

Re-elected Obama's Pluses and Minuses

There were positives in Barack Obama's reelection, particularly the rejection of many reactionary Republican policies and offensive tactics, but Obama's second term may be beset by many of the same failings as the first, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Barack Obama won reelection on Nov. 6 and the reaction of many on the Left was: "So what?" Well, we are spared four years of Mitt Romney. Again, the response: "So what? They are both two peas from the same pod."

Well maybe, but even peas can vary. Here are some positive differences to consider, which will be followed by some negative similarities to Romney and his conservative advisers. We will start with the bright side:

–In terms of probabilities, under Obama the U.S. is less likely to find itself at war with Iran than would be the case with Romney. On such issues as war in the Middle East, Obama seems to be able to think relatively independently while Romney, by his own admission, can't tell the difference between U.S. interests and those of Israel.

–Obama took a sensible attitude toward the Arab Spring uprising except, of course, in Bahrain where his administration's support for the monarchy was lamentable. Romney's reaction to the Arab Spring would have been to ring up Netanyahu and ask him what to do.

–On issues of women's rights, gay rights, the environment and educational concerns, an Obama administration is much preferable to a Romney one.

–If there are Supreme Court vacancies in the next four years, we are much less likely to have extreme conservatives nominated than would have been the case under Mitt Romney.

–Obama dropped Bush's torture directive. Given Mitt Romney's neoconservative advisers, a President Romney might well have been tempted to reinstate it.

The Similarities

These are only some of the positive things and they are far from unimportant. Nonetheless, Obama has a darker side that sometimes echoes the conservative Republican mindset. For instance:

–Barack Obama is an African-American with, apparently, only selective concerns for civil liberties. He employs another African-American, Eric Holder, with similar blind spots. Holder heads up the FBI and has allowed that agency to entrap Americans mostly of yet another minority group, in this case Moslems, in alleged terrorist activities which, without the FBI’s scheming, would almost certainly never have been carried out.

–Throughout his first term, Obama went after “illegal aliens,” deporting them in high numbers, and only modified this policy as the election neared. He cannot be trusted on this front.

–Obama has continued to enforce President Bush’s criminal policies many of which are institutionalized in the Patriot Act and related laws. These include unconstitutional practices such as indefinite detention and warrantless eavesdropping.

–And while Obama’s foreign policy in the Middle East probably will not lead to the war so ardently desired by Romney’s buddy, Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu, Obama is still willing to kill innocent people with drones and harm even more with draconian sanctions.

Romney’s Minority

The election itself was anything but reassuring. Take a look at [the map](#) showing who won which states and there is a scary amount of red (how the media came up with the color red for Republican states only one generation after the demise of Russian communism is beyond me!).

The only saving grace is that these are (with the exception of Texas) the less populous states. Nonetheless, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer’s final election figures (Nov. 8), some 57,591,058 American voters cast their ballots for Romney, a man who could be confused with the [“dwarf chameleon,”](#) a subgroup of lizards that is particularly adept at “adjusting their colors for camouflage in accordance with the vision of species” confronting them.

Romney’s voters included 62 percent of voting white men and, more surprisingly, 56 percent of voting white women. Were most of these folks just motivated by a desire to vote against Obama rather than for Romney? Or were they good hypnotic subjects who were easily mesmerized by expertly choreographed flip-flopping?

After Obama’s victory, the reelected president gave a “let’s all come together” [speech](#) that, under present circumstances, is embarrassing to listen to. Having been crudely defamed and ridiculed for months on end one would like

to see from Obama a public hint, a mere glint, of annoyance with the Republicans. Those feelings would be human and proper.

However, according to Obama, though some of us might disagree “fiercely,” the insulting tone taken toward him was just a manifestation of “noisy and messy” democracy. In President Obama’s estimation, despite the political mudslinging, we all want the same kind of America.

Somehow I don’t think so. The Tea Party Republicans and neoconservative militarists do not want the same sort of America that (many of us sincerely hope) Obama does. It is a pretty safe bet that even John A. Boehner, the Speaker of the Republican-controlled House, does not want the same America as Obama.

Nonetheless, on victory night Obama told his supporters, “I just spoke with Gov. Romney and ... I also look forward to sitting down with [him] to talk about where we can work together to move this country forward.”

This may not be just a *pro forma* offer, a gracious victor extending a hand of conciliation. I am convinced that Obama wants to do exactly as he says in this regard, for in his heart of hearts he is a compromiser. He will compromise with just about anyone on just about anything.

Given the political structure within which he lives, that means he will compromise with rabid Republicans, Zionists and neoconservatives if they will only “see reason” and compromise with him. Actually, the probable exception to this list are American progressives who may be viewed by Obama and his advisers as a fringe group whose goals and values don’t merit much consideration.

Thus all the early indicators are that the second-term Obama will be a lot like the first-term one. Yet there are so many of his supporters who are sure this will not be the case. They swallow whole that teasing line “the best is yet to come.”

As one 2012 supporter said, “things are going to be different in Washington now that Obama proved he has the majority of Americans on his side.” I thought he had already proved that in 2008.

Obama Wish List

Well, all right, for those who count on the “real progressively inclined” Barack Obama showing up for his second term, here are a number of things the President can do to prove that things will be different. I take many of the following points from Juan Cole’s recent column “Top Ten Wish List for President Obama.”

–Obama can propose and fight hard for legislation that will overturn the

horrible *Citizens United* law that, among other things, reinforced the farce that corporations are really people and Super PACs somehow have the right to try to buy elections. And, simultaneously, the “real” Obama can expend some political capital pushing hard for meaningful campaign finance reform.

–Obama can push for strong economic regulation, particularly for the banking and financial sectors of the economy.

–He can fight to strengthen union rights both in the public and private sectors.

–He can fight for legislation that will make illegal conservative efforts to restrict the franchise through such gambits as required photo IDs.

–The President can reshape the priorities of the FBI and other national law-enforcement agencies, moving them away from enforcing the unconstitutional Patriot Act; away from the manufacture of terrorist schemes in order to entrap otherwise innocent people; and away from the warrantless surveillance of thousands of Americans. In other words, the second-term Obama should show himself publicly in opposition to Bush-era crimes dressed up as laws.

–Finally, specific to the Middle East, President Obama can: a) get out of the way of Palestinian efforts to achieve more meaningful membership status at the UN and b) he can pardon the Holy Land Foundation leaders who have been unfairly convicted of supporting terrorism in one of the 21st Century’s most outrageous miscarriages of justice.

Will the Barack Obama who shows up for the second term fight for any of these things? My own guess is that what efforts there are in these directions will be lukewarm at best. They will be watered down by incessant compromise.

Not because that is the way politics must be played (certainly the Republicans haven’t met anyone halfway this side of the Tea Party), but because that is the way the real Barack Obama wants to play politics.

