forms of glorification of violence (it is one thing to use a tool, it is another to glory in its use).

I invoke the Hebrew and biblical concept of “glory” which at its core means “presence.” We make violence present to ourselves in various ways, where that presence is not one of lament, necessity, risk or regret; but is characterized by celebration, even fun. Much has been written about this, little unpacking of the point is necessary. Video games. Movies. Television. Stories of heroism and sacrifice in our national myths.

Chris Hedges has reminded us powerfully that *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*. Political theorists and actors have known since antiquity that a powerful way to forge unity in a tribe or society is to identify, and monger fear about, a common enemy. This simply makes us feel better about ourselves.

And back to video games, it is no surprise that the young people sitting behind consoles in the U.S. with joysticks in their hands, guiding drones in their

murderous missions, are operating equipment designed to look and feel just like the toys they grew up playing. Blurring the line between virtually killing people and actually killing them is just one way our taxes have gone to work.

Fourth, we are (and perhaps increasingly so) a culture of anomie. Christopher Lasch wrote about our culture of “diminishing expectations,” and Walker Percy told us, upon publishing *The Thanatos Syndrome*, that precisely because we can walk into any bookstore and find shelves of “life-affirming” books, we should know that there is very much death around us.

We Americans are increasingly desperate, depressed, distracted and drifting. We handle our malaise through various forms of sedation, entertainment and violence turned both inward and outward. In a word, we are less happy and less able to cope than most other peoples who live above desperate poverty.

Columbia University’s 2012 *World Happiness Report* ranks the U.S. as the planet’s 23rd happiest country (since we tell ourselves that happiness is purchasable, and we’re the world’s richest country, our unhappiness reveals the lie of consumerism=happiness).

Fifth, we are a culture of fear. We are fear-based creatures as surely as we are carbon-based. Read Genesis 3, the primordial Legend of our Fall, and notice how animated by fear our first parents were. Notice the central role given to our fear in the construction of Hobbes’s social contract in his seminal *Leviathan*.

In its current iteration, the Republican Party is most fundamentally, the Party of Fear. In the GOP, fear comes before and runs deeper than commitment to fiscal sanity, easily demonstrable by the strident call for spending cuts everywhere except “defense.” Fear generates disillusionment, dismay, and destruction. It births resentment, anger, bigotry, tribalism, xenophobia, greed, and various centrifugal and centripetal forms of ugliness.

In this time of economic insecurity, and loss of hope in authorities and institutions, those on the Right constantly tell us how fearful we should be, and their calls to fear are too often obeyed.

Last, in our society, as in all others, are found many persons who suffer from mental, psychological, and emotional deficit. Here, as elsewhere, many live lives marked by pathology, dis-ease, dis-integration, and various kinds of mental, emotional and spiritual loss. Many are dysfunctionally lacking wholeness and health.

These variables are closely related, and in certain combinations, bring direct violence into our lives through the agency of guns. Millions of mentally ill persons do not conduct random violence as we saw in Aurora. Other societies have

loose gun laws and high levels of gun ownership. We can go through the variables and find other places where some of them are pronounced. But they all seem substantively or robustly present in the U.S., and uniquely so.

This is, tragically, what is never said in the wake of a Columbine, Jonesboro, Virginia Tech, Tucson or Aurora, let alone in regard to the ordinary violence that plagues us, especially in our urban centers, daily. These spasms of murderous violence are the tip of an iceberg.

But what gives rise to the spasm is structure and system, what peace and conflict scholars call structural or indirect violence. These variables are structural and systemic. Of course an individual shooter is to blame (in some ways, depending on his mental health). But there is plenty of blame to go around.

When a shooter enters a theater and kills, he must be held accountable, but let's not pretend we have nothing to do with it as a culture.

Michael Minch teaches Peace Studies at Utah Valley University.

Romney Adds to Iran Tensions

Mitt Romney wants American Jewish voters to know he's ready (if not eager) to back an Israeli preemptive war against Iran. Romney's recent bellicose comments in Jerusalem add pressure on President Obama to escalate his support for an Israeli strike, too, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's strong pro-Israel statements over the weekend, including his endorsement of Jerusalem as Israel's capital (a reversal of long-standing U.S. policy), increases the pressure on President Barack Obama to prove that he is an equally strong backer of Israel.

The key question is whether Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak will interpret the presidential campaign rhetoric as an open invitation to provoke hostilities with Iran, in the expectation that President Obama will feel forced to jump in with both feet in support of our "ally" Israel. (Since there is no mutual defense treaty between the U.S. and Israel, "ally" actually is a misnomer, at least in a juridical sense.)

As we saw 10 years ago with respect to Iraq, if one intends to whip up support

for war, one needs to find a casus belli, however thin a pretext it might be. How about juxtaposing “weapons of mass destruction” with terrorism. That worked to prepare for war on Iraq, and similar rhetorical groundwork for an attack on Iran is now being laid in Israel.

Mr. Netanyahu broke all records for speed in blaming Iran and Hezbollah for the recent terrorist attack that killed five Israelis in Burgas, Bulgaria, and in vowing that “Israel will react powerfully against Iranian terror.” But what is the evidence on Iranian or Hezbollah involvement? Bulgarian officials keep saying they have no such evidence. More surprising still, government officials in Washington and elsewhere keep warning against jumping to conclusions.

So far the “evidence” against Iran consists primarily of trust-me assertions by Mr. Netanyahu. On Fox News Sunday on July 22, Mr. Netanyahu claimed Israel has “rock-solid evidence” tying Iran to the attack in Bulgaria. The same day on CBS’s Face the Nation, Mr. Netanyahu said, “We have unquestionable, fully substantiated intelligence that this [terrorist attack] was done by Hezbollah backed by Iran,” adding that Israel gives “specific details to responsible governments and agencies.”

Did the Israelis somehow forget to give “specific details” to Bulgarian and U.S. officials?

At a joint news conference with White House counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan in Sofia early last week, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov admitted that he was aware of no information concerning the terrorist or those who dispatched him. Mr. Brennan’s July 25 talks with top Israeli officials, it appears, were similarly unproductive. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz on July 26: “A week after the Burgas attacks, Israeli, Bulgarian, and U.S. [officials] still have no leads regarding the identity of the suicide bomber.”

These events took place against a historical backdrop pregnant with relevance. July 23 was the 10th anniversary of a meeting at 10 Downing Street, at which the head of British intelligence casually revealed the fraudulent origins of the coming attack on Iraq. The official minutes of that meeting were leaked to London’s Sunday Times, which ran them on its front page May 1, 2005. No one has disputed their authenticity.

This is how the minutes record the core of the briefing by Sir Richard Dearlove, the British intelligence chief, who had just conferred with his U.S. counterpart, George Tenet, at CIA headquarters on July 20, 2002, on what was in store for Iraq:

“Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam,

through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”

The “fixing” of intelligence is bad enough. But note Mr. Dearlove’s explanation that war with Iraq was to be “justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.” Translation: We will claim Saddam has weapons of mass destruction and that he might well give them to terrorists, unless he is stopped forthwith. Mr. Netanyahu is now taking the same line on Iran.

On Face the Nation on July 22, he pointedly asked: “Just imagine what the consequences would be if these people [terrorists] and this regime [Iran] got a hold of nuclear weapons. [We need to] make sure that the world’s most dangerous regime doesn’t get the world’s most dangerous weapons.”

Never mind the elusive evidence on the perpetrators of the attack in Bulgaria. Never mind that Defense Secretary Leon Panetta posed the direct question to himself on Face the Nation on Jan. 8 and then answered it: “Are they [the Iranians] trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No.” Never mind that 10 days later Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said essentially the same thing during an interview on Israeli Army Radio.

The likelihood of hostilities with Iran before the presidential election in November is increasing. Beware of “fixed” intelligence.

Ray McGovern is a retired 27-year veteran of CIA’s analysis division whose responsibilities included preparing and delivering the president’s daily brief. His email is rrmcgovern@gmail.com. [This article appeared first at the Baltimore Sun’s Web site.]

Deranged Angels of Self-Preservation

The new Batman movie, “The Dark Knight Rises,” envisions a social order overturned by a violent and vengeful rabble, a parody of Occupy Wall Street activists transformed into the villains of this pro-One Percent propaganda film, writes Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

In the contest between Stupid and Evil, Stupid reaps far more destruction. Why? Stupid prevails by the sheer force of numbers in its ranks. But the argument is

moot: Because all too often Stupid is working for Evil believing it is serving as a force for good and, I might add, for degrading wages as well.

German-born filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) insisted to her dying breath that her 1936 masterwork of visual bravura, "Olympia," documenting the 1936 Summer Olympics, held in Berlin, Germany, and funded and promoted by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi state, was not a political film nor was intended as propaganda for the Third Reich as writer/director Christopher Nolan is claiming his "The Dark Knight Rises" is not a political movie.

Yet, for some reason, the villains of the movie just happen to resemble the febrile stuff of right-wing delusion regarding Occupy Wall Street activists, and the beleaguered victims of the movie's vengeance-seeking, blood-drunk rabble's reign of mindless terror happen to resemble the denizens of the One Percent.

But we are told to relax ruminating on a jumbo bucket of popcorn and suck down the high-fructose soda of our choice. We should allow our limbic system to ascend to the throne room of consciousness to simply let the spectacle pull us along, as in a trip through a high-tech funhouse.

Historically, a component of fascism has been the visceral appeal of mass spectacle – the drowning of the burdens of Industrial Age selfhood into an intoxicating immersion in the anonymity of the mob.

Another aspect is the promotion of shadow projection, i.e., the attempt to lessen inner conflict and shame involving dark-tinged, hidden emotions and yearnings by projecting those traits on outside groups, e.g., the political use of racism to displace class-based resentment; the caricatures created to demonize the enemy, appropriated by governments and promulgated in popular culture to mobilize support for war.

In "The Dark Knight Rises," Nolan (perhaps unconsciously he doesn't seem all that bright and self-aware) deploys the psychological trope of shadow projection by portraying members of an Occupy Wall Street-type popular insurgency as boilerplate, comic book villains who rise from the city's underbelly, compelled by murderous grievances, to inflict a reign of chaos, reminiscent of Terror-gripped, late 18th Century/ early 19th Century France, on the city's economic elite.

What is the writer/director getting at here? Whether Nolan is aware of it or not, he has made a fascist epic.

Batman, from its inception was always a hyper-authoritarian myth. Comic Books, at their inception and rise during the Great Depression of the 1930s, reflected a middle/upper class unease regarding those popular heroes of the disaffected

laboring class such as Pretty Boy Floyd and John Dillinger. Woody Guthrie's take on song writing is germane to the subject of movies as well. Woody averred: All songs are political.

Hollywood movies are suffused with capitalist false consciousness? And how could they not be? The "successful" members of the entertainment "business" have done quite well by the system, thus have been bestowed with all the privileges of the One Percent.

Moreover, certain self-appointed arbiters of good taste and social propriety have posited the canard that the recent madman-inflicted, firearm-wrought tragedy at an Aurora, Colorado, cinema exhibiting Nolan's "The Dark Knight Rises" should not be politicized. Nonsense.

The assertion, in itself, is political, for it is a (tacit) admonition to refrain from challenging the status quo – and the status quo of U.S. gun culture comes down to this: blood-drenched shooting spree followed by blood-drenched shooting spree.

Withal, the Second Amendment is not the word of God writ large across the eternal heavens. It is an archaic notion of a past, rural/agrarian era, and crafted by an assembly of land-holding, powdered wig-clad aristocrats.

