

The Blowback from Interventionism

American foreign policy remains locked in a cycle of violence, with the Obama administration failing to escape the neocon insistence on a swaggering “tough-guy-ism” abroad. That reliance on military intervention also comes with the cost of “blowback,” as ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman notes.

By Melvin A. Goodman

The United States and the Central Intelligence Agency have never acknowledged the potential for “blowback,” or negative fallout, from their military and covert actions. Yet, the Watergate burglary by the veterans of the Bay of Pigs was an obvious example of blowback. CIA’s support for the anti-Soviet mujahedeen in the 1980s proved particularly damaging, because the mujahedeen provided weaponry to fuel conflicts in the Balkans and the Sudan and trained the terrorists who would attack us at home, including the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993.

Former CIA Director Robert Gates may believe that support to the mujahedeen was the CIA’s “greatest success,” but don’t tell that to U.S. soldiers and Marines in Afghanistan who have had to deal with former mujahedeen forces, such as the Haqqani and Hekmatyar networks, for the past decade. The United States inadvertently created, trained, and sustained an infrastructure of terror that exported terror wrapped in the language of religious war.

Now we are dealing with an updated version of “blowback,” a series of terrorist attacks in the United States where perpetrators claim their inspiration is the U.S. “war on Islam.” They cite the use of U.S. military power and CIA operations in Muslim countries. The surviving Boston Marathon bomber, who contends that he acted to counter U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, is the latest example.

But he is one of many. Osama bin Laden claimed that he targeted the United States because of the “occupation” of Saudi Arabia and its holy places by the U.S. military. Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani immigrant who went to college in Connecticut, said he left a S.U.V. packed with explosives in Times Square because of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. Major Nidal Malik Hasan killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009 because of U.S. military strikes in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan-American, planned a suicide attack on New York City’s subway system because of the U.S. role in Afghanistan.

The attack on the Benghazi consulate last year focused on the U.S. intelligence platform in eastern Libya. The groups claiming responsibility for the Benghazi

attack had been targeted by U.S. intelligence throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa. Any U.S. intelligence component is a likely target of the wrath of militant and terrorist organizations because of the CIA's key role in the "war on terror" and the increasingly widespread use of drone aircraft.

The United States has been single-minded and narrow-minded in dealing with terrorism, believing that a unilateral use of military power would provide the best protection for its interests. We have used unwieldy military instruments, such as armed drones, to counter the threat.

There is increased evidence that the militarization of U.S. foreign policy and the increased operational tempo of the U.S. military itself is creating many more terrorists and insurgents than it is destroying. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged this fact ten years ago, and more recently the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, did the same.

A Yemeni activist told a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee on April 23 that a single drone strike creates a greater hatred of the United States than the actions of Yemeni insurgents.

Just as a bipartisan panel in the 1950s, the Doolittle Committee, declared that there were "no rules" in the global competition with the Soviet Union and that "hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply," which led to the misuse of the CIA and a series of misbegotten covert actions from the 1950s to the early 1970s, the "war on terror" became the justification for another surge in illegal CIA activities, including the use of torture and abuse, secret prisons and extraordinary renditions. These tactics raise important moral and humanitarian questions and compromise the strategic quest for international stability.

The "creativity" of the United States in using the CIA as a military weapon has not been matched by the use of diplomacy in the international arena. At the outset of his first term, President Barack Obama sent strong signals regarding the need for diplomacy and conciliation as opposed to President George W. Bush's emphasis on military force and covert action.

President Obama even named three so-called tsars for diplomatic dealings with the Middle East (George Mitchell), Iran (Dennis Roth), and Afghanistan-Pakistan (Richard Holbrooke). It was soon obvious that the tsars were isolated and ignored within Hillary Clinton's Department of State and General James Jones's National Security Council.

The example of Holbrooke was particularly revealing because, unlike his

colleagues, Holbrooke had actual ideas about using a prisoner exchange to get the Taliban to talks similar to the Dayton talks for Bosnia or Rambouillet for Kosovo in the 1990s. But the Pentagon backed by congressional conservatives opposed any prisoner release that would possibly lead to putting Taliban fighters back on the battlefield. The Pentagon is even dragging its heels in implementing further withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan.

The end of the Cold War dramatically widened the area of diplomacy and conciliation in U.S. foreign policy, but three presidents over a 20-year period chose to ignore the opportunity.