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Telling an Untold US History

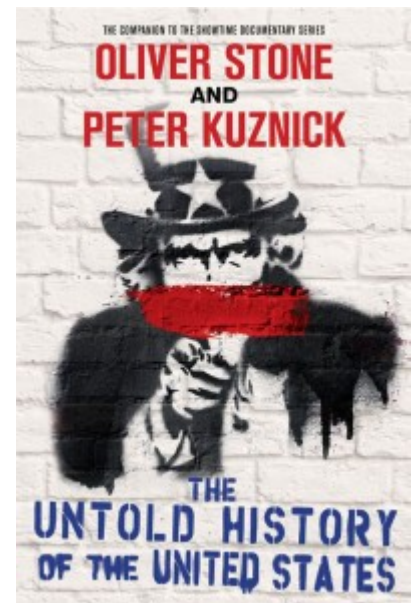
Over the decades, the U.S. has grown into a place of myth and outright lies

rather than empiricism and reliable history. In a new book and TV series, director Oliver Stone and historian Peter Kuznick challenge the faux reality, says David Swanson.

By David Swanson

Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick have produced a phenomenally great book of U.S. history, and an accompanying television series premiering on Showtime on Monday. Having just read half the book and having watched an advance copy of the first episode, my conclusion is that the book is dramatically better than the TV show, but that both are at the top of what's available in their respective genres.

The Untold History of the United States is not people's history in the sense of telling the stories of popular movements. This is very much top-down history dominated by key figures in power. But it is honest history that tears through myths and presents a reality not expected by most Americans – and backs it up with well-documented facts.



This is a history that focuses on foreign policy, and – at least in the book – begins with World War I. No book can include everything one might have liked to see included, but this one is a terrific sampling of things I've wished were told more often and things I never knew before.

Some will call it a depressing tale lacking “all the good things the United States has done too.” I call it a refreshingly honest tale aimed at improving our conduct going forward. I also come away with a deep sense of gratitude that – for the moment anyway – our society is still around at all.

After considering the steps that certain presidents and scientists have taken to

destroy life as we know it, one has to be amazed we're still here. Truman and Eisenhower figure prominently, and I believe that I have found in these authors a couple of men who might just agree with me that Harry Truman is the worst president we've ever seen. They certainly make that case quite powerfully.

The book is excellent on World War I and on the New Deal, as well as on forbidden topics like the Wall Street Putsch of 1934 or the Nye Committee hearings on war profiteering. The section on the dropping of the nuclear bombs on Japan is the best I've seen.

The history of the Cold War and who started it is invaluable. The authors take on McCarthyism, the Eisenhower presidency, the Mossadeq overthrow, the Guzman overthrow, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and numerous other topics with great skill and insight – and careful research.

The Kennedy assassination, which Stone has famously dramatized on film before, gets a mere two paragraphs. The discussion of the formation of Israel leaves much to be desired, but at least it's there. The Korean War account is incomplete to say the least, as is the discussion of moves to impeach Truman – for which there were motives the authors don't touch on. But this is quibbling. I would love for everyone to read this book, and I'll read the second half on Monday.

The book's take on World War II is far superior to that of the television show's first episode. The episodes don't line up with the chapters, and so – for whatever reason – the TV viewers begin in World War II, not World War I.

The book has more useful material than the film and is lacking some material the film ought to have left out too. The authors are very much in favor of U.S. entry into the war and wish it had come earlier. They claim that Pearl Harbor was a surprise and reject claims that it was "abetted" by the U.S. government. But who claims that?

Many have well documented that it was expected and in a certain sense desired by the Roosevelt White House. But Stone and Kuznick's account makes crystal clear Roosevelt's desire for some such war-beginning incident, and their general account of the war is miles above any taught in any U.S. school I've ever seen. (Kuznick teaches at American University, so students might consider enrolling there.)

The TV episode on WWII lacks background and context that the book provides in various chapters. The bulk of it is standard history of supposed forces at work and intentions acted on. The "untold" bits include Truman's racist murderousness, and a particular focus on the starring role the Soviet Union

played in “winning” the war.

If Episode I serves to ease viewers into the fact-based reality being presented in “The Untold History,” I’m all for it. I suspect, however, that some of the other episodes that I haven’t yet had time to watch will be far more engaging and exciting, as well as controversial – or *because* controversial.

The episode on the dropping of the nuclear bombs might be the one to start your viewing with. Or, if you really want to take my strongest advice: read the book!

David Swanson’s books include [War Is A Lie](#). He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works as Campaign Coordinator for the online activist organization <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@davidcswanson](#) and [FaceBook](#).

Pundit Tears for Petraeus’s Fall

Exclusive: Much of Official Washington is in mourning after David Petraeus admitted to an extramarital affair and resigned as head of the CIA. Top pundits were as smitten by the former four-star general as his mistress was, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

A day after the surprise announcement that CIA Director David Petraeus was resigning because of marital infidelity, the pundits continue to miss the supreme irony. None other than the head of the CIA (and former bemedaled four-star general) has become the first really big fish netted by the intrusive monitoring of the communications of American citizens implemented after 9/11.

It is unclear whether it is true that, according to initial reports, Petraeus’s alleged mistress and biographer, Paula Broadwell, was caught trying to hack into his e-mail. What does seem clear is that the FBI discovered that she had “unusual access” (to borrow the delicate wording of this morning’s New York Times) to Petraeus during his time as commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan from July 2010 to July 2011. The potential for compromise of sensitive information is equally clear.

Not surprisingly, Establishment pundits are disconsolate that their beloved David Petraeus has been brought down in such a tawdry way. They are already at work trying to salvage his legacy as the implementer of George W. Bush’s much-

heralded “successful surge” in Iraq (even though the sacrifice of nearly 1,000 more dead U.S. soldiers did little more than provide a “decent interval” between Bush’s departure from office in 2009 and the final U.S. withdrawal/defeat at the end of 2011).

Among those lionizing/eulogizing Petraeus on the morning after his resignation was Washington Post columnist (and longtime CIA apologist) David Ignatius, who argued that Petraeus “achieved genuinely great things.” Ignatius’s lamented Petraeus’s admission of the extramarital affair with the poignancy you might find in a novel by Leo Tolstoy or Victor Hugo about an admirable but ill-fated hero.

Ignatius, too, was a writer who was embedded with Petraeus and was dazzled by his charm. Ignatius wrote that he “spent nearly three weeks traveling with [Petraeus] during his CENTOM assignment, and saw how he fused the political and military aspects of command, as he met with sheiks and presidents and intelligence chiefs, in a way that should have been captured in a textbook for future commanders.”