Does the uncertainty of these times and the fading of cherished concepts evoke feelings of unease within you? Then how about trying this? Quit stroking your guns and hyperventilating over the depleted embers of dying delusion: Get over the hagiography of this sham democratic republic, and begin to re-imagine and remake the world anew.

Regarding all the bombast and braggadocio of rightist Second Amendment true believers, who claim that guns are the last, best hope to stand against government tyranny: Where were these sentinels of freedom when the operatives and enforcers of the U.S. national security/police state brought its brutality down on peaceful Occupy Wall Street dissidents?

Neither they nor the vast majority of people in the U.S. possess any concept of – nor do they give a rodent's rectum about freedom. Because the fledgling nation's solution to what they termed the "Indian problem" was addressed by the use of firearms, the habit of viewing and deploying guns as a solution to societal ills has bequeathed a violent, blood-sodden legacy upon the culture.

To all you compulsive gun-strokers – heirs of the hateful legacy of your genocidal ancestors – I ask you this – how do you like existing under dismal, degraded conditions such as these?

Seemingly, from their graves, my Native American ancestors (My late father was born of half native descent.) have cursed you. But the grim truth is, on a collective basis, through our acceptance of a toxic cultural mythos, the people of this nation have conjured this curse, and have, by their clinging to death-besotted attitudes and attendant actions, seeded the winds of fate.

Regarding gun violence in the U.S., the situation is very simple. The Second Amendment is not only antiquated, but is an outright menace to public good. Nations that do not fetishize guns, and have said fetish codified into law and imprinted into the public's imagination are not afflicted by any degree of violent gun deaths.

Although its origins and workings seem to us mysterious and evanescent, evil remains proliferate because our traumatized psyches see it as a force of good. Evil is a deranged angel of self-preservation, convinced his wicked machinations and destructive fury are bulwarks against outside forces aligned to bear his doom.

"A man who is unconscious of himself acts in a blind, instinctive way and is in addition fooled by all the illusions that arise when he sees everything that he is not conscious of in himself coming to meet him from outside as projections upon his neighbor." – Carl Jung: "The Philosophical Tree" (1945). In CW 13: Alchemical Studies. P.335

To those firearm apologists who proffer the assertion that one should not blame guns for the acts of madmen let me ask you this? There are unstable individuals residing all over the world, and have throughout every era, what is it about the U.S. that engenders a social milieu wherein so many unhinged individuals go on murderous rampages, and why is the death toll so high therein?

The startlingly obvious answer: The easy availability of firearms and a toxic mythos surrounding these weapons that promotes their ownership and drowns out reasoned discourse on the subject.

Restricting the manufacture, thus profit motive, of firearms is a must ... to keep them out of the hands of criminals, psychopaths, and idiots, and that includes the cops.

The problem of evil would be more easily remedied if evil people saw themselves as evil. But evil does not arrive in the form of a new computer application (Irredeemable Wickedness, version 13. 13) that foul-minded types can download into their psyches. Evil creeps up on you when you're going about the mundane business of the day.

Will we, as a people – inculcated by cultural mythos and saturated by shallow,

sensationalist mass-media narratives – learn anything about the hideous, tragic nature of non-virtual reality violence from this latest in a long series of gun-wrought mass murder?

In grim contrast to comic book-based, movie-style, violence porn, these repeated incidents of gun violence displayed for us the effects of actual violence. These events should serve as object lessons in the consequences of having large segments of a population, stressed to the point of collective madness and dwelling in a nation that, culturally, evinces demonstrably psychotic attitudes regarding firearms.

Gun-clutching pathology – and sorry, people, that is exactly what it is – is engendered by emotionally displaced feelings of powerlessness. The ridiculous number of guns, combined with racism and wealth inequity, in this deeply troubled nation, contributes to the endless number of firearm-related tragedies that nations that have sane gun laws – meaning tight restrictions – don't suffer.

You boys and girls can swoon in all the hyper-macho, retrograde, Sarah Palin-level, Second Amendment-conflating fantasies that your besieged minds can conjure – but it will not change the reality that it is the people of this country's sacred illusions and attendant fetishizing of guns that makes worse the very situation of which they live in fear. What a waste of human life and mental real estate.

Accordingly, the work of Hollywood artificers, such as Christopher Nolan, reflects collective pathologies at large in the culture.

All too many big-budget, Hollywood action movies, epic in scale and one dimensional in content, are saturated with the empty grandiosity of fascist thought. Carl Jung noted that evil generally comes with an aura of emotional detached coldness. Apropos: The shop-worn device of the super-villain is fascist conceit – a projection of the coldness and overkill of the U.S. police state/militarist empire on imaginary villains.

Evidently, Nolan has internalized the fascist inclinations inherent to late-stage capitalism. His cinematic images are over-wrought, yet cold – a fascist paradox that are catnip to troubled personalities, such as James Holmes, whose inner torments and concomitant actions mirror the collective nature of this violence-worshipping culture.

Only a society as violently (and, I fear, irredeemably) bughouse crazy as the one extant in the U.S. would arrive at the assertion that an individual who carried out a deadly shooting rampage in a packed movie theatre could be

feigning madness, or, in the words of a corporate press headline, “James Holmes’ behavior sign of psychosis or faking it, expert says.”

In a nation that, for example, accepts as normal the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, supports state-applied torture, and the slaughter of children by predator drone attack, yet gibbers on about the latest outrage committed by some sub-cretinous, Reality Television celebrity – the standard for psychosis and the standard of so-called normal will dovetail. To paraphrase one wit: Fish should be the last creatures queried regarding the existence of water.

Phil Rockstroh is a poet, lyricist and philosopher bard living in New York City. He may be contacted at: phil@philrockstroh.com . Visit Phil’s website <http://philrockstroh.com> / And at FaceBook: <http://www.facebook.com/phil.rockstroh>

Romney Ups the Ante in Israel

Exclusive: Mitt Romney took his campaign to Israel with a belligerent speech suggesting that he, as President, would happily support an Israeli war against Iran. In a major foreign policy speech, he also ignored Palestinian rights and repeated some old Mideast canards, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney told an audience of Israelis and some wealthy pro-Israel Americans that he is prepared to employ “any and all measures” to stop Iran from gaining a nuclear weapons “capability,” a vague concept that arguably already exists.

Romney’s speech in Jerusalem on Sunday was accompanied by a comment from his top foreign policy adviser Dan Senor seeming to endorse an Israeli unilateral strike against Iran. “If Israel has to take action on its own,” Senor said, “the governor would respect that decision.”

In what was widely interpreted as an attempt by Romney to peel some Jewish votes and particularly Jewish financial support away from President Barack Obama, Romney insisted that he has long supported an aggressive strategy against Iran.

“Five years ago, at the Herzliya Conference [on Israeli security], I stated my view that Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons capability presents an intolerable threat to Israel, to America, and to the world,” Romney said on Sunday. “That

threat has only become worse.

“Now as then, the conduct of Iran’s leaders gives us no reason to trust them with nuclear material. But today, the regime in Iran is five years closer to developing nuclear weapons capability. Preventing that outcome must be our highest national security priority.

“We must not delude ourselves into thinking that containment is an option. We must lead the effort to prevent Iran from building and possessing nuclear weapons capability. We should employ any and all measures to dissuade the Iranian regime from its nuclear course, and it is our fervent hope that diplomatic and economic measures will do so. In the final analysis, of course, no option should be excluded.”

By elevating Iran’s achievement of a nuclear weapons “capability” to America’s “highest national security priority” and vowing to “employ any and all measures” to prevent that eventuality, Romney is essentially threatening war against Iran under the current situation. In that, he is going beyond the vague language used by President Obama, who himself has sounded belligerent with his phrasing about “all options on the table” to stop Iran if it moves to build a nuclear weapon.

However, the nuance here is significant, since U.S. intelligence agencies and even their Israeli counterparts have concluded that Iran has not decided to build a nuclear weapon even as it makes progress in a nuclear program that Iranian leaders say is for peaceful purposes only. Still, those lessons from a peaceful nuclear program arguably can give a country a nuclear weapons “capability.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[US/Israel: Iran NOT Building Nukes.](#)”]

In recent months, American neoconservatives and sympathetic journalists have slipped in the new weasel word “capability” in the face of complaints that the earlier formulation about Iran seeking nuclear weapons was contradicted by the U.S. intelligence assessment. For most casual readers, the subtle change was barely noted but the word “capability” can mean pretty much anything.

To deny Iran a nuclear “capability” would almost surely require a war between the United States and Iran, a course that some neocons have been quietly desiring for at least the past decade when the Iraq invasion was seen as a first step to bringing “regime change” to Iran or as some neocons joked at the time, “real men go to Tehran.”

Indeed, the massive U.S. Embassy in Baghdad which now sits increasingly idle can be best understood as the intended imperial command center for a new American dominance of the region. But those neocon plans were spoiled by the disastrous turn of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and ultimately America’s forced

military withdrawal from the country at the end of 2011.

Usual Misquote

Romney's speech in Israel was also peppered with the usual exaggerations about Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad making threats about "wiping this nation off the map." Though that quote is now widely known to be a mistranslation, U.S. leaders, including President Obama, have continued to cite it as part of their tough-talking indictment of Iranian intentions.

Indeed, repeating the bogus quote has become almost an expected signal of support for Israel. Romney even mocked those who note the mistranslation as something of Ahmadinejad apologists by adding: "only the naive or worse will dismiss it as an excess of rhetoric."

Beyond Romney's full-throated advocacy of Israeli policies in the Middle East, his speech was also notable in that he made no reference to Palestinian rights or the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Romney's references to the Palestinians were limited to his condemnation of Hamas, the militant group that now governs Gaza.

To drive his apparent disdain for Palestinian rights home, Romney referred to Jerusalem as Israel's capital, something the Obama administration avoids because the Palestinians hope that East Jerusalem might someday become the capital of their future state.

Besides ignoring Palestinian desires for statehood and self-determination, Romney finished his speech with flowery and some might say hypocritical rhetoric about the commitment of the United States and Israel to the rule of law and to democracy. He said:

"We both believe in democracy, in the right of every people to select their leaders and choose their nation's course. We both believe in the rule of law, knowing that in its absence, willful men may incline to oppress the weak. We both believe that our rights are universal, granted not by government but by our Creator.

"I believe that the enduring alliance between the State of Israel and the United States of America is more than a strategic alliance: it is a force for good in the world. America's support of Israel should make every American proud. We should not allow the inevitable complexities of modern geopolitics to obscure fundamental touchstones.

"No country or organization or individual should ever doubt this basic truth: A free and strong America will always stand with a free and strong Israel. And

standing by Israel does not mean with military and intelligence cooperation alone. We cannot stand silent as those who seek to undermine Israel, voice their criticisms. And we certainly should not join in that criticism. Diplomatic distance in public between our nations emboldens Israel's adversaries.

"By history and by conviction, our two countries are bound together. No individual, no nation, no world organization, will pry us apart. And as long as we stay together and stand together, there is no threat we cannot overcome and very little that we cannot achieve."

The New York Times reported that among the Americans flown to Israel to witness Romney's speech were casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, who has vowed to spend \$100 million to defeat Obama; Cheryl Halpern, a New Jersey Republican and advocate for Israel; Woody Johnson, owner of the New York Jets; John Miller, chief executive of the National Beef Packing Company; John Rakolta, a Detroit real estate developer; L. E. Simmons, the owner of a private-equity firm in Texas with ties to the oil industry; Paul Singer, founder of a \$20 billion hedge fund; and Eric Tanenblatt, a Romney fund-raiser in Atlanta.

