

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.

Melvin A. Goodman is a former CIA senior analyst and the author of the forthcoming "*National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism*" (City Lights Publishers, January 2013). [A version of this article previously appeared at Counterpunch and is republished with the author's permission.]