But Ignatius inadvertently acknowledged the futility of Petraeus’s approach to Bush’s wars. The Post columnist wrote: “For all Petraeus’s counter-insurgency doctrine, his Afghanistan command often appeared to be the equivalent of building on quicksand. No sooner were the Afghan forces ‘stood up’ than they would begin to slip away, back into the culture that was deeply, stubbornly resistant to outside pressure. In his last month in Kabul, Petraeus had all the tools of victory in hand except one, the Afghan people and institutions.”

So much for Petraeus’s “brilliant” counter-insurgency doctrine. He had all the tools except the Afghan people and institutions, the two requisites for winning a counter-insurgency war!

So What’s the Big Idea?

Ignatius adoringly adduces the following quote from Petraeus as proof of the ex-general’s acute vision: “As I see it, strategic leadership is fundamentally about big ideas, and, in particular, about four tasks connected with big ideas. First, of course, you have to get the big ideas right, you have to determine the right overarching concepts and intellectual underpinnings to accomplish your organization’s mission.

“Second, you have to communicate the big ideas effectively through the breadth and depth of the organization. Third, you have to oversee the implementation of the big ideas. And fourth, and finally, you have to capture lessons from the implementation of the big ideas, so that you can refine the overarching concepts

and repeat the overall process.”

Got that? That’s probably right out of Petraeus’s PhD dissertation at Princeton, or from a how-to book that might be called “Management Rhetoric for Dummies.”

If only Petraeus and his colleague generals remembered the smaller but far more relevant ideas inculcated in all of us Army officers in Infantry School at Fort Benning in the early Sixties. This is what I recall from memory regarding what an infantry officer needed to do before launching an operation big or small division or squad size.

Corny (and gratuitous) as it may sound, we were taught that the absolute requirement was to do an “Estimate of the Situation” that included the following key factors: Enemy strength, numbers and weapons; Enemy disposition, where are they?; Terrain; Weather; and Lines of communication and supply (LOCS). In other words, we were trained to take into account those “little ideas,” like facts and feasibility that, if ignored, could turn the “big ideas” into a March of Folly that would get a lot of people killed for no good reason.

Could it be that they stopped teaching these fundamentals as Petraeus went through West Point and Benning several years later? Did military history no longer include the futile efforts of imperial armies to avoid falling into the “graveyard of empires” in Afghanistan?

What about those LOCS? When you can’t get there from here, is it really a good idea to send troops and armaments the length of Pakistan and then over the Hindu Kush? And does anyone know how much that kind of adventure might end up costing?

To Army officers schooled in the basics, it was VERY hard to understand why the top Army leadership persuaded President Barack Obama to double down, twice, in reinforcing troops for a fool’s errand. And let’s face it, unless you posit that the generals and the neoconservative strategic “experts” at Brookings and AEI were clueless, the doubling down was not only dumb but unconscionable.

Small wonder all the talk about “long war” and Petraeus’s glib prediction that our grandchildren will still be fighting the kind of wars in which he impressed the likes of David Ignatius.

As commander in Afghanistan, Petraeus was able to elbow the substantive intelligence analysts in Washington off to the sidelines. What might those analysts have said about LOCS, or about the key point of training the Afghan army and police? We don’t know for sure, but it is a safe bet those analysts who know something about Afghanistan (and, better still, about Vietnam) would have rolled their eyes and wished Gen. Westmoreland oops, I mean Petraeus good luck.

As for winning hearts and minds, it was Petraeus who shocked Afghan President Hamid Karzai's aides by claiming that Afghan parents might have burned their own children in order to blame the casualties on U.S. military operations.

And the same Petraeus eagerly increased the incredibly myopic drone strikes in Pakistan, killing thousands of civilian "militants" and creating thousands more to contend with in the "long war" now alienating a nuclear-armed country of 185 million people.

Good Riddance

If, by now, you get the idea that I think David Petraeus is a charlatan (and I am not referring to sexual escapades), you would be correct. The next question, however, is his replacement and whether the policies will change.

Mr. President, with the mandate you have just won, you have a golden chance to reverse the March of Folly in Afghanistan. You can select a person with a proven record of integrity and courage to speak truth, without fear or favor, and with savvy and experience in matters of State and Defense.

There are still some very good people with integrity and courage around former Ambassador Chas Freeman would be an excellent candidate. Go ahead, Mr. President. Show that you can stand up to the Israel lobby that succeeded in getting Freeman ousted on March 10, 2009, after just six hours on the job as Director of the National Intelligence Council.

And there are still some genuine experts around to help you enlist Afghanistan's neighbors in an effort to ease U.S. troop withdrawal well before the 2014 deadline. The faux experts the neocon specialists at Brookings, AEI and elsewhere have had their chance. For God's sake, take away their White House visiting badges at once.

Create White House badges for genuine experts like former National Intelligence Officer for the Near East Paul Pillar, former State Department Chief of Staff Lawrence Wilkerson, and military historian and practitioner Andrew Bacevich (Lt. Col., USA, ret.). These are straight-shooters; they have no interest in "long wars"; they will tell you the truth; all you need do is listen.

Do NOT listen this time to the likes of your counter-terrorism adviser, John Brennan, a former CIA functionary who was staff director for CIA Director George "slam-dunk" Tenet. Brennan will probably push for you to nominate Petraeus's deputy and now Acting CIA Director Michael Morell, who did the same dirty work for Tenet that Brennan did.

Morell is even more likely to take his cues from Brennan and tell you what he

and Brennan want you to hear. At best, Morell is likely to let things drift until you move on Petraeus's replacement. And this is no time for drift.

There is absolutely no reason to prolong the agony in Afghanistan until the end of 2014. Doubling down on Afghanistan might have seemed a smart political move at the time, but you now should face the fact that it was a major blunder. Troops out now!

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served as an Army infantry/intelligence officer in the early Sixties, and then as a CIA analyst for 27 years. He now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Behind Petraeus's Resignation

Exclusive: The resignation of CIA Director David Petraeus over an extramarital affair marks a stunning reversal for the longtime media darling. But some in President Obama's inner circle are not displeased the neocon-friendly ex-general is gone, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The messy departure of CIA Director David Petraeus over an extramarital affair removes the last high-ranking neoconservative holdover from George W. Bush's administration and gives the reelected President Barack Obama more maneuvering room to negotiate a settlement over Iran's nuclear program.

Petraeus's resignation along with a public acknowledgement of an affair, reportedly with an admiring female biographer, raised eyebrows in Washington for reasons beyond the sudden and humiliating fall of the high-flying former four-star general. Normally, in such situations, a cover story is used to spare someone of Petraeus's stature embarrassment.

Especially in the days after a president's reelection, it would not be uncommon for a senior official to announce new career plans or a desire to spend more time with the family. Instead, Petraeus's resignation was accompanied by an admission of the affair. Press reports identified the woman as Paula Broadwell, who co-authored a biography of Petraeus, *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus*.