[For the full text of Romney's speech, [click here](#).]

To read more of Robert Parry's writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [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.

Romney Pleases Political Donor on Israel

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is stopping in Israel to highlight his close ties to Prime Minister Netanyahu. But the visit also will showcase super Super-PAC donor Sheldon Adelson, whose money is aimed at defeating President Obama, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

In this first presidential election since the *Citizens United* decision of the Supreme Court took away Congress's legislative ability to reduce the corrupting influence of big money on the U.S. electoral process, there are worrisome manifestations of that influence every week.

For example, Mitt Romney right now is doing some fund-raising in Britain among banking nabobs on the heels of the Libor-fixing scandal. A co-chair of an event that is charging \$25,000 to \$75,000 a head to schmooze with the presumptive GOP nominee is the chief lobbyist of Barclays. He replaced in that role former Barclays chief executive Bob Diamond, who resigned (from his bank job and from his role in the Romney fund-raiser) because of his bank's central role in the scandal.

But if I had to identify one source of big money whose influence is most worrisome on issues I happen to think about a lot, it would be someone who will meet Romney at a later stop on his current overseas trip, in Israel. That source is casino magnate Sheldon Adelson.

Two things about Adelson's role in this post-*Citizens United* world stand out. One is the sheer magnitude of the money involved. Adelson appears to be on track to be the single biggest individual donor in this U.S. election year, although we may never know that for sure, given the way the bundling of political money works and the refusal of the Romney campaign to identify the sources of its bundled money.

Adelson's fortune is currently estimated at about \$24 billion. He has taken in stride the fluctuation of his wealth by many billions as shares of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation tanked during the recession before recovering, and he has repeatedly commented about how wide he intends to open his wallet to the candidate of his choice. During the primary season, that candidate was Newt Gingrich. Adelson said he would have been willing to give as much as \$100 million to Gingrich's campaign, before that campaign ended and Adelson turned his support to Romney.

The other distinguishing characteristic of Adelson is the strength of his affinity to a foreign government, not just to a foreign country but to the policies of the current government of that country. It is appropriate that Adelson will be one of the greeters when Romney arrives in Israel because, although Adelson is a U.S. citizen, his declared primary allegiance is to Israel.

Adelson once commented that when he did military service as a young man it

“unfortunately” was in a U.S. uniform rather than an Israeli one and that all he and his Israeli wife “care about is being good Zionists, being good citizens of Israel, because even though I am not Israeli born, Israel is in my heart.”

Adelson is using his fortune to push a political agenda in Israel as well as in the United States. One way he has done that is by establishing five years ago a free-distribution newspaper, *Israel Hayom*, which has become the highest-circulation daily in Israel. The paper follows a firmly rightist, pro-Netanyahu line. As a business the newspaper is a money loser, but Adelson cheerfully has indicated his willingness to continue losing money on the paper (not a significant loss, in comparison with his fortune) to get its message across.

Israel already has a government to Adelson’s liking, and he is using his money to sustain public support for it. In the United States, it is a matter of still trying to buy a government to his liking. His current hoped-for vehicle for doing that, Mitt Romney, has to date left his foreign policy largely a blank beyond slogans and the most general of themes.

This was fully in evidence in his pre-trip VFW speech, in which the paucity of specific alternatives to the Obama administration’s policies was as evident as the rhetorical vehemence with which the Obama foreign policy in general was denounced. (Jacob Heilbrunn has furnished a good guide on how to interpret that speech.)

It is possible, of course, that very specific foreign-policy ideas are firmly embedded in the candidate’s head, being kept in occultation there until he is elected. It is at least as plausible that there is much opportunity for those who would enjoy influence with a President Romney, including those most helpful in electing him, would have considerable opportunity to influence the policies that eventually emerge.

In Adelson’s case, so much money is involved that it is hard to believe that money would not buy something on matters he feels most strongly about. When Gingrich was his man, it bought a candidate who dismissed the Palestinians as an “invented” people.

Adelson probably has strong feelings about some of the same fiscal and economic matters that some other very wealthy Americans have strong feelings about. He has griped, for example, about the whole idea of progressive income taxes. But given where he has put both his money and his mouth, matters relating to Israel are of prime importance to him.

Romney and the Republicans have, of course, been trying to use sentiment toward Israel as one of the themes for bashing Obama. Here’s what Romney said about

Israel in the VFW speech:

“President Obama is fond of lecturing Israel’s leaders. He was even caught by a microphone deriding them. He has undermined their position, which was tough enough as it was. And even at the United Nations, to the enthusiastic applause of Israel’s enemies, he spoke as if our closest ally in the Middle East was the problem. The people of Israel deserve better than what they have received from the leader of the free world. And the chorus of accusations, threats, and insults at the United Nations should never again include the voice of the President of the United States.”

The efforts of politicians to win votes by exaggerating differences often makes it hard to recognize how elements of continuity and similarity may be much greater than the differences. The Obama administration’s policies toward Israel mostly have followed in the familiar bipartisan American pattern of great deference to the wishes of the Israeli government of the day.

The billions of aid and security support continue unquestioned, regardless of the difficulties that Israel causes for U.S. interests. The acceptance of, and much U.S. help for, overwhelming Israeli regional military superiority continues.

The Obama administration pointed out the unacceptability of Israeli colonization of occupied territory but then promptly caved to Netanyahu on the issue. On Iran, Obama has adopted the Israeli position about the “unacceptability” of an Iranian nuclear weapon, while saying nothing about the Israeli nuclear arsenal. And at the United Nations, it is hard to figure out what those “accusations, threats, and insults” are that supposedly have been voiced by the President, but under Obama the United States has continued to cast lonely vetoes, against the will and moral sense of the overwhelming majority of the world community, on behalf of Israel on subjects such as Israeli settlements built in occupied territory.

A markedly different U.S. course certainly could be envisioned, but it would not be a course that Romney is recommending and definitely not one that Adelson would want. Any difference between Obama’s policies on Israel and what Romney is suggesting or Adelson is seeking is the difference between usual obeisance to Israel and complete obeisance to it.

A change in this other direction would mean not only furnishing Israel with vetoes of U.N. resolutions about settlements but also not even raising the subject with the Israelis. It would mean being more careful around open microphones in commenting about how much of a problem Netanyahu is. It would mean a bigger act of outsourcing than anything done by any company controlled by

Bain Capital: the outsourcing of an important segment of U.S. foreign policy to a foreign government. That is contrary to U.S. interests, no matter which foreign country is involved.

What Adelson is doing also is ultimately contrary to the interests of Israel. Those on the Israeli Left obviously are most inclined to see his activity that way. The blatant nature of his fortune-fueled political activism has also caused some unease in Israel because of the danger of eliciting the most damaging forms of prejudice. Ira Sharkansky of Hebrew University observes:

“It’s hard to imagine a better advertisement for the Protocols of the Elders of Zion than Sheldon Adelson. A Jew who is enormously wealthy on the basis of gambling enterprises on the fringes of respectability, who does not shrink from publicity about using his wealth for Jewish causes, . . . Adelson fits in the long tradition of court Jews, using their wealth to gain access to whoever is ruling in order to benefit the Jewish community. Where Adelson differs from Jewish traditions is in making his wealth felt in front of the curtains rather than behind them.”

To the extent that Sharkansky’s concerns about the exacerbation of anti-Semitism materialize, that would be bad in general and bad for Israel. Even if they do not materialize, Sheldon Adelson is doing no favor to the country he says he loves by promoting policies that condemn it to perpetual conflict and isolation. Sometimes love is blind, even in a man smart enough to have made billions.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)

Caro’s Flawed Tale of LBJ’s Rise

Exclusive: Author Robert Caro has labored through decades of his multi-volume study of Lyndon Johnson’s life, only now reaching LBJ’s presidency in *The Passage of Power*. But the much-praised book misses or misrepresents many of the key events, writes Jim DiEugenio.

By Jim DiEugenio

The Mainstream Media (or MSM) has a long and ongoing romance with Robert Caro. Most authors have a tough time getting an ad campaign behind their books. Not

Bob Caro. Most authors have an even tougher time getting their books reviewed in mass circulation journals. Not Bob Caro.

Most authors have an almost impossible time getting interviewed in print or broadcast media that has any real reach. Not Bob Caro. Ever since he began writing his multi-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson, Caro has had the Keys to the Kingdom as far as authors go.

I can think of no other current biographer who has had the media eating out of his hand as much as Caro has. Or for as long as he has: over three decades.

I was never in the Caro fan club. In fact, I did not even read Caro's previous three volumes on Lyndon Johnson: *The Path to Power*, *Means of Ascent*, and *Master of the Senate*. I had two general reasons for not doing so.

First, I have never been impressed by a book's length. For instance, Peter Wyden's book on the Bay of Pigs invasion is almost twice as long as the volume by Trumbull Higgins. But Higgins' book is much more valuable than Wyden's.

Second, I understand the concept that some famous men are complex and multi-faceted. But I also understand the fact that, actually, *many* famous men are complex, and some complex men are more worth understanding than others.

Therefore, as an historian and author, I have been quite satisfied with reading much shorter books about Lyndon Johnson, of which there are many, in order to piece together what is important about the man.

After reading all 692 pages of *The Passage of Power* I feel no need to believe that I was wrong in that judgment. But before addressing why this book is a serious disappointment, let us give Caro his due, for there are some good things in it.

First, Caro is a skilled and supple writer. He knows how to, as Warren Hinckle used to say, "Draw a scene in prose." That is, give us the backdrop, etch in the characters, let us know what is at stake therein, describe the action, and then wind the scene down. But then, how to use a tag line from that scene to transition to the next. Caro uses this technique throughout the book and it keeps the flow going.

Caro's discussion of the 1960 race for the Democratic nomination, Johnson's choice as Vice President, and his role in John Kennedy's subsequent winning campaign is all quite good. In fact, that part of the book, which amounts to about a hundred pages, ranks with the best I have read in that category.

It is pretty clear from this account that Johnson very likely could have had the

nomination if he had not vacillated so long in getting into the race. The key would have been getting the majority of the Western state delegates.

If Johnson had done that, he would have stopped Kennedy from winning on the first ballot. And he could have easily won those delegates. The problem is that, against the predictions of his political adviser Jim Rowe, he did not send his representatives to meet with them until December of 1959. (Caro, p. 72)

By then, it was too late. Knowing the importance of those states, JFK had sent his brother Ted to tie them up months before. This was crucial, for as campaign manager Robert Kennedy was counting the votes at the convention, he told his brother Ted that their first ballot victory would come down to the last state called, namely Wyoming. (ibid, p. 107)

And Ted needed to get all of the 15 delegates to pull it off. If not, and the process went to a second ballot, they would lose the nomination. Therefore, Ted was standing with that delegation when they announced all of their votes for Kennedy. Johnson made a huge miscalculation getting into the race too late. And he also underestimated the Kennedy organization.

Caro also does a good job in explaining why Kennedy picked Johnson as his Vice President, and why Johnson accepted the position. Kennedy made the choice as a simple political decision.

After a meeting with a group of southern governors, Kennedy and campaign director Larry O'Brien decided that they simply could not win the fall race without Texas. And further, they had no chance at all of beating Nixon in Texas without Johnson. (ibid, p. 126)

On Johnson's side, he figured that if Kennedy won, he as Senate Majority Leader Johnson would not be the top Democrat in town anymore and it would not be his legislative agenda he would be passing. (ibid, p. 112)

Further, Johnson was convinced that a man branded as a southerner would not win the presidency. By accepting the vice presidency, he was getting out of Texas, getting next to a northeast liberal, and raising a more national profile.