President Bill Clinton ignored signs of conciliation from Iran, and instead of "anchoring" Russia to the Western security architecture, he enlarged the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

President George W. Bush abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the core of strategic deterrence, in order to deploy a national missile defense that does not work, and then manipulated specious intelligence to lead the country into an unnecessary and immoral war against Iraq.

President Obama ignored a credible signal from North Korea for the start of a diplomatic dialogue, and has relied on sanctions and coercion in dealing with Iran's nuclear program. His administration has ignored fundamental questions of law and morality in the "war on terror."

At home, the Obama administration prosecutes whistleblowers; allowed solitary confinement for Bradley Manning; failed to close Guantanamo; and has endorsed a National Defense Authorization Act that permits indefinite detention of U.S. citizens.

After the Pentagon was attacked on 9/11, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld told his closest advisers to "go massive sweep it all up, things related and not." Going massive has meant the use of an even blunter military instrument to stabilize a lawless tribal region in Southwest Asia that has been causing trouble for the past 150 years.

Pakistan has used U.S. money and support to fund the regrouping of the Afghan Taliban, thus assuring defeat in any counter-insurgency. The U.S. policy of extraordinary renditions created a virtual global network for torture and abuse that involved dozens of countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Military tools will not solve the myriad problems that include India vs. Pakistan; Afghanistan vs. Pakistan; Iran vs. Afghanistan, nor defuse the powder kegs that exist in Central Asia. The long-term commitment of military forces and money has further destabilized the region, and contributed to the violence aimed

at U.S. forces and even the United States itself.

We cannot occupy the entire world. The sooner we close certain doors and turn the keys over to key regional actors, the better off we will be.

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The Special-Interest Congress

Special interests with lots of money continue to be heard in Congress; the average citizen not so much. Thus, corporate tax breaks are protected while programs to help people and build the country are cut, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship explain.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

If you want to see why the public approval rating of Congress is down in the sub-arctic range, an icy 15 percent by last count, all you have to do is take a quick look at how the House and Senate pay worship at the altar of corporations, banks and other special interests at the expense of public aspirations and need.

Traditionally, political scientists have taught their students that there are two schools of thought about how a legislator should get the job done. One is to vote aye or nay on a bill by following the will of his or her constituency, doing what they say they want. The other is to represent them as that legislator sees fit, acting in the best interest of the voters, whether they like it or not.

But our current Congress, as cranky and inert as an obnoxious old uncle who refuses to move from his easy chair, never went to either of those schools. Its members rarely have the voter in mind at all, unless, of course, that voter's a cash-laden heavy hitter with the clout to keep an incumbent on the leash and comfortably in office.

How else to explain a Congress that still adamantly refuses to do anything, despite some 90 percent of the American public being in favor of background checks for gun purchases and a healthy majority favoring other gun-control measures?

Last week, they ignored the pleas of Newtown families and the siege of violence in Boston and yielded once again to the fanatical rants of Wayne LaPierre and the National Rifle Association. In just the first three months of this year, as it shoved back against the renewed push for controls, the NRA spent a record \$800,000 keeping congressional members in line.

And how else to explain why corporate tax breaks have more than doubled in the last 25 years? Or why the Senate and House recently gutted the STOCK Act requiring disclosure of financial transactions by White House staff and members of Congress and their staffs and prohibiting them from insider trading?

It was passed into law and signed by President Obama last year an election year with great self-congratulation from all involved. But fears allegedly arose that there might be security risks for some in the Executive Branch if their financial business was known.

That concern was examined by the Columbia Journalism Review, which “consulted four cybersecurity experts from leading think tanks and private security consultancies. Each came to the same conclusion: that Congress’s rationale for scrapping the financial disclosure rules was bogus.”

Nonetheless, the House and Senate leapt at the opportunity to eviscerate key sections of the STOCK Act when almost no one was watching. And the President signed it.

Then there’s the fertilizer plant in West, Texas, where last week, fire and explosion killed at least 15, 11 of them first responders, and injured more than 200. The Reuters news service reported that the factory “had last year been storing 1,350 times the amount of ammonium nitrate that would normally trigger safety oversight by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.”

Why wasn’t Homeland Security on top of this? For one thing, the company was required to tell the department, and didn’t. For another, budget cuts demanded by Congress mean there aren’t enough personnel available for spot inspections.

Same goes for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration OSHA. The plant hadn’t been inspected in nearly 30 years, and there are so few OSHA inspectors in Texas that it would take 98 years for them to take a look at each workplace in the state once.

According to the non-partisan reform group Public Campaign, “Already only able to conduct 40,000 workplace inspections a year in a country with seven million worksites, OSHA will see its budget cut by an additional 8.2 percent this year on account of the sequester.”