One person familiar with the Obama administration's thinking said President Obama was never close to Petraeus, who was viewed as a favorite of the neoconservatives and someone who had undercut a possible solution to Iran's nuclear program in 2011 by pushing a bizarre claim that Iranian intelligence was behind an assassination plot aimed at the Saudi ambassador to Washington.

As that case initially evolved, the White House and Justice Department were skeptical that the plot traced back to the Iranian government, but Petraeus pushed the alleged connection which was then made public in a high-profile indictment. The charges further strained relations with Iran, making a possible military confrontation more likely.

Petraeus's Input

At the time, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, a favored recipient of official CIA leaks, reported that "one big reason [top U.S. officials became convinced the plot was real] is that CIA and other intelligence agencies gathered information corroborating the informant's juicy allegations and showing that the plot had support from the top leadership of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, the covert action arm of the Iranian government."

Ignatius added that, "it was this intelligence collected in Iran" that swung the balance. But Ignatius offered no examples of what that intelligence was. Nor did Ignatius show any skepticism regarding Petraeus's well-known hostility toward Iran and how that might have influenced the CIA's judgment.

As it turned out, the case was based primarily on statements from an Iranian-American car dealer Mansour Arbabsiar, who clumsily tried to hire drug dealers to murder Saudi Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir, though Arbabsiar was actually talking to a Drug Enforcement Agency informant. Arbabsiar pled guilty last month as his lawyers argued that their client suffers from a bipolar disorder. In other words, Petraeus and his CIA escalated an international crisis largely on the word of a person diagnosed by doctors of his own defense team as having a severe psychiatric disorder.

Despite the implausibility of the assassination story and the unreliability of the key source, the Washington press corps quickly accepted the Iranian assassination plot as real. That assessment reflected the continued influence of neoconservatives in Official Washington and Petraeus's out-sized reputation among journalists.

The neocons, who directed much of President George W. Bush's disastrous foreign policy and filled the ranks of Mitt Romney's national security team, have

avored a heightened confrontation with Iran in line with the hardline position of Israel's Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In the post-election period, it is a top neocon goal to derail Obama's efforts to work out a peaceful settlement of the dispute over Iran's nuclear program. The neocons favor "regime change."

Suspect Loyalties

Petraeus's ideological alignment with the neocons threatened to undercut the administration's unity behind Obama's peace initiative. Thus, according to the person familiar with the administration's thinking, some key figures close to the President wanted Petraeus out and there was no sadness that his personal indiscretions contributed to his departure.

Regarding the facts behind Petraeus's sudden resignation, the New York Times reported that the FBI had begun an investigation into a "potential criminal matter" several months ago that was not focused on Petraeus. It was in the course of an their inquiry into whether a computer used by Petraeus had been compromised that agents discovered evidence of the relationship as well as other security concerns. About two weeks ago, FBI agents met with Petraeus to discuss the investigation, the Times reported.

According to the Times, one congressional official who was briefed on the matter said Petraeus had been encouraged "to get out in front of the issue" and resign, and that he agreed.

Though held in high esteem by Official Washington for his role in advocating "surges" of U.S. troops in Iraq in 2007 and in Afghanistan in 2009, Petraeus actually has a less than sterling record of military success. He was in charge of a trouble-plagued effort to train a new Iraqi army after the U.S. invasion in 2003, and his supposedly successful "surge" in Iraq was more a public relations success than a change in the strategic trajectory toward ultimate U.S. failure there.

The Unsuccessful Surge

The reality regarding the Iraq "surge" in 2007 was that much of the reduction in violence in Iraq derived from policies of Petraeus's predecessors, including the implementation of the so-called Sunni Awakening which involved paying off Sunni tribal leaders to turn against al-Qaeda extremists and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Sectarian violence also had led to a *de facto* separation of Sunnis and Shiites and thus a natural burning-out of the civil strife. All these developments occurred in 2006 before President Bush ordered the "surge" in 2007 and put Petraeus in charge.

The “surge” actually led to a spike in violence in Iraq before the other factors contributed to a gradual reduction. Nevertheless, Official Washington’s conventional wisdom was framed around the “successful surge” credited to President Bush, Gen. Petraeus and the neocons.

Though nearly 1,000 U.S. soldiers died during the “surge,” its primary effect was to enable Bush and the other Iraq War architects to leave office without the legacy of a clear-cut military defeat hung around their necks. At the end of 2011, the U.S. military left Iraq with little to show for Bush’s investment of blood and treasure.

Besides Bush, the chief beneficiaries of the “successful surge” myth were Gen. Petraeus and Bush’s last Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Both remained as part of the high command after Barack Obama took office in 2009, as the young President didn’t want an abrupt break with Bush’s war policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the “continuity” trapped Obama when he tried to steer the wars toward conclusions. While pursuing the drawdown of troops in Iraq, he asked for less aggressive options in the Afghan War, only to have Gates, Petraeus and other Bush holdovers maneuver him into authorizing another “surge” for Afghanistan.

Behind the President’s Back

As Bob Woodward reported in his book, *Obama’s Wars*, it was Bush’s old team that made sure Obama was given no option other than to escalate troop levels in Afghanistan substantially. The Bush holdovers also lobbied for the troop increase behind Obama’s back.

According to Woodward’s book, Gates, Petraeus and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, refused to even prepare an early-exit option that Obama had requested. Instead, they offered up only plans for their desired escalation of about 40,000 troops.

Woodward wrote: “For two exhausting months, [Obama] had been asking military advisers to give him a range of options for the war in Afghanistan. Instead, he felt that they were steering him toward one outcome and thwarting his search for an exit plan. He would later tell his White House aides that military leaders were ‘really cooking this thing in the direction they wanted.’”

In mid-2011, Obama finally eased Gates out of the Pentagon and replaced him with one of the President’s most trusted advisers, Leon Panetta, who had been serving as director of the CIA. At CIA, Panetta had overseen backchannel contacts between the White House and the Iranian leadership and other sensitive initiatives.

To complete the personnel shift and to keep the Republican-leaning Petraeus out of presidential politics in 2012 Obama put Petraeus in as CIA director. But Obama's inner circle never trusted Petraeus who was known to have built political support for his military career by cultivating the loyalty of Washington's top neoconservatives.

Friendly Neocons

For instance, in 2009 when Obama was deciding what to do about Afghanistan, Gen. Petraeus personally arranged extraordinary access to U.S. field commanders for two of his influential neocon friends, Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations and Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute.

"Fears of impending disaster are hard to sustain if you actually spend some time in Afghanistan, as we did recently at the invitation of General David Petraeus, chief of U.S. Central Command," they wrote upon their return.

"Using helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, and bone-jarring armored vehicles, we spent eight days traveling from the snow-capped peaks of Kunar province near the border with Pakistan in the east to the wind-blown deserts of Farah province in the west near the border with Iran. Along the way we talked with countless coalition soldiers, ranging from privates to a four-star general," they said.