Further, Johnson had done a study which placed the odds of becoming president from the vice president's office as much higher than gaining the office from the Senate. In fact, after Kennedy won the West Virginia primary, Johnson let it be known that he would not be averse to accepting a vice-presidential offer. (ibid., p. 116)

Johnson also communicated his willingness to House Speaker Sam Rayburn and Gov. David Lawrence of Pennsylvania. In turn, Lawrence told Kennedy that Johnson

would accept the office if he offered it to him. In fact, Johnson had hinted to a *New York Times* reporter a week before the convention that he would accept the vice presidency if his party needed him. (ibid, p. 117)

Therefore, the morning after he won the nomination, Kennedy called Johnson at his suite and told him he would be down to talk to him in a couple of hours. Figuring what was in store, Johnson met with his closest advisers: John Connally, Bobby Baker, and Rowe. They all told him that, if it came, he should accept the offer.

If he did not, Kennedy would lose both Texas and the election. And if that happened, Johnson would be blamed. But if Kennedy won, Johnson would be in a better position to take the presidency. (ibid, pgs. 118-119)

Kennedy came down and made the offer. Johnson said he would accept if Kennedy went to see his mentor House Speaker Sam Rayburn and he agreed. Kennedy did so. Rayburn told Johnson to accept. (ibid, pgs. 128-29)

RFK/LBJ Feud

The problem was Robert Kennedy. RFK never liked Johnson, even when he was working as a lawyer in the Senate. Further, Kennedy was working closely with both the labor unions and the civil rights caucus at the convention. Neither group wanted Johnson as VP.

So when they heard the unwelcome news, cries of outrage got back to RFK. Bobby then went to see Johnson. When LBJ would not meet with him personally, Bobby met with his representatives. RFK said Johnson would have to endure a brutal floor fight. Therefore he might want to withdraw. The younger Kennedy visited the Johnson suite three times with this message, even after JFK had announced Johnson as his VP to the press. (ibid, p. 136)

Most commentators, including Jeff Shesol, author of the definitive book on the LBJ/RFK feud, *Mutual Contempt*, have concluded that Bobby was acting on his own in these visits – without the authorization of his brother. (And this was what Johnson always felt.)

Caro, after measuring the arguments for and against, agrees with Shesol that this was the case. Bobby Kennedy's later arguments are simply not convincing in light of JFK's actions at the time, and the testimony of other witnesses. (ibid, p. 138)

But the upshot of Bobby's independent maneuvering to get Johnson off the ticket was significant. Up to that point, Robert Kennedy did not like Johnson. After this incident, Johnson hated Robert Kennedy.

The third aspect of this section of the book that is exemplary is Caro's portrayal of Johnson's success in the 1960 campaign. Johnson worked tirelessly for the election of the ticket.

Like a modern-day William Jennings Bryan, Johnson got on board a 13-car train called the "LBJ Special." He then visited town after town after town from morning to night for weeks on end. Johnson understood his job was to win the South, especially his home state. This was not easy since Dwight Eisenhower had made a significant dent in the Democrats' Solid South in 1956 by winning five of the 11 states of the Confederacy. (ibid, pgs. 144-45)

Further, Eisenhower had taken Texas not just in 1956 but also in '52. There can be little doubt that without Johnson, Kennedy would have lost not just Texas, but probably three other states in the South.

At the start of the election, the Republicans thought they would take seven states in the South. Excluding Mississippi, which voted for an independent slate, the Democrats ended up winning seven states, including Texas. (ibid, p. 155)

Caro rightly concludes that Bobby Kennedy was wrong and his older brother was right. Without Johnson, Massachusetts Sen. Kennedy most likely would not have become President Kennedy.

Sketching Characters

There are some other good things in the book. Caro sketches in the Bobby Baker and Don Reynolds scandals that were in process respectively at *Life* magazine and in the Senate at the time of Kennedy's murder on Nov. 22, 1963.

The Baker scandal was about a double-cross in an influence-peddling scandal, the Reynolds case was more like bribery. LBJ was indirectly involved in the former, he appeared directly involved in the latter. Both scandals seemed to disappear after Kennedy was killed.

Caro does a nice job showing how obsessed with getting good press in Texas Johnson was. He got a reporter investigating his fortune in TV stations removed from that assignment. He then got the *Houston Post* to supplement their negative reporting on him with more positive reporting.

But the problem with *The Passage of Power* is that all the above takes up about 125 pages, or less than 20 percent of the book. The vast majority of what Caro has written here seems to me quite questionable, especially in light of all the declassified documents that have become available about the Kennedy administration.

One thing that struck me was Caro's reliance on secondary sources. The last installment of this series, *Master of the Senate*, was published a decade ago. So Caro had 10 years, and much money to dig into the two million pages of declassified files made available at National Archives II.

To be frank, he didn't make much use of them. And the materials he did use are things that are quite easy to attain today. So much so that they are on YouTube, e.g. Johnson's phone call with Sen. Richard Russell to cajole him into joining the Warren Commission.

But beyond that, some of the books Caro chose for his information on the Kennedy administration are surprising. Are we really to believe that the celebrated author could find time to read *The Kennedys* by Peter Collier and David Horowitz but he couldn't find time to read *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* by Richard Mahoney?

That somehow Caro thought it was important to read Seymour Hersh's discredited *The Dark Side of Camelot*, but it wasn't important to read John Newman's milestone work, *JFK and Vietnam*? With these choices made, one can see why Caro's discussion of the Kennedy administration, although longer, is no more sophisticated or nuanced than the work of Chris Matthews. [See Consortiumnews.com's [["Why Mr. Hardball Found JFK Elusive."](#)]]

Missing JFK's Achievements

Reading Caro, and exaggerating only slightly, one would think that President Kennedy did three things while president: oversaw the Bay of Pigs invasion, supervised the Cuban Missile Crisis, and sent troops to allow James Meredith to attend Ole Miss (a key event in the civil right struggle which Caro underplays.)

But yet, entire books have been written about Kennedy's wide domestic program. The problem is, you won't find them in Caro's bibliography. To list just three good ones absent from his bookshelf: *Promises Kept* by Irving Bernstein, *Battling Wall Street* by Donald Gibson, and *John F. Kennedy: The Promise Revisited* by Paul Harper and Joann Krieg.

To use just one example of this imbalance: Caro never even bothers to explain what President Kennedy's strategy was in regards to civil rights. Bernstein spends two chapters explaining this subject in detail. (Bernstein, pgs. 44-117)

Kennedy understood that he could not send a civil rights bill to Congress in 1961. It would simply die in committee, pigeonholed by southern committee chairmen. Understanding this, he decided to spend his first two years going as far as he could in the use of executive orders in order to force the issue and make it high profile.

The violence at Ole Miss in 1961, where two people were shot, and many injured was a prime example. Between U.S. Marshals, the Army Engineer Corps, Army M.P.'s and the National Guard, JFK had over 2,000 troops on hand to protect Meredith. For two years, Meredith was escorted by military police to and from each class.

But this is only one example among many. I could also point out Kennedy sending in the National Guard and Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to confront Gov. George Wallace at the University of Alabama. The point is Kennedy was waiting for a huge public moment where the South would overplay its hand and northerners would be repelled by the brutality they saw.

It happened in April 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. There, amid the arrest of 3,000 people, rabid German shepherd attack dogs, and the use of fire hoses by Police Chief Bull Connor to break up demonstrations, Kennedy decided the time had come to send a civil rights bill to Congress.

As Bernstein notes, "The Birmingham crisis was decisive in making civil rights the central domestic issue of the decade." The sight of this ugly conflict on the nightly news was shocking to average Americans. And Kennedy wryly remarked that the black leaders there, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth, owed a lot to Connor. (Bernstein, p. 95)

Now, in any chronicle of the civil rights movement in the years 1960-65, the siege of Birmingham looms quite large. Yet, in over 600 pages of text, Caro spends six lines on it. (Caro, p. 257)

Recall, the title of the series is "The Years of Lyndon Johnson." Caro chose that title because he explicitly states he does not just wish to tell LBJ's story, but to depict the temper of the times. (See pages xvi-xii) How can you do that without really dealing with Birmingham?

Ignoring MLK's Speech

But yet, there is something missing in *The Passage of Power* that is even more surprising than that. Caro at least mentions, however briefly, Birmingham. He doesn't even mention King's great "I Have a Dream" speech and the March on Washington in August 1963.

The impact of that speech was galvanizing. And President Kennedy was the first white politician to support King's rally in public. He then handed control over the huge demonstration to his brother Robert. (Bernstein, p. 114)

When I noted Caro had skipped this episode, I began to detect an unnatural pattern in the book. No objective historian attempting to depict the struggle to pass a Civil Rights bill in 1963-64 could possibly discount the impact of those

two events in embedding the issue into the consciousness of the public, the media and the politicians in Washington D. C.

Caro does so because he wants to minimize the impact of Kennedy and King in the eventual passage of the bill. Why? Because he wants to hand the trophy to Johnson. Which is absurd because the bill was already in Congress when King made his great speech. It had been sent up to Capitol Hill on June 19, 1963. (Bernstein, pgs. 105-07)

In a very tough fight, Kennedy had shepherded it through the Judiciary Committee. In November, it was in the hands of the Rules Committee. That committee was helmed by the 80-year-old arch-conservative, arch-segregationist Howard Smith of Virginia. And he was going to do everything in his power to stop the bill from coming to the floor.

In the face of those circumstances, the only way to get the bill out of Smith's hands and to a floor vote was through a discharge petition. Which was simple. Why? Because the Democrats had a large majority in the House. The bill eventually passed there 290-130. Caro somehow wants to give Johnson kudos for thinking up this strategy. As if that dolt Kennedy would not have realized this tactic when he got back from Dallas.

Caro's imbalance is also clear when he describes the procedure to pass the bill in the Senate. As Bernstein notes, Kennedy always understood that the real battle would be there because of the ability of southern senators to filibuster. So he realized that he needed the votes of liberal and northern Republicans in order to defeat the filibuster through a cloture vote.

Caro wants the reader to think that only with Johnson as president could the Democrats have understood that the key to defeating the filibuster was Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois. Not so. Kennedy understood this in the summer of 1963. (Bernstein, p. 106) And Kennedy got along quite well with Dirksen. With Dirksen on board to break the filibuster, the bill passed handily by a vote of 71-29.

One will find Caro using these same rhetorical tactics with the other piece of legislation that Kennedy originated and Johnson passed. Namely the tax cut bill. Again, Caro promotes the feeling that somehow this bill had been floundering around Congress for years and Kennedy was completely lost about how to get it passed. Not true.

Kennedy sent his tax bill to Capitol Hill after he made his State of the Union address in 1963. It was 300 pages long and took five months to write. (Bernstein, p. 157) The hearings went on for two months and 267 witnesses

testified.

Because budget and finance matters originate in the House, everyone wanted to testify and everyone wanted input. But it finally came out of the Ways and Means Committee in August, and was passed by the House in late September. And unlike what Caro writes, the Republicans in the House made no effort to tie the tax bill to the civil rights bill. (Bernstein, p. 159)

The Senate Finance Committee did not open its hearings until Oct. 15, 1963. So, far from being stranded or lost in the Senate, the bill was in the middle of hearings at the time of Kennedy's death. Kennedy expected those hearings to end at the end of November.