Twelve members of Congress want to make a bad situation even worse, sponsoring the industry-backed General Duty Clarification Act; its banal title hiding that, as reported by Tim Murphy at *Mother Jones* magazine, “The bill is designed to sap the Environmental Protection Agency of its powers to regulate safety and security at major chemical sites, as prescribed by the Clean Air Act.”

“‘We call that the Koch brothers bill,’ Greenpeace legislative director Rick Hind says, because the bill’s sponsor, GOP Rep. Mike Pompeo, represents the conservative megadonors’ home city of Wichita, Kansas. (The sponsor of the sister legislation in the senate, GOP Sen. Pat Roberts, represents the Kochs’ home state of Kansas.) The brothers have huge investments in fertilizer production, and Hind thinks they’ll ultimately get what they want, whether or not the bill becomes law.”

No coincidence, perhaps, that the sponsors of the House bill and Senator Roberts, Public Campaign reports, “have collectively taken over \$670,000 from the chemical manufacturing industry over their careers.” Since 2011, the industry has spent \$85.1 million lobbying.

Congress quietly acquiesces as the regulations meant for our safety are whittled away. The progressive website ThinkProgress notes that even though food-related infections, which kill 3,000 and sicken 48 million Americans each year, rose last year, congressional and White House budget cuts may mean up to 600 fewer food inspectors at meat and poultry plants, leaving it up to the industry to police itself. That rot you’re smelling isn’t just some bad hamburger.

It’s true that 92 percent of Americans say, yes, reducing the deficit and spending cuts are important, but all on their own the people have figured out cuts that make more sense than anything Congress and its corporate puppeteers want to hear about.

Mattea Kramer, research director at the National Priorities Project, says “a strong majority”, 73 percent of us ,want a reduced reliance on fossil fuels, and 50 percent want something done about climate change. A carbon tax would help with both, and raise an estimated \$125 billion every year. Response from Congress: crickets.

Fifty-eight percent of the U.S., according to Gallup, wants “major cuts in military and defense spending,” the average American favoring a reduction of 18 percent. Good luck, the Pentagon and defense contractors already are bellowing about the puny 1.6 percent reduction called for in the new White House budget.

Mattea Kramer writes that Americans for Tax Fairness, a coalition of 280 organizations, has “identified 10-year budgetary savings of \$2.8 trillion simply

by limiting or eliminating a plethora of high-income and corporate tax loopholes.”

Congress is busily revising the tax code as we speak but how many of those loopholes and other perks like credits and deductions do you bet will go away?

Not many, if the lobbying industry has anything to do with it. The House Ways and Means Committee has 11 working groups considering rewrites and according to the congressional newspaper *The Hill*, they’re quietly meeting with lobbyists and other interests “deep pocketed players” all the time.

Keep your eye on who’s donating to the re-election campaigns of each of those working group members as we move toward the midterms next year.

Over on the Senate side, *The New York Times* recently reported those seeking to cut taxes and hang onto their incentives as the code is revised have found one strategy that seems to work hire firms that employ former aides to Democratic Senator Max Baucus, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

The *Times* analyzed lobbying files and found at least 28 of his ex-staffers “have lobbied on tax issues during the Obama administration more than any other current member of Congress.”

Reporter Eric Lipton writes, “Many of those lobbyists have already saved their clients millions, in some cases, billions, of dollars after Mr. Baucus backed their requests to extend certain corporate tax perks, provisions that were adopted as part of the so-called fiscal cliff legislation in January.”

Senator Baucus’s spokesman was quick to say that his boss regularly rejects requests as well, but the fact is, he added, “Oftentimes good policy can indirectly benefit someone. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be done.”

Just so. Which is why, for example, Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican minority leader who likes to complain about the current tax code’s four million words of red tape seven times the length of *War and Peace*, will doubtless support tightening loopholes, right?

A January report from Public Campaign Action Fund, found that, “Companies that lobbied against bringing jobs back to America and ending tax breaks for offshoring have given McConnell one million dollars to win his elections and look out for their interests.” In other words: don’t hold your breath.

No wonder the biggest newspaper in his native Kentucky said in a recent editorial that McConnell “has long ceased to serve the state, instead serving the corporate interests he counts on for contributions and leading obstruction

that continues to plague Congress.”

Sadly, such is the way of Washington, home of the scheme and the fraud, where the unbreakable chain between money and governance weighs heavy and drags us ever deeper into a sinkhole of inaction and mediocrity.

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