Their access paid dividends for Petraeus when they penned a glowing report in the Weekly Standard about the prospects for success in Afghanistan if only President Obama sent more troops and committed the United States to stay in the war for the long haul.

Besides getting neocons to put public pressure on the President, Petraeus turned to Boot in 2010 when Petraeus felt he had made a mistake in allowing his official congressional testimony to contain mild criticism of Israel. His written testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee had included the observation that "the enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests" in the Middle East and added:

"Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support."

Though the testimony might strike some readers as a no-brainer, many neocons regard any suggestion that Israeli intransigence on Palestinian peace talks contributed to the dangers faced by American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as a "blood libel" against Israel.

A Happy Face

So, when Petraeus's testimony began getting traction on the Internet, the general quickly turned to Boot and began backtracking on the testimony. "As you know, I didn't say that," Petraeus said, according to one e-mail to Boot timed off at 2:27 p.m., March 18, 2010. "It's in a written submission for the record."

In other words, Petraeus was arguing that the comments were only in his formal testimony and were not repeated by him in his oral opening statement. However, in the real world, the written testimony of a witness is treated as part of the official record at congressional hearings with no meaningful distinction from oral testimony.

In another e-mail, as Petraeus solicited Boot's help in tamping down any controversy over the Israeli remarks, the general ended the message with a military "Roger" and a sideways happy face, made from a colon, a dash and a closed parenthesis, ":-)."

The e-mails were made public by James Morris, who runs a Web site called "[Neocon Zionist Threat to America](#)." Morris said he apparently got the Petraeus-Boot exchanges by accident when he sent a March 19, 2010, e-mail congratulating Petraeus for his testimony and Petraeus responded by forwarding one of Boot's blog posts that knocked down the story of the general's implicit criticism of Israel.

Petraeus forwarded Boot's blog item, entitled "A Lie: David Petraeus, Anti-Israel," which had been posted at the Commentary magazine site at 3:11 p.m. on March 18. However, Petraeus apparently forgot to delete some of the other exchanges between him and Boot at the bottom of the e-mail.

Morris sent me the e-mails at my request after [an article](#) by Philip Weiss appeared about them at Mondoweiss, a Web site that deals with Middle East issues. When I sought comment from Petraeus and Boot regarding the e-mails, neither responded.

Obama's decision to entrust a position as crucial as CIA director to Petraeus, an ambitious man with strong ties to the neocons, was always a risk. While Obama may have been thinking that he was keeping Petraeus out of a possible run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, the President put Petraeus in a spot where he could manipulate the intelligence that drives government policies.

Finally, as Obama heads into a second term, he appears to be clearing the decks so he can move ahead more aggressively with his own foreign policy. Robert Gates departed in mid-2011; David Petraeus has now resigned in ignominy; and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who often sided with Gates and Petraeus in taking

neocon-style policy positions, is expected to step down soon.

Belatedly, Obama seems to have learned a key lesson of modern Washington: surrounding yourself with ideological and political rivals may sound good but it is usually an invitation to have your policies sabotaged.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Thanks for Your Support!

From Journalist Robert Parry: We did fall a bit short on our second-half fund drive, but a late surge got us a lot closer than we were. If you still wish to contribute, you still can. There are several easy ways you can help to keep this 17-year-old Web site afloat.

You can make a tax-deductible donation that will go to paying our writers for their original work and support upcoming investigative projects, including one that will examine how Rupert Murdoch used political influence to build his U.S. media empire.

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Donations of \$100 or more qualify you for an autographed gift copy of my new book, *America's Stolen Narrative: From Washington and Madison to Nixon, Reagan and the Bushes to Obama*. The book corrects some of the key false narratives that the Right has inserted into American history. I have set aside the first 250 copies for this purpose. (If you want a special inscription, just send me an e-mail at consortnew@aol.com.)

Also, we will count all sales of *America's Stolen Narrative* toward our goal. In other words, you can help by buying the book by clicking [here](#) to purchase the book with a Visa, Mastercard or Discover, or you can mail a check for \$24.95 to The Media Consortium; 2200 Wilson Blvd., Suite 102-231; Arlington VA 22201. (Shipping is free.) Or, you can get the e-book version from [Amazon.com](#) or [barnesandnoble.com](#).

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As always, thanks for your support.

Robert Parry

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 as the Internet's first investigative magazine. He saw it as a way to combine modern technology and old-fashioned journalism to counter the increasing triviality of the mainstream U.S. news media.

Second-Term Obama's Foreign Policy

Freed from pressures of reelection, President Obama has the opportunity to chart a more daring foreign policy in his second term, taking chances for peace. But he will still face determined political opposition if he crosses powerful lobbies, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

After a campaign and election in which, at least as much as in most other election years, foreign policy took a back seat to domestic concerns, we, and the newly re-elected president, should take stock of the foreign policy significance of the electoral decision the American people just made.

Possibly the most significant implication is that the nation has dodged a bullet in the form of what would have been, given a different election outcome, a likely return of neoconservatives to positions of power and influence.

Perhaps a President-elect Romney would have surprised us with his appointments, but the ideological pattern in his party and the identities of his advisers suggest otherwise. They suggest that future historians would be scratching their heads to explain how, so soon after the Iraq War, promoters of that enormously costly blunder would be back in position to inflict still more damage.

Lowering the risk of ideologically-driven disasters should be only part of the stock-taking. There are broader implications, having mostly to do with the incumbent president entering his second and final term.

Although Barack Obama is still young enough for us to expect from him vigorous leadership right up until January 2017, he will never be running for office again. That should lift much of the weight of the political millstone that drags down policy-making on foreign as well as domestic affairs.

It does not remove the millstone completely; domestic political opposition, sometimes of a puerile sort, is a factor even for second-term presidents as they try to strike deals and build coalitions. But a second term opens up distance from the kind of reductionism in the discussion of foreign policy that is part of any effort to win election or re-election.

The extra intrusion of domestic politics whenever hoped-for re-election is a factor impairs the making of sound foreign policy in at least three respects. First, it amplifies the influence of small but nonetheless assertive interests that are different from the U.S. national interest.

Second, it requires an oversimplification or dumbing-down of policy questions and thus leaves little room for care and precision in crafting strategies well-suited for a complicated world. Third, it encourages politicians to adhere to low-risk positions unlikely to generate political vulnerabilities before the next election. Such low-risk positions tend to lead to policies that are uncreative and offer little potential for positive breakthroughs.

What are some of the themes and directions that our second-term president should adopt to take advantage of having been relieved from the burdens of his last round of electoral politics?

One is suggested by an unfortunate tendency that the just-completed campaign season exhibited regarding foreign as well as domestic policy: the tendency to treat a vote for or against the incumbent president as if it were just an expression of approval or disapproval of whatever is going well or going poorly in the country or in the world.