He was obviously not around to manipulate things in case Harry Byrd, chairman of the committee, had any problems at the conclusion of the hearings. Byrd did. He would not grant the tax-cut bill unless the budget was cut to below \$100 billion, without accounting gimmicks. So Johnson did that. He then called in Byrd and told him that he could now tell his friends that he made the president do his bidding before he voted for his bill. Which Byrd did. (Caro, p. 553)

Caro presents this as Johnsonian legislative genius. Well, if you cut out almost everything Kennedy did on the bill, and imply that JFK could not figure out how to please Byrd and massage his ego, then yes you can present it as such.

MSM's Praise

What I have just described, the passing of the tax and civil rights bill has been praised by the MSM as being the highlights of the book. But as I have noted, Caro presents a very curtailed and unbalanced picture of the passage of both. He also tries to imply that Kennedy kept Johnson isolated from all facets of the civil rights effort. Again, this is not accurate.

When Kennedy gave his famous June 11, 1963, televised speech on the moral evils of racism, Johnson had input into it and was right in the room when he gave it. Kennedy placed Johnson in charge of the integration of government contracting. When Kennedy met with black leaders before sending his civil rights bill to Congress, Johnson was sitting right next to him. (Bernstein, p. 108)

And when Kennedy met with King after the March on Washington, Johnson was again, standing right next to the President. (See photo facing page 103 in Bernstein.)

From here, the book gets worse. One would think that if an author were presenting a history of the Kennedy years, which Caro is in large part doing, one would have to explain why Kennedy's presidency inspired so much hope and excitement. Well, Caro doesn't do that.

If Caro is unfair to Kennedy on the domestic side, he is worse than unfair in dealing with Kennedy's foreign policy. There is very little background on Kennedy's interest in the Third World during the Fifties. Like Chris Matthews, Caro does not mention Kennedy's visit to Saigon in 1951 and his meeting with Edmund Gullion. (Richard Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, pgs. 14-15)

In this day and age, if an author leaves that incident out then you know he has not done his homework on the man. For it was Gullion who altered Kennedy's view of the Cold War and how it was being fought in the Third World. There is also no mention of Kennedy's attack on Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles for contemplating the use of atomic weapons at Dien Bien Phu to bail out the French in 1954. (ibid, p. 16)

Caro devotes all of seven lines to Kennedy's great and daring 1957 speech on the French colonial war in Algeria. (Caro, p. 32) So it naturally follows that Caro mentions not a word about how Kennedy broke the Eisenhower/Dulles Cold War consensus after he was inaugurated in 1961. And he did so on more than one front: in Laos, Indonesia, Congo, and of course Vietnam.

By leaving all this out, there can be no closing of the circle, because by 1965, Johnson had reversed course and gone back to the Eisenhower/Dulles formula in all these places, plus the Dominican Republic. But this is a narrative arc that Caro apparently wanted to avoid even though it's undeniably true.

How he will avoid it in the next volume escapes me, because there is no doubt that Johnson left the United States a much worse off country than the one he inherited. A country that was ripe to be taken over by the likes of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. And the rest, as they say, is history.

If there is a tragic arc from 1960-68, and there is, then that is the story line to hew to: How Johnson took a country at relative peace and great prosperity and drove it into war, economic stagflation and race riots. But you won't find it here.

LBJ's Descent

In the immediate aftermath of Kennedy's death, clearly the two most important things Johnson did were to 1.) Convene his first Vietnam meeting on Nov. 24, 1963, and, a few days later, 2.) Appoint the Warren Commission. Caro spends all of two pages describing the former. (Pgs. 401-03)

For a point of comparison, when German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard visits Johnson at his ranch in Texas a month later, Caro spends four pages describing it. (Caro, pgs. 506-10) Yet nothing of enduring substance happened there. As described by other authors, most notably John Newman and James Douglass,

Johnson's first meeting on Vietnam was quite notable.

First, Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge was in attendance. He had been summoned to Washington by President Kennedy. But Kennedy had already made the decision to get rid of Lodge. (James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, p. 375)

The reason Kennedy wanted to get rid of the ambassador was because he did not approve of the handling of the overthrow of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, which had resulted in the killing of both Diem and his brother Nhu. Caro characterizes Lodge's role in that overthrow by saying that Lodge "had not been at all opposed to the coup. . . ." (Caro, p. 401)

Understatement does not come any richer than that. For both James Douglass and John Newman demonstrate beyond question that, from the moment he arrived in Saigon, Lodge worked assiduously to get rid of Diem by any means. This went as far as having CIA station chief John Richardson removed since Richardson supported Diem (Douglass, p. 186)

But this is only the beginning of Caro's distortion of this meeting, for the author cannot bring himself to type the words NSAM 263. This was the order issued by Kennedy in early October to begin the withdrawal of American advisers from Vietnam. A thousand men were to be removed by the end of the year with the complete withdrawal to be finished by 1965.

Caro describes some of Kennedy's plan, but does not actually name the National Security Action Memorandum. Further, he ascribes NSAM 263 to a report handed to Kennedy in October 1963 by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor (Caro, p. 402), as if Kennedy had just come up with this idea upon their return from Saigon.

This is nonsense on multiple grounds. First, that report was not even written by McNamara and Taylor. It was composed in Washington by presidential military aide Victor Krulak, but under Kennedy's supervision. And far from being presented to Kennedy by those two men, it was given to them by the President to present to him. (John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, p. 401)

Kennedy was not leaving anything to chance about his intent to withdraw from South Vietnam, for he had been planning this withdrawal for two years. In the fall of 1961 he had sent John K. Galbraith to Saigon in order to counter a report by Walt Rostow and Taylor to insert combat troops into South Vietnam. Galbraith's report had later been delivered to McNamara. (Newman, p. 236)

And in May of 1963, the actual withdrawal of American advisers had been planned at a large meeting in Hawaii with the entire in-country team from South Vietnam

in attendance. (Douglass, p. 128)

So far from being as Caro says, "tentative", or beginning in October of 1963 with McNamara and Taylor, the withdrawal plan had been firmly decided many months before by Kennedy himself.

Further, Caro states that because of the overthrow of Diem, Kennedy may have later altered his view of the withdrawal plan. He fails to note that in reply to a press conference question of Nov. 12, which was after Diem's overthrow, Kennedy said his goal "was to bring Americans home." (Newman, p. 426) And there is no evidence in the record that Kennedy changed his mind on this issue prior to his death.

Caro mentions OPLAN 34A, the plan for covert operations against North Vietnam. The seed for this plan was approved by Johnson as part of NSAM 273 in late November of 1963. Caro actually calls it a "reaffirmation." (Caro, p. 403) If what he means is a reaffirmation of Kennedy's policies, then this is just wrong.

As John Newman noted in *JFK and Vietnam*, Johnson tried to characterize his signing of the NSAM in the same terms i.e. as a continuance of Kennedy's policy. (Newman, p. 445) Newman wrote that this was "extremely misleading" because, first, Kennedy never saw the draft of the NSAM that National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy presented to Johnson.

Therefore, it is not known what he would have done with it. But we do know that Bundy held stronger views on the war than Kennedy did. Because Bundy admitted this to Gordon Goldstein, who was to be Bundy's co-author for his posthumously published memoir *Lessons in Disaster*.

Johnson's War

It turns out that Johnson had stronger views on the war than even Bundy, because he made three modifications to NSAM 273, and all of them were escalatory. The most important change was the one in which Johnson allowed for direct U. S. Navy involvement in provocative patrols against the North.

This later resulted in the DESOTO missions in which American destroyers worked in tandem with South Vietnamese speedboats in violation of North Vietnam's territorial waters. That operation led to the Gulf of Tonkin incident of August 1964, which Johnson used to launch the first air attacks against North Vietnam.

Johnson's new and militant tone was apparent at his first Vietnam meeting. CIA Director John McCone actually wrote about it in his notes to the meeting. In fact, he directly contrasted Johnson's stance with Kennedy's. McCone wrote that Johnson was tired of Americans emphasizing social reforms and being "do-

gooders.” (Newman, p. 443)

In his memoir *In Retrospect*, McNamara also noted the difference in the two men on Vietnam. McNamara wrote that, at this meeting, LBJ was much more forceful on winning in Vietnam because he saw it as part of the storied struggle between America and the communist forces of China and Russia. (McNamara, p. 102)

Both Bundy and McNamara agree that Kennedy, who was much more sophisticated about the Cold War, did not see Vietnam that way. But the reader of Caro is not aware of this important distinction because the author has cut out Kennedy’s 1951 visit to Saigon, his meeting with Gullion, and his protest against the Eisenhower/Dulles attempt to use atomic weapons in support of the French in 1954.

In fact, during this meeting, Johnson explicitly compared the loss of South Vietnam with the loss of China in 1949. (Caro, p. 402) This is a comparison that no one recalls Kennedy ever making. And it continued after the meeting adjourned when Bill Moyers walked into the room afterwards.

The new president said to Moyers that he intended to “stand by our word. I want ‘em to get off their butts and get out there in those jungles and whip hell out of some Communists.” (Newman, p. 445) This crucial dialogue with Moyers is not in Caro’s book. Again, no one can recall Kennedy ever talking like this about Vietnam.

Caro picks up with the Vietnam issue again about one month later. Here, Caro quotes Johnson as saying that the earlier intelligence reports he had on Vietnam had misled him into “over-optimism.” (Caro, p. 532) He now needed hard facts and not “wishful thinking.”

So Johnson sent McNamara to Vietnam to come back with the real story on what was happening there. McNamara returned and told Johnson that the situation was very disturbing, and the country may soon be neutralized or be subject to a communist takeover.

Caro reports this with no comment and goes no further with it except to say that 1.) Johnson announced the thousand man withdrawal had been completed when it had not, and 2.) Johnson continued to plan for covert operations in secret. (Caro, p. 535) Caro never asks himself, why would McNamara announce a thousand-man withdrawal in October under Kennedy based upon intelligence reports, but then, just two month later, tell Johnson that Vietnam was in danger of falling?

The answer to this question, of course, is the theme of Newman’s book, which, apparently, Caro never consulted. Kennedy understood there was an intelligence deception going on about Vietnam.

And he was going to use the (false) rosy reports to justify his withdrawal plan, thus hoisting the Pentagon perpetrators on their own petard. But when the military understood what Kennedy was doing, they now began to substitute and backdate more realistic reports. (Newman, pgs. 425, 441)

Moving McNamara

When McNamara understood where Johnson was coming from, that a new sheriff was in town, he knew which reports to get. The completeness with which Caro misses this point is shocking because it appears that Johnson *knew* what the real reports were all along. He was getting them through a back channel provided by his military aide Howard Burris. (Newman, p. 225)

So, while McNamara was telling Congress how well the war was proceeding, Johnson was getting a much more realistic view, namely that the Army of South Vietnam could not put a dent in the incursions by the Viet Cong. In fact, the Viet Cong attacks were growing in frequency and size.

Johnson actually encouraged Burris to provide him with this information. In other words, Johnson was fully aware of the duplicity in the reporting. When he sent McNamara to Saigon, he understood what he would get when he came back.

In other words, this was actually done more for McNamara's sake than for Johnson's. LBJ immediately knew where he was headed. He wanted to make sure McNamara understood that also.

But it is not accurate to say that once McNamara brought back the new and negative reports Johnson only contemplated further covert action. Within a month after getting McNamara's new reports, the Joint Chiefs sent a proposal to the White House recommending both bombing of the North and the insertion of U.S. combat troops. (Gordon Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p. 108)

These were not covert actions, they were overt acts of war. And these are things Kennedy would never countenance in his presence. Less than six weeks later, the Pentagon passed another proposal to the White House for proposed action against the North. It included bombing, the mining of North Vietnamese harbors, a naval blockade, and possible use of tactical atomic weapons in case China intervened. (Ibid, Goldstein.)

Caro extends his discussion of the Vietnam issue up to an announcement made by Johnson on March 7, 1964. The Joint Chiefs made this proposal to Johnson on March 2. So the decision by Caro not to include it in the text seems arbitrary, especially in light of the fact that this proposal would become the basis for NSAM 288, Johnson's formal plan for waging war against the North.

In just three months, Johnson had now done what Kennedy did not do in three years: assemble full-scale battle plans to attack North Vietnam. I would think a lot more of *The Passage of Power* if Caro would delineate these pretty obvious distinctions.

Warren Commission

As bad as Caro is in his discussion of the crucial Vietnam issue, he is perhaps just as bad in his discussion of Johnson's appointment of the Warren Commission. Although Caro ostensibly devotes a chapter to this subject, it's actually less than that since he spends part of that chapter describing the layout and history of the Oval Office. In reality it's about 10 pages.

Caro understands that Johnson's original plan for an investigation of JFK's death was to hold a Texas Court of Inquiry supported by the FBI. Johnson and FBI Director Hoover had talked about this, and up until Nov. 25, 1963, this was the operative plan.

But something happened on Sunday the 24th that, unbelievably, Caro leaves out of his narrative. Namely the murder of Lee Oswald by Jack Ruby in the basement of the Dallas Police Department, with the suspect literally surrounded by the Dallas Police. And the shooting was broadcast live on television.

This alerted certain members of the Power Elite that the image of Texas had taken a horrific beating in the last two days. In order, the President had been killed in broad daylight, a police officer had then been shot dead on a city street, and now the only suspect had been murdered live on television while in the direct custody of the police.

Texas authorities were now going to investigate what appeared to be a Wild West Show with live ammunition? Who would accept the credibility of such a verdict?

Within two hours of Oswald's murder by Ruby, forces from outside the White House began to work on changing Johnson's mind on the matter. Eugene Rostow, Dean of Yale Law School and brother of Walt Rostow who would be Johnson's National Security Adviser called the White House and talked to assistant Bill Moyers.

Rostow suggested a national blue-ribbon commission to investigate the three murders in Texas. And in this call, Rostow revealed that he had already talked to Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. (*The Assassinations*, edited by James DiEugenio and Lisa Pease, p. 7)

Although it appears that Rostow was the first person to call the White House and suggest an investigatory model like the Warren Commission, Caro doesn't mention him. Rostow seemed to have an effect since Hoover told Walter Jenkins on Nov. 24

that in talking to Katzenbach, the Deputy AG thought a presidential commission should make a determination on the assassination and issue a report. (ibid, p. 9)

But the next morning, in a call with Hoover, Johnson still expressed displeasure with the commission idea. Then, at 10:40 a.m., nationally recognized columnist Joe Alsop called Johnson. (Caro says that Johnson called Alsop, but all one has to do is read the opening lines of the phone transcript to see it's the other way around.)

Caro spends less than a paragraph on this call. What is worse, he only reports the conversation from Johnson's side. The marvel of this phone call is the extraordinary persistence and use of rhetorical devices by Alsop to get LBJ to seriously consider the idea of a presidential commission.

Alsop knows just what buttons to push with Johnson to get his guard down on this issue. By the end of the call, Johnson, who previously had been vehemently opposed to the idea, is now willing to consider it. (ibid, pgs. 11-15) You would hardly get any of this from Caro's brief review of this important conversation.

In his discussion of the recruitment of the actual Warren Commissioners, Caro leaves out another important piece of information. As the author notes, Sen. Richard Russell was reluctant to join. One of his excuses was that it would be too time consuming.

Johnson's reply to this is remarkable. He says it won't take any time since all Russell will be doing is evaluating a report that Hoover had already made. (Transcript of 11/29/63 call made at 8:55 p.m.) Since Johnson had been talking to Hoover regularly, he must have known that Hoover had solely focused on Oswald as his only suspect since the afternoon of the assassination.

Therefore, LBJ was asking his close friend and mentor to assist in a non-investigation of Kennedy's assassination in which the chief investigator made up his mind the day of the shooting. Caro leaves this out. Apparently, he didn't want to tell us that the fix was in and his man Johnson knew about it. (Caro, p. 448)

Scaring the Chief Justice

In his conversations with Russell and Chief Justice Earl Warren, Johnson used a common technique to get both of them to serve on the Commission. It was the threat of thermonuclear war with tens of millions of Americans killed.

Why and how did Johnson come up with this? After leaving New Orleans in late September, Oswald allegedly went to Mexico City by bus. While there he

supposedly visited both the Cuban and Soviet consulates in order to obtain something called an in-transit visa for Russia by way of Cuba. He was ill prepared to attain it, and did not secure the visa while there.

The night of the assassination, David Phillips's aide, Anne Goodpasture, delivered a tape that was supposed to be Oswald speaking to a consular official to FBI agent Eldon Rudd for delivery to Hoover. (John Newman, *Oswald and the CIA*, p. 653, 2008 edition.)

The day of the assassination, the FBI called the CIA and found out that, while in Mexico City, Oswald had allegedly spoken to a man named Valery Kostikov, a KGB agent under foreign service cover in the Russian consulate. The CIA then added that Kostikov was in charge of KGB assassinations in the Western Hemisphere. (ibid, p. 631)

In other words, a former defector to Russia, who was working for communist causes in New Orleans, had met a KGB assassination specialist seven weeks before he supposedly killed the President. This is where Johnson found this nuclear holocaust material to use with both Russell and Warren. He actually alludes to it directly on occasion to both men. (Douglass, pgs. 83, 231) Johnson told Russell that this threat brought Warren to the brink of tears.

Caro does not explain the Oswald in Mexico City angle being the source for the nuclear holocaust threat. Neither does the author say what happened as a result of Johnson's hanging this specter of a mushroom cloud over Warren. It intimidated Warren down to his toenails.

At the first executive session meeting of the Warren Commission, the Chief Justice came out meek as a lamb. In essence, Warren did not want to do any investigation. He wanted to rely on the FBI. He did not want to hold public hearings, he did not want to hire investigators, and he actually did not even want to call any witnesses! (Executive session meeting of 12/5/63, pgs. 1,2)

In other words, Johnson's warning about Armageddon had effectively neutralized Warren into not wanting to investigate Kennedy's murder.

A Fake Voice

But that's not the worst part. The worst part is this: the evidence about Oswald in Mexico City and doing what he allegedly did at the two consulates was dubious. The voice on the tapes turned out not to be Oswald's. But it's still worse: Johnson *knew that* when he used the threat of nuclear destruction on Russell and Warren!

For Hoover called Johnson within two days of getting the tapes. Hoover had

agents who questioned Oswald in Dallas listen to them and they told him the voice on the tapes was not Oswald's. The Director then relayed that message to the new president.

The most obvious way that a false voice could have occurred on the tapes is if the plot was an internal one. Consciously or not, Johnson ignored that fact and proceeded as if the only suspects could be foreign. To say that this ploy worked does not do it justice.

In still another part of the story that Caro does not tell, Richard Russell turned out to be the most honest Warren Commissioner. He perceived very soon that what was happening was a cover-up. He actually composed a letter of resignation to Johnson that he never delivered. He was so disgusted with the proceedings that he actually pursued his own private inquiry, which came to contrary conclusions than the Commission's. Again, Caro ignores this. (Dick Russell, *On the Trail of the JFK Assassins*, pgs. 126-27)

All of this, using knowingly false information to instigate a cover-up about Kennedy's death, ignoring the possibility of a domestic plot of which he had prima facie evidence of, making his friend Russell then serve as part of that cover-up, something which Russell regretted until his death, somehow this is deemed as praiseworthy by Caro. (Caro, pgs. 450-51, 600)

But for me, that's still not the worst part. Because Warren was essentially neutered by Johnson, the man who came to dominate the Commission was former CIA Director Allen Dulles.

Dulles was the man who deceived Kennedy about the Bay of Pigs operation. When that doomed endeavor capsized, there were two investigations into it. One by the CIA, and one by the White House.

As a result of these inquiries, President Kennedy decided to fire Dulles, thereby ending the longest reign ever by a CIA Director. So the question then became: If that were the case, why would Johnson appoint Dulles to the Warren Commission? Well, Caro says Johnson didn't really appoint him. He only did so at Robert Kennedy's request. (Caro, p. 442)

What does the author base this startling statement on? A diary entry made by Johnson for his upcoming memoir in 1969. Now, let us recall that by 1968 Johnson was facing a ruined presidency. He could not even run for reelection since he faced certain defeat at the hands of his own party.

If he had run, he would have been trounced in the Democratic primaries by his longtime antagonist RFK. Johnson had left the Democratic Party so divided that Richard Nixon defeated Vice President Hubert Humphrey for the White House.

Humphrey had lost in part because Johnson would not let him denounce the disaster of the Vietnam War until too late in the race.

Johnson was so bitter about the possibility of Bobby Kennedy becoming president that, as Robert Dallek revealed in his book *Flawed Giant*, Johnson wanted Nelson Rockefeller to run on the Republican side because he didn't think Nixon could beat Kennedy.

Collapsed Presidency

Further, by this time, most of the American public knew that the Warren Commission was a flimsy cover-up designed to conceal the true circumstances of JFK's murder. For this was after the publication of books by critics like Mark Lane, Sylvia Meagher, Harold Weisberg, and Josiah Thompson. It was also after the discoveries about Oswald in New Orleans by DA Jim Garrison.

So both the Commission that Johnson had appointed and his presidency had fallen apart. But further, in 1969, Robert Kennedy was dead. So he could not deny Johnson's accusation. When Johnson called Sen. Russell in 1963, Russell asked him if Robert Kennedy had suggested any Commissioners. Johnson said no. (Caro, p. 445)

Most historians will tell you that when there is an inconsistency in an individual's testimony, the witness testimony nearest to the event should be believed, especially in light of the circumstances I have listed.

Yet Caro chooses to believe the statement from five years later. But further, the fact that Caro bought into this shows his poor primary research on the Kennedy years, especially the Bay of Pigs, for one of the chief investigators into the Bay of Pigs debacle during the White House inquiry was Robert Kennedy.

Suspecting Dulles had tricked his brother into a hopeless mission, RFK went after Dulles mercilessly. He then had his father Joseph call Robert Lovett who the elder Kennedy had served with under Eisenhower on a supervisory board over the CIA.

Lovett told RFK that he and David Bruce had written a report about Dulles for Eisenhower. They concluded that Dulles had completely altered the Agency from its original intelligence-gathering mission. Dulles had made it into a rogue organization that was irresponsibly replacing foreign governments and making America into a bogeyman in the Third World.

Lovett told RFK that he, Joe Kennedy and Bruce had tried to have Dulles fired. They could not since Eisenhower was influenced by Allen's brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. All this important information is in Arthur

Schlesinger's book *Robert Kennedy and His Times*. (See pgs. 474-76)

That book is in Caro's bibliography. Are we to believe that he didn't notice it enough to make a note of it? But further, after RFK got his brother to fire Allen Dulles, he then asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk if there were any more members of the Dulles family still serving in the administration.