Such an attitude mistakenly disregards the causes of the good news or bad news, disregards whether the alternative candidate would have done anything different or better, and disregards whether whatever we are happy or dissatisfied with is something *any* U.S. president can do much about.

The countervailing theme that the re-elected president ought to start emphasizing is that there are many unpleasant things going on in the world that neither he nor the United States as a whole can reshape to our satisfaction, that it is not the responsibility of the United States to correct all such situations around the world, and that attempts to assume such responsibility will often result in costly frustration and failure.

Making such observations while seeking re-election invites charges of wimpiness or of trying to avoid responsibility. But the observations are true.

A related theme is that the United States needs to pay more attention to the damage it inflicts, the anger it incurs and the resistance it engenders through many of its own actions, even well-intentioned ones, around the world and to how the effects redound negatively to U.S. national interests. This refers especially to the use of force in other countries.

Voicing any such theme amid an election campaign is political poison; it invites attacks from opponents for straying from the exceptionalist orthodoxy that America is never anything other than good and great. Now that Mr. Obama is no longer running against an opponent who conjures up mythical "apology tours," he should not have to worry as much about such attacks.

In fact, the President can educate the public about the realities behind this theme without compromising at all the concept of America's greatness, which involves stature and influence that does not require using a hammer to pound at every gnat that flies by.

As for more specific issues, recall how the presidential candidates responded when they were asked in the last debate to name the biggest foreign or security threat facing the United States (always a flawed question, in its requirement to single out one topic to the exclusion of others).

President Obama replied, "terrorism." A safe answer, but now the President should foster a public discussion about the actual extent of terrorist threats to U.S. interests and about the costs and consequences of measures and policies aimed at countering those threats. The discussion should include material costs amid larger budgetary stringency, and it should include the broader consequences of killing individual suspected terrorists.

Governor Romney's reply to the same question was "Iran." The substantively appropriate response by his opponent would have been to ask how a second-rate power thousands of miles away could be considered the greatest threat facing the world's sole superpower.

But any such questioning would have been politically risky, and so neither candidate rose above the demonization and alarmism in which public discussion in the United States about Iran has been mired. With the election over (and especially before Iran gets preoccupied with its own presidential election in the spring), the administration needs to get away from the demonization and alarmism.

Unfortunately, as Jacob Heilbrunn points out, Mr. Obama has boxed himself in

somewhat with his categorical statements, matching those of Romney, that an Iranian nuclear weapon would be unacceptable. The good news is that there is definitely an opportunity for negotiating an agreement with Tehran that keeps Iran short of even deciding to build a nuclear weapon.

The administration needs to seize that opportunity, with all of the flexibility in negotiations that seizing it requires. The biggest impediment to doing so is likely to be resistance in Congress over the relaxing of sanctions.

The agitation over Iran has primarily been a project of the Israeli government, and this involves an area where the outcome of the election potentially makes a major difference. If Romney had won we would have a president who would outsource a major chunk of U.S. foreign policy to Benjamin Netanyahu, has already written off giving any attention to the defining conflict in the Middle East, and in hoping for re-election would have to keep thinking about what Sheldon Adelson will say the next time he sees him.

Mr. Obama has an opportunity to set another course, one far more attuned to the interests of the United States than to those of a foreign government. The opportunity stems not only from his status as a second-term president but also from encouraging signs in recent years (including the voice vote on Jerusalem at this year's Democratic Party convention) that increasing numbers of people are coming to see the political force that has enforced unquestioning support to the policies of the Israeli government as being something of a naked emperor.

President Obama can claim a mandate of sorts for setting a new course in this regard. In addition to winning the votes of a large majority of American Jews, election-night polling showed that four-fifths of that segment of the electorate believe that a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be negotiated, that the United States should take an active role accomplishing this, and that resolution of that conflict is an important U.S. national security interest.

The lobby that has impeded progress on this subject is, though weakened, still very much around. Opposing it will generate a lot of political ugliness. But the ugliness is not a good excuse for drifting along the old course. What comes closer to a legitimate excuse is the amount of presidential attention required amid fiscal cliffs and all the other demands on that attention.

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.)

Hopeful Signs in US Election

The U.S. political process still has many flaws, but the voters turned back the most brazen assaults on democracy, from plutocrats trying to buy the election to Republicans seeking to suppress the votes of minorities. Fairness on gay marriage and other social issues also won, writes William Boardman.

By William Boardman

Election 2012 probably doesn't prove anything, but it provides some evidence for the hopeful proposition that: *even when the game is rigged, the cheaters lose*. Some examples:

MONEY. Even though the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision allowed gross amounts of money (almost \$6 billion) from known and unknown donors to distort the process, few elections near the top of the ballot appear to have been bought. But the down-ballot races may be most of the iceberg.

Big money may not have overwhelmed the electoral system in 2012, but that's far from saying big money doesn't control too much of government and too many public officials.

PROCESS. Even though hyper-partisan Republican legislators, election officials and outside groups made a concerted effort by a variety of means to suppress voting by likely Democratic-leaning constituencies, there was sufficient pushback from the courts, the Justice Department and professional election officials to allow the democratic process to function pretty well.

Something like a fair and open election seems to have taken place in 2012, but the people who attacked the process mostly remain in power. Their gerrymandered Congressional districts will remain in place until the next census, in 2020. Unless these people begin to re-think their beliefs, they will continue to have strong motivation to skew the electorate in any way they can, and they will likely try.

PROPAGANDA. The results of Election 2012 may also support another hopeful proposition: denying reality is not as good a path to political victory as it used to be.

Maybe, there are positive portents, some straws in the wind:

OBSTRUCTIONISM. Republicans in Congress (and out) preferred to perpetuate economic suffering rather than risking the perception that the President had any

success. Enough of a less than grateful nation understood this treacherous blackmail to prevent it from succeeding.

CLIMATE. The leading candidates ignored the issue of climate change. Then Hurricane Sandy helped the President win re-election. The big money still backs denial and continued planetary destruction.

WOMEN. Maybe it's not God's will when rape produces pregnancy. Candidates who believed it was ended up losing races they could have won. That was the will of the electorate.

MARRIAGE. The idea that two people who want to get married should have that right in modern America was endorsed by electorates for the first time. False gender stereotypes and appeals to a false notion of "traditional marriage" lost some of their power to cloud people's minds.

MARIJUANA. "Reefer Madness" propaganda failed to persuade voters in two states. The dishonesty and stupidity of the "war on drugs" is becoming obvious to a majority of Americans. Does that majority include the President yet?

RACE. Years of overt and covert racism failed to prevent the President's re-election. Is the country post-racial yet? Hardly. But people who agree with what Bill O'Reilly means when he says, "it's not a traditional America anymore," are part of a slowly contracting minority.

Some scales have fallen from some eyes, but the country still suffers from many chronic delusions. Probably the most dangerous is the near hysterical fear of Iran having a nuclear weapon.