Rusk replied that Allen had a sister named Eleanor who worked in the State Department. RFK told him to fire her also because "He didn't want any more of the Dulles family around." (Leonard Mosley, *Dulles*, p. 473)

But yet, if one believes Caro, after finding out about Allen Dulles's duplicity in the Bay of Pigs, and being so repulsed by it that he wanted no member of the Dulles family in the administration, we are to believe that RFK asked Johnson to appoint Dulles to investigate the suspicious death of his brother. Add to that the fact, as David Talbot notes, that Bobby first suspected that the CIA had killed JFK. (*Brothers*, pgs. 6-7)

To pile a howler onto all this, Caro writes that Operation Mongoose was still operative on Nov. 22, 1963, with RFK in charge. In fact, Mongoose had been disbanded after the Missile Crisis, many months before the assassination. (Morris Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution*, p. 151)

I could go on and on about the further shortcomings of this inflated and much overrated book. The worst thing about it is that it does not teach you more about the era Caro is describing. Because his leading character the man Caro chose to devote decades of his life to did little in these years, Caro decided to make him more attractive by diminishing those around him. (In addition to not describing the March on Washington, Caro does not even mention Malcolm X.)

That technique does not make for good history because it shortchanges us on facts. But in *The Passage of Power*, Caro does not seem very interested in facts. He wants to construct a narrative first, with Johnson as the lead actor in it. Even though, in these years, he wasn't.

With what Caro does here, I don't look forward to the final volume. Now that I have seen him operate close up, he reminds me of the likes of Stephen Ambrose and David McCullough. That is, historians who worship success more than the truth.

Jim DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era.

The Vanity of Perfectionism

Exclusive: As President Obama faces a tough reelection fight, some on the Left vow to sit it out or vote for a third party, saying support for Obama would dirty them. But there is another moral imperative, to mitigate the harm a U.S. president can inflict on the world's people and the planet itself, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Some Americans view elections as a time to express their disappointment or even their anger at the shortcomings of the major party candidates closest to their own positions, a tendency particularly noticeable on the Left. In recent decades, this behavior has contributed to a string of Democratic defeats at the presidential level Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Jimmy Carter in 1980 and Al Gore in 2000 as well as key setbacks in Congress in 1980, 1994 and 2010.

And, with its disproportionate prevalence on the American Left, this voting pattern now threatens to cost Barack Obama a second term. Some on the Left feel no compunction about aiding in Obama's defeat even if it means installing Mitt Romney, an unabashed one-percenter in the White House.

Romney also would likely be accompanied by a Republican-controlled Congress with a mandate to complete the dismantling of the New Deal at home and, abroad, to extend the Afghan War and possibly start a new war with Iran. So the question is: should politics be an expression of your feelings or your expectation of consequences?

For the past 40-plus years, this "lesser-evil" debate has been fought primarily on the Left in America. By contrast, the Right tends to challenge Republican candidates in primaries but then lines up behind the party nominees whoever they are.

Progressives have shown less determination to fight for control of the Democratic Party, preferring instead to vote for third-party candidates or simply express their displeasure by sitting out November elections.

While brushing aside alarms about the dangers from the Republicans, many progressives instead focus on the failures and misdeeds of the Democrats. Humphrey was too slow in opposing the Vietnam War; Carter shifted too much to the center; Gore supported the NAFTA trade agreement and military intervention in Yugoslavia; and Obama continued prosecuting the "war on terror" (albeit by a different name and in a more targeted fashion) and didn't do enough to enact

progressive priorities.

Much Worse?

While there is surely merit in all these complaints, the other side of the debate would note – from a progressive perspective – that the Republican alternative is often worse, sometimes much worse.

Indeed, one way to view this question is to ask: What might the world look like if the “lesser-evil” Democrat had prevailed in those earlier elections? What if Richard Nixon had lost in 1968, Ronald Reagan in 1980, and George W. Bush in 2000? Would Americans and the people of the planet be better off?

We now know, for instance, that in 1968, President Lyndon Johnson was serious about negotiating an end to the Vietnam War and was closing in on that objective. The evidence is also overwhelming that Nixon’s campaign went behind Johnson’s back to sabotage the peace talks, denying Vice President Humphrey a last-minute boost and enabling Nixon to hang on for a narrow victory.

Nixon then continued the Vietnam War for four more years, while infusing U.S. politics with his paranoid win-at-all-cost poison.

Though many progressives in 1968 may have felt justified in expressing their anger at Johnson and Humphrey by boycotting the Democratic campaign, the practical effect of that behavior was to turn the U.S. government over to a dangerous individual, Nixon, whose policies not only extended the unimaginable horror across Southeast Asia but helped overthrow Chile’s democratic government in 1973 and unleashed a spasm of right-wing terror across Latin America.

For all his faults on the Vietnam War, Humphrey would have supported Johnson’s efforts to bring the war to a close quickly and would have worked to refocus the U.S. government on domestic priorities, like poverty and racism. Humphrey had long been a stalwart for civil rights and economic fairness. The United States also would have been spared the Watergate scandal and the ugly way it changed American politics.

Anger at Carter

In 1980, many progressives were angry with President Carter for shifting the Democratic Party toward the center, a trend that prompted a primary challenge from Sen. Edward Kennedy.

After defeating Kennedy, Carter had trouble rallying the Left behind him heading into the fall election against Ronald Reagan (whose campaign apparently had learned some of Nixon’s old tricks and undercut Carter’s efforts to negotiate

freedom for 52 Americans held hostage in Iran).

It was common to think then and it is conventional wisdom now that Carter was an inept president who lacked a grand vision and over-emphasized issues like alternative energy, human rights, arms control with the Soviets, and peace in the Middle East.

In retrospect, however, a Carter second term could have proved crucial in weaning Americans from their dependence on fossil fuels, restraining right-wing repression in Latin America and elsewhere, pushing nuclear non-proliferation, and pressuring Israel to reach a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

In 1980, the anti-Carter intensity on the Right was driven by those same priorities. Carter was a threat to Big Oil which wanted nothing to do with alternative energy, a threat to Cold Warriors who wanted to heat up international tensions (though the Soviet Union was in a steep decline), and a threat to the Likud's strategy of blocking a Palestinian state by moving more and more Jewish settlers onto the West Bank.

The election of Ronald Reagan along with the Republican victory in the Senate sent the United States off on a very different course than the one Carter had charted.

Reagan more than halved the top marginal income tax rate for the rich; he expanded the military budget even as the Soviets were seeking detente; he created a gigantic federal deficit; he smashed unions; he slashed federal regulations, including on financial institutions; he gutted Carter's programs for alternative energy and reversed environmental policies; he collaborated with death squads across Latin America and in Africa; he vastly expanded U.S. support for Islamic fundamentalists fighting a Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan; he looked the other way as Pakistan developed a nuclear bomb; and he put Middle East peace on the backburner as Israel bolstered the West Bank settlements and invaded Lebanon.

Ronald Reagan also imposed a new orthodoxy on the way journalists, scholars and politicians could talk about the United States. Whereas the 1970s offered a brief window for looking back honestly at the many wrongful acts committed by the U.S. government, the 1980s saw an enforced "patriotism" that frowned on as Reagan's UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick put it those who would "blame America first." Critical voices were marginalized, controversialized and effectively silenced.

While it's impossible to chart alternative histories precisely, it is safe to say that many of America's problems were made worse by Reagan's presidency.

He began the systematic savaging of the Great Middle Class, widening the gap between the rich and everyone else; he sharply increased the national debt; he pushed the deregulation frenzy on Wall Street; he continued America's dependence on fossil fuels and disdained environmental safeguards; he alienated Washington from much of the Western Hemisphere by supporting state terror across Central America; he transformed Afghanistan into a home for Islamic terrorism; he permitted nuclear proliferation in South Asia; he allowed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to fester.

It is perhaps a commentary on how Reagan neutered the U.S. press corps and duped the American people that he is remembered as one of the greatest U.S. presidents. To this day, almost no one in Washington's mainstream dares to speak critically about the real effect that Reagan's presidency had on the country and the world.

Bush v. Gore

In 2000, the United States was at another crossroads. Eight years under President Bill Clinton had addressed some of the problems left behind by 12 years of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

For instance, by slightly raising the top marginal tax rate on the rich, restraining spending and riding the wave of the new Internet economy, Clinton had succeeded in eliminating the federal deficit. By the end of Clinton's presidency with employment expanding and poverty shrinking government budget estimates foresaw the complete elimination of the national debt.

But Clinton had upset the American Left by continuing many of the tough-guy policies from the Reagan-Bush-41 era. Clinton kept in place harsh sanctions against Iraq and intervened militarily in sectarian clashes in the old Yugoslavia. He also had worked with Republicans to limit welfare, to expand trade agreements and to loosen more regulations on the banking system.

So, when his Vice President Al Gore faced off against Texas Gov. George W. Bush, some on the Left decided it was time to teach those "triangulating" Democrats a lesson. However, instead of challenging Gore for the Democratic Party nomination in the way that the Right has reshaped the Republican Party these progressives supported Green Party candidate Ralph Nader and ignored warnings that this strategy might doom Gore's election chances.

Nader encouraged this result by telling young and impressionable voters that Gore was "Tweedle-dee" to Bush's "Tweedle-dum." Nader ran on the slogan, "not a dime's worth of difference" between Bush and Gore. On the Left, many activists appeared persuaded that there really were no meaningful distinctions between

Bush and Gore.

However, in retrospect, there were key differences. Experienced on the world stage, Gore was alert to the terror threat from al-Qaeda, while Bush pooh-pooed the danger. He blew off a CIA warning in August 2001 and then sat dumbstruck in a second-grade classroom reading "The Pet Goat" on 9/11 when two hijacked commercial jets struck the Twin Towers in New York and another headed toward the Pentagon.

Bush then followed the advice of neoconservative advisers – rushing through a retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan and letting al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden slip away – so the U.S. military could move on to invading Iraq, which had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.

The Iraq invasion and resulting chaos led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and ironically helped al-Qaeda establish a foothold in the Sunni areas of Iraq. Meanwhile, Bush's neglect of the Afghan conflict allowed al-Qaeda's allies, the Taliban, to stage a comeback there.

If Gore had been president, it's very possible 9/11 never would have happened and even if it did Gore would have almost surely responded in a less blunderbuss way. Gore also had a strong record for respecting the constitutional rights of Americans and the principles of international law, while Bush treated both as inconveniences to be ignored or overridden.

Bush also enacted more tax cuts weighted toward the wealthy, blowing a huge hole in the federal budget and hollowing out more of the middle class. Bush appointed two more right-wing justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, John Roberts and Samuel Alito, key votes in the 2010 *Citizens United* case, which opened the floodgates to special interest spending to buy elections.

But perhaps most significantly, Gore cared about the looming existential crisis of global warming, while Bush treated the issue with disdain, thus contributing to the hostility now expressed by right-wingers who depict the science on climate change as a myth and as part of some grand socialist conspiracy.

If the planet continues toward climate devastation with ice caps melting, sea levels rising and droughts disrupting food supplies a key turning point will have been the presidency of George W. Bush, rather than the presidency of Al Gore.

While many institutions and individuals share the blame for installing Bush in the White House, part of the responsibility must fall on the Green Party and Ralph Nader, who helped Bush get close enough to steal Florida's electoral votes and thus the presidency. The bitter irony is that the one major mark that the

American Green Party may have on history is enabling an anti-environmental president to put the world on course for ecological destruction.

Yes, I know Nader and the Green Party deny all responsibility for this catastrophe; they point their fingers at everybody else including Al Gore. But their arguments are sophistry. The truth is they ignored many timely warnings about the danger that ultimately came to pass; they knew they were playing chicken with the planet; their reckless words (about “Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee” and “not a dime’s worth of difference”) were unsafe at any speed.