We also remain deluded about the efficacy of nuclear weapons generally, as well as the rationality of nuclear power. And we still imagine that we're so exceptional that we can and should work our will anywhere we want in the world. Even if we could, it wouldn't be a good idea.

The totality of the election was not a victory so much as an escape from defeat. But there were enough smaller, real victories across the country to make the larger victory seem almost possible again.

William Boardman lives in Vermont, where he has produced political satire for public radio and served as a lay judge.

A Great Night for US Democracy

Exclusive: President Obama's reelection was a victory for him and the Democrats but also for the principles of democracy. The Republicans sabotaged the economy, sought to suppress the vote and flooded TV screens with attack ads, but young people and minorities led the way in rejecting these tactics, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In the end, after a long ordeal lasting much of the last four years, the American people rejected the politics of Republican hostage-taking. Rather than reward the GOP for making the U.S. economy "scream," voters by a margin of nearly three million ballots reelected President Barack Obama.

The ruthless Republican strategy began on the day Obama took office, Jan. 20, 2009. It was a plan to delegitimize, denigrate and destroy the first African-American president. But it failed as young people, blacks, Hispanics and other minorities rallied to defend their choice from four years ago, turning out in strong numbers and refusing to submit.

Though President Obama's numbers were down among whites, who increased their support for the Republican candidate compared to 2008, other demographic groups, including women, voted for Obama's reelection in overwhelming numbers.

In doing so, the voters not only rejected the GOP scheme of taking the U.S. economy hostage (by obstructing Obama's proposals to create jobs and forcing a crisis over the nation's credit rating last year), but they withstood Republican efforts to suppress their votes, and they rebuffed the unprecedented expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars lavished on attack ads mostly paid for by pro-Republican billionaires.

So, Election Night turned out to be a great night for American democracy. The most brazen offensive by plutocrats in modern U.S. history had been turned back. Besides Obama's reelection, Democrats actually gained seats in the U.S. Senate, contrary to the expectation that they might lose their majority.

The GOP did retain its majority in the House of Representatives benefiting from redistricting in many states controlled by Republican governors and legislatures but it appears the Republican majority will be several seats smaller after a few close races are decided.

The Big Question

Thus, the big question on the day after this GOP debacle is whether the defeat

will lead to the kind of soul-searching that could convince the Republicans to look in the mirror and begin to remake themselves more in the image of the responsible pro-business party that many of us remember from the Eisenhower era of the 1950s.

Will the Republicans finally repudiate the win-at-all-cost tactics of Richard Nixon, including his Southern Strategy and its not-so-subtle appeals to racism and xenophobic resentments? Will the GOP accept facts and science on crucial issues like global warming or will the party continue to insist on fantasies and rely on propaganda?

Will the Republicans finally recognize that the American Republic was created by Founders who embraced government as crucial to build the nation and who devised the Constitution to create a vibrant central authority with strong powers to promote the "general welfare"? The Framers did not disdain government as today's Tea Party pretends. [See Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative*.]

The answers to these questions will not be easy for the GOP, which has not only internalized ruthlessness over the past four-plus decades but has implanted know-nothingism in the party's DNA. And the Republicans have generally profited from this approach. It's hard to abandon tactics that have worked. [For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's *"How to Save the GOP."*]

There's also the reality of the Right's massive infrastructure of angry media personalities, mercenary think tanks and ugly attack groups all of which have a strong self-interest in the status quo. Even if some GOP leaders wanted to change course, they'd have to confront these entrenched propagandists, the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Fox News, ready to denounce any responsible Republicans as traitors.

Faced with this prospect of internecine warfare, the Republican Party might well opt to just continue down the same path toward consolidating the white vote and suppressing the votes of others, while investing even more in propaganda to create public confusion and resuming the GOP's obstructionist ways.

But the hard truth for the Republicans is that those tactics didn't succeed in 2012. The GOP took the U.S. economy hostage and told the American people that their only choice was to elect Mitt Romney and then follow the instructions from the Republican Congress.

More than 60 million American voters called the GOP's bluff.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#)

A New Day for Mideast Negotiations

With President Obama's reelection, prospects for progress in Middle East disputes have brightened but no one expects the resolution of crises in Syria, Iran, Israel, Palestine and elsewhere to be easy. An offhand remark by a Palestinian leader shows how complex some issues remain, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas received attention the other day with a remark about the possible return of Palestinian Arabs to Israel. He was asked in an interview whether he wanted to return to the town in the Galilee region where he grew up and from which he had been driven as a 13-year-old during the war in 1948 that accompanied the establishment of Israel.

Abbas replied that he would like to visit the town but not live there. Although he described himself as a refugee, he referred to the boundary that lasted until a later Arab-Israeli war in 1967 and said that Palestine is on one side of that border and Israel is on the other.

The comment, despite being an apparently unscripted answer to an interview question, was seized on in various quarters as a significant concession on the longstanding issue of "right of return." Some Israelis hopeful of meaningful peace negotiations, including President Shimon Peres, lauded Abbas's remark.

Abbas's Palestinian rivals in Hamas denounced his comment, saying he had no right to make such a "concession" on behalf of the Palestinian people. Both sorts of reactions vastly overstated the significance of the remark.

Abbas hasn't really made any formal concessions on this issue. The official Palestinian position is still that there is a right of return, but when commenting at other times about the right of return Abbas has shown himself to be realistic.

He has observed that if all the Palestinian refugees and their descendants, now numbering several million, were to return to Israel that would effectively destroy Israel, and he has no desire to do that, wanting instead to live alongside Israel. He has also appropriately questioned how many Palestinians

would want to go back to live in their old home towns. Many say they would in principle, but if the reality would be to live as a minority in the Jewish state, most would have preferences similar to Abbas's own.

What the reactions to Abbas's comment illustrate, besides an overplaying of the comment itself, is a common tendency to confuse a position maintained for bargaining purposes with some kind of intractable bottom line demand. Some elements may have an interest in promoting such confusion, such as in this case Hamas, which tried to use the issue as a stick with which to beat Abbas. Partly because of such promotion, others may genuinely but mistakenly believe that a negotiating position is a rigid demand.

In any conflict with multiple major issues in dispute, and that is certainly true of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, it behooves each side not to make concessions even on issues on which it is willing to concede until and unless it gets something in return on other issues.

Everyone concerned has long realized that a reasonable resolution of the issue of right of return would be some formula that lets Palestinians claim the right has been recognized but that involves only a symbolically small number, no more than a few thousand, actually moving to Israel, perhaps with monetary compensation provided to the rest.

Palestinian leaders, however, would be foolish to offer such a formula without getting anything on other issues of concern to them, including borders and the status of Jerusalem.