Obama’s Reelection?

Which brings us to 2012 and what many on the Left insist is another meaningless election between two politicians whose only differences are cosmetic. We are told again that it doesn’t matter whether President Obama gets a second term or if Mitt Romney and the Tea-Party Republicans take full control of the U.S. government.

We’re told that elections simply don’t matter, even if these right-wing Republicans will likely gut what’s left of the New Deal and the Great Society; will further concentrate wealth at the top; will free Wall Street from even the modest burden of the Dodd-Frank regulations; will drive more middle-class families into poverty; will let thousands of Americans die prematurely without health care; will put neocons firmly back in charge of U.S. foreign policy with plans to extend the Afghan War and start possible new wars in Syria and Iran.

After all, Barack Obama has not been perfect on these issues. He has blood on his own hands. He has made many compromises. He is far from the socialist that some Tea Partiers claim he is. I’m often told by progressives that they are “disappointed” in Obama as if their feelings are the most important part of this equation.

It does seem that some on the Left will only be satisfied with perfection. They act more like critics whose job is to find fault with a politician than as participants in a political process. “Obama should have done this; Obama should have done that.”

Indeed, some behave as if what’s truly important is that they be recognized as staking out the “perfect” the most uncompromising position, regardless of how impractical that stance might be or what harmful side effects it might have.

This vanity of perfectionism sometimes takes precedence even if it may help empower an unstable or incompetent U.S. leader who would implement horribly destructive policies that could kill millions.

What some on the Left fail to grasp is that who is elected President of the United States even with the deep gradations of gray among the major-party choices can mean life or death to people around the planet, even life or death for the planet itself.

So, this choice over how to vote should not be a decision based upon personal feelings or one's flattering desire for a perfect self-image. The American people are hiring the person who will be entrusted with the nuclear codes, who will have the power to start wars, who will decide whether to take action on global warming.

Real people in other countries live or die by such U.S. decisions. Even if some Americans feel that voting for some imperfect candidate is too degrading, too compromising, the decision can have devastating consequences for others.

Yes, there is an element of triage here, since neither Obama nor Romney would be a pacifist. Some people will die regardless of who's elected, but there can be an order of magnitude difference. There is a distinction between targeted killings of al-Qaeda operatives (even with "collateral" deaths of people in the vicinity) and the mass slaughter inflicted by fullscale war.

At minimum, it would seem to be the duty of American voters to minimize the damage that their country might inflict on people in faraway lands. Even if perfection is not an option, one of the choices is likely to cause fewer deaths and wreak less havoc than the other. It may be impossible to know the future but history can be some guide.

While this responsibility to mitigate harm to the world may seem unsatisfying to Americans who yearn for something much closer to moral purity and who don't want to sully their consciences with such moral relativism this lesser-evilism does have a profoundly moral basis.

Just stop and ask: as imperfect as Humphrey, Carter and Gore were, would the world be in a better place if they had been elected in 1968, 1980 and 2000, respectively.

Would there likely be fewer people living in poverty in the United States or dying without health care? Would American politics be more democratic and less corrupt than it is today? Would the environment be less endangered? Would science and reason be disparaged the way they are today?

Would a lot of innocent Vietnamese, Cambodians, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Afghans, Iraqis and people from many other countries be alive today? Might they have escaped horrible deaths, rapes and maiming? While no one can say for sure, you can make a reasonable guess.

So, in the end, what's more important? What's more moral? The vanity of perfectionism when perfection is not an option or doing the imperfect thing to save some innocent lives and maybe save the planet?

To read more of Robert Parry's writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [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.

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in June focused on the misguided framing of Campaign 2012, continued misreporting on Iran's nuclear program, the misunderstood history of Watergate, and mistaken beliefs about human nature.

["Showing that Hostage-Taking Works"](#) by Robert Parry, reflecting on the GOP success in making the U.S. economy "scream," June 1, 2012.

["The 'Blame Obama' Syndrome"](#) by Robert Parry, describing how Big Media ascribes U.S. problems to Obama's personality, June 5, 2012.

["Sorting Out the Facts About Iran"](#) by Ray McGovern, puzzling over the neocon persistence in exaggerating the Iranian threat, June 5, 2012.

["Lessons from Gov. Walker's Win"](#) by Robert Parry, analyzing why the recall effort failed, June 6, 2012.

["The Almost Scoop on Nixon's 'Treason'"](#) by Robert Parry, recalling how an investigative story in 1968 nearly changed history, June 7, 2012.

["Madness of Late-Stage Capitalism"](#) by Phil Rockstroh, comparing today's economy with an aged Howard Hughes, June 11, 2012.

["Jesus, the Radical Economist"](#) by Rev. Howard Bess, learning from the economic teachings of Jesus, June 11, 2012.

"The Dark Continuum of Watergate" by Robert Parry, defining the lasting footprint of Richard Nixon's politics, June 12, 2012.

"Media Backsliding on Iran Nukes" by Robert Parry, calling out the mainstream press for its sloppy reporting, June 13, 2012.

"Admissions on Nixon's 'Treason'" by Robert Parry, reporting on the Asian side of Richard Nixon's Vietnam peace talk sabotage, June 14, 2012.

"How Tea Partiers Diss the Framers" by Robert Parry, remembering how the Framers valued a strong central government, June 16, 2012.

"Amnesty's Shilling for US Wars" by Ann Wright and Coleen Rowley, calling out Amnesty International for its backing of the Afghan War, June 18, 2012.

"Who Speaks for Jesus?" by Paul Surlis, challenging the Vatican's denunciations of American nuns and health-care reform, June 19, 2012.

"Julian Assange's Artful Dodge" by Ray McGovern, explaining the WikiLeaks founder's dash to the Ecuadorian embassy, June 20, 2012.

"Strangling the Republic" by Beverly Bandler, tracking the efforts of Corporate America to squeeze the life out of the old republic, June 20, 2012.

"All for One" by Winslow Myers, remembering that despite divisions and animosities, humans have a common need to cooperate, June 22, 2012.

"WPost's Kessler Earns 4 Pinocchios" by Robert Parry, noting how this "fact-checker" covers Mitt Romney's flanks on jobs exporting, June 24, 2012.

"A Comedy at the 'End of the World'" by Lisa Pease, commending a comic look at humans at the end of existence, June 25, 2012.

"What Russia Fears in Syrian Conflict" by Joe Lauria, dissecting Russian objections to intervention in a civil war, June 26, 2012.

"WPost's Fact-Check-gate" by Robert Parry, calling out "fact-checker" Kessler for a cover-up of Romney's business practices, June 26, 2012.

"Why Jesus Died" by Rev. Howard Bess, describing recent historical findings that give context to Jesus's execution, June 26, 2012.

"The Price of Political Purity" by Robert Parry, drawing lessons for today from the bitter politics of 1968, June 27, 2012.

"How Iran Might See the Threats" by Ray McGovern, taking an Iran-eye-view of Western and Israeli hostility, June 28, 2012.

“The Thwarting of Catholic Reform” by Paul Surlis, recalling the promise of Vatican II and why those hopes were dashed, June 28, 2012.

“Footlong Hot Dogs of the Apocalypse” by Phil Rockstroh, warning of the fate that comes from American over-consumption, June 29, 2012.

“Roberts Embraces Right’s Fake History” by Robert Parry, noting that Justice Roberts’s support for health reform came with a concession to the Right, June 29, 2012.

To produce and publish these stories and many more costs money. And except for book sales and a few ads, we depend on the generous support of our readers.

So, please consider a tax-deductible donation either by credit card online or by mailing a check. (For readers wanting to use PayPal, you can address contributions to our account, which is named “consortnew@aol.com”).

Thanks for your support.

Kafkaesque Legacy of Gitmo/Bagram

More than a decade after the 9/11 attacks and George W. Bush’s “war on terror,” U.S. justice remains mired in Kafkaesque legal swamps at Guantanamo Bay and Bagram, places where murky theories about “unlawful combatants” mean detainees have no real rights, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Among the legal anomalies and affronts to justice involved in certain things the United States does in the name of counterterrorism is an incarceration netherworld that seems likely to persist as indefinitely as the detention of many of the people caught in it.

We didn’t seem to have this problem before 9/11. But the popular sense, after that one off-the-charts terrorist event, that America was “at war” led to the problem. The Bush administration obliged by declaring a “war on terror.”

Applying the established law of war would not suffice, however; that would have meant giving suspected terrorists the rights of prisoners of war. The response was to handle anyone who came into U.S. hands with some suspicion of possibly having something to do with terrorism as if they were not subject to any system of law and the rights associated with it.

People scooped up in Afghanistan or elsewhere were declared to be “illegal combatants” if they were declared to be anything at all. Most were sent to a newly established detention facility at Guantanamo, the location of which was not chosen so the prisoners could enjoy the mild Caribbean climate. The location was chosen with the intention of keeping detentions there outside the purview of anyone’s law, given Guantanamo’s special status as a base under a long-term lease that is outside the United States but also not subject to the sovereign control of any foreign country.

The ploy has not worked completely, in that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Boumediene v. Bush* in 2008 that Guantanamo detainees have a right to contest their detention in U.S. courts. But the specific practices at Guantanamo continue to reflect the legal vacuum in which the prisoners find themselves.

One recent decision by the Obama administration about which the *New York Times* editorial page appropriately took exception severely limits the right of prisoners to consult their attorneys in confidence. As one of the lawyers involved pointed out, this vitiates the right of habeas corpus that the Supreme Court formally bestowed four years ago.

It is not just prisoners at Guantanamo who are affected. This month a district court heard for the second time a case involving prisoners being held at a detention facility in Bagram, Afghanistan. The same court had earlier interpreted the *Boumediene* decision as applying not only to Guantanamo prisoners but also ones held at Bagram who had been captured someplace other than Afghanistan. That decision was reversed on grounds that a war zone is a war zone, and thus outside the jurisdiction of a civilian court, even if the prisoners in question had been nabbed somewhere else, although the appellate court left a possible opening for rehearing, leading to the current proceedings.

The main trouble-maker in much of this is the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, to which the Supreme Court seems content to give very free rein on this subject. It was the D.C. circuit court that ruled that capturing someone outside a war zone and then moving him into a war zone effectively removes his habeas rights.

In another peculiar decision that reversed a district court’s order to release a Guantanamo prisoner, the majority on a D.C. circuit court panel effectively said that any documents the government presents in arguing for continued detention should be accepted at face value, even though many such documents reflect questionable and unverified assertions.

Near the end of its just-concluded session, the Supreme Court let this appellate court ruling stand without comment, even though the appellate judges who made

that ruling barely disguised their contempt for the *Boumediene* decision.

A problem all along with the “war” formulation as applied to suspected terrorism is not only the twists one has to go through to avoid granting prisoner-of-war status. Since there is no well-defined entity this “war” is being waged against, there is no definable end to the anomalies involved. This problem applies not only to authorizations to use military force but also to detentions.

With no end in sight to the fundamental legal peculiarity involved, at least some of the procedural unfairness should be peeled back, such as that involving the attorney-client privilege. The executive branch’s attorneys should also stop challenging the right of prisoners to petition for habeas corpus and instead concentrate on the facts in each case that would warrant continued detention.

Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court ought to show the D.C. circuit who is boss by agreeing in its next term to hear one of the detention cases on which a majority at the circuit court seems determined to place its insubordinate stamp.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)