Similar situations arise all the time, including on other matters of concern to Israel. Why should Hamas, for example, make unilateral concessions involving something such as recognition of Israel if it does not get in return something as basic as recognition of Hamas?

On that all-preoccupying matter involving Iran's nuclear program, the Iranians have given ample indication of flexibility on restricting their enrichment of uranium and on much else. But they would be foolish to make unilateral concessions with no prospect of getting anything in return on matters of importance to them.

When someone seems to be adhering to a position that ought not to be a vital interest to them, we should not make the mistake of interpreting this as a mark of obduracy and unreasonableness. More likely it means they are willing to bargain.

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.)

Did Netanyahu Seek War with Iran?

The Israeli news media is reporting that in 2010 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered Israel's military onto high alert for an attack on Iran's nuclear program but was blocked by his military and intelligence chiefs. But the question remains how close to war Israel actually got, writes Gareth Porter for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

A new twist was added to the long-running media theme of a threat by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to go to war with Iran when news stories seemed to suggest on Monday that Netanyahu had ordered the Israeli military to prepare for an imminent attack on Iranian nuclear sites in 2010.

Netanyahu backed down after Israeli Defense Forces chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Mossad director Meir Dagan opposed the order, according to the reports. But the details of the episode provided in a report by Israel's Channel 2 investigative news program "Truth," which aired Monday night, show that the Netanyahu order was not meant to be a prelude to an imminent attack on Iran.

The order to put Israeli forces on the highest alert status was rejected by Ashkenazi and Dagan primarily because Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak had not thought through the risk that raising the alert status to the highest level could provoke unintended war with Iran. All the participants, moreover, understood that Israel had no realistic military option for an attack on Iran.

Most stories about the episode failed to highlight the distinction between an order for war and one for the highest state of readiness, thus creating the clear impression that Netanyahu was preparing for war with Iran. The stories had to be read very carefully to discern the real significance of the episode.

The Israeli Ynet News report on the story carried the headline, "Was Israel on verge of war in 2010?" and a teaser asking, "Did Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak try to drag Israel into a military operation in Iran without cabinet approval?"

AFP reported that Netanyahu and Barak “ordered the army to prepare an attack against Iranian nuclear installations.” The Reuters story said Netanyahu and Barak “ordered Israeli defence chiefs in 2010 to prepare for an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities but were rebuffed.”

And AP reported that the order from Netanyahu was for a “high alert for a looming attack on Iran’s nuclear program” and that the episode “indicated that Israel was much closer to carrying out a strike at that time than was previously known.”

Washington Post blogger Max Fisher certainly got the impression from the press coverage that Netanyahu and Barak had “attempted to order the Israeli military to prepare for an imminent strike on Iran but were thwarted by other senior officials.” Fisher concluded that Netanyahu was “more resolved than thought to strike Iran.”

The coverage of the story thus appears to have pumped new life into the idea that Netanyahu is serious about attacking Iran, despite clear evidence in recent weeks that he has climbed down from that posture.

The details of the episode in the original Channel 2 program as reported by the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth suggest that none of the participants in the meeting believed that Netanyahu had decided on actual war with Iran. The incident occurred, according to the program, after a meeting of seven top cabinet ministers at an unspecified time in 2010.

As Dagan and Ashkanazi were about to leave the meeting room, the program recalls, Netanyahu ordered them to prepare the military for “the possibility of a strike” against Iran by putting the IDF on the highest level of readiness. Netanyahu used the code word “F Plus” for the alert status, according to the Channel 2 program.

Ashkenazi and Dagan reacted strongly to the order, and Netanyahu and Barak eventually backed down. But both Ashkenazi and Barak appear to agree that the issue was not whether Israel would actually attack Iran but the alert itself. Ashkenazi’s response indicated that he did not interpret it as a sign that Netanyahu intended to carry out an attack on Iran.

“It’s not something you do if you’re not sure you want to follow through with it,” Ashkenazi was quoted as saying. Barak sought to downplay the order for the high alert status, asserting that raising the alert level “did not necessarily mean war.”

“It is not true that creating a situation in which the IDF are on alert for a few hours or a few days to carry out certain operations forces Israel to go

through with them," the defense minister said.

Ashkenazi was not asserting, however, that Netanyahu would be forced to attack. Rather, he feared it would have the unintended consequence of convincing Iran that Israel did intend to attack and thus trigger a war.

The former IDF chief highlighted that danger in commenting, "This accordion produces music when you play with it," according to "sources close to" Ashkenazi the formula usually used when an official or ex-official does not wish to be quoted directly.

Barak also said Ashkenazi had responded that the IDF did not have the ability to carry out a strike against Iran. "Eventually, at the moment of truth, the answer that was given was that, in fact, the ability did not exist," Barak is quoted as saying on the program.

Significantly, Barak made no effort to deny the reality that the Israeli Air Force did not have the capability to carry out a successful attack against Iran. Instead he is blaming Ashkenazi for having failed to prepare Israeli forces for a possible attack.

Ashkenazi angrily denied that obviously political charge. "I prepared the option, the army was ready for a strike but I also said that a strike now would be a strategic mistake," he is quoted as saying. Israeli military leaders are still saying publicly that the IDF can carry out a strike.

But while Ashkenazi is quoted as saying the army was "ready for a strike", that is not the same as claiming that Israel had a military option that had any chance of success in derailing Iran's enrichment program. And in February 2011, he told then-Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen that references to such a military option were "empty words", because "Israel has no military option," according to an earlier report by Yedioth Ahronoth.

Despite the public political feud between them, both Barak and Ashkenazi implied that the purpose of the high alert was to achieve a political effect rather than to prepare for an actual attack.

Both Ashkenazi and former Mossad director Dagan were apparently shocked that Netanyahu and Barak would be so irresponsible as to run the obvious risks of feigning preparations for a war with Iran. Dagan concluded that Netanyahu is unfit for leadership of the country a point that he had made repeatedly since leaving his Mossad post in 2011.

Netanyahu sought to manipulate the supposed threat of military force against Iran to put pressure on U.S. President Barack Obama to adopt harsh sanctions

against Iran and even get him to pledge to use force if Iran did not yield on its nuclear program. The firm rebuff to that ploy by Obama last summer brought that phase of the Netanyahu military option ploy to an end, as indicated by his failure to include any implicit threat in his U.N. address in late August.

Netanyahu continues to insist publicly, however, that he is considering the military option against Iran. In an interview for the Channel 2 program, he said, "We are serious, this is not a show. If there is no other way to stop Iran, Israel is ready to act."

Israeli political observers have suggested that Netanyahu's belligerent posture has now become primarily a theme of his campaign for reelection as prime minister. But as the coverage of the 2010 episode indicates, the news media have not yet abandoned the story of Netanyahu's readiness to go to war against Iran.

Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy, received the UK-based Gellhorn Prize for journalism for 2011 for articles on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.
