

# The Root of American Bullying

The issue of bullying in U.S. schools has attracted much attention of late. But the problem is not isolated to schools, with bullying evident in major institutions, from the U.S. government in its foreign policy to Christian churches demanding obedience to the Bible, as retired Baptist minister Howard Bess explains.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

Bullying is now a major reason that American teenagers give for skipping school and eventually dropping out of high school. Students get bullied over race, sexual orientation, clothes, looks, handicaps, intelligence and economic class.

Yet, where can we find a voice of sanity that will publicly call for a halt in the practice of bullying? It is not the Christian churches. Indeed, many Christian pastors and fundamentalists practice the art of bullying themselves, demanding obedience to holy books and creeds.

I cringe every time I hear preachers and devout Christians declare "The Bible says" Rarely do they identify the author or the circumstance of the passage to which they refer. "The Bible says" is the sledge hammer of Protestant Christianity.

The message is all too plain: Get in line or you are headed for punishment, rejection or even Hell. It is the ultimate bullying tool because it is difficult for a parishioner to out-gun a holy god who has spoken with finality and without error. Dynamic and authoritarian preachers are especially good at Bible rhetoric that is calculated intimidation. Preachers may be the most skilled persons in our society in the practice of bullying.

And then there are the creeds, which were originally devised to force conformity to Christian belief. The creeds of Christianity have been and are regularly used as the club for bullying. Again, the message is clear: Agree or be denied ordination; agree or be silenced; agree or be censored; disagree and be labeled a heretic and be excommunicated.

Bullying also is practiced at the highest level of American civil society, with bullying a front-line tool of U.S. foreign policy. One could say that America in its world leadership role has refined and redefined the art of bullying.

We constantly send messages to the nations of the world: Behave and we will send you money; misbehave and we will place sanctions against you; get out of line too much and we have the power to crush you; dare rattle your own sword and we

will station our battleships off your coast.

None of these public practices teaches our children the ways of peace. Then we seem surprised when we find bullying prevalent among our school children. Teenage gangs are simply another manifestation of a bully system that pervades many of the most respected institutions of society.

While details change, the dynamics of bullying never change. The story line repeats itself over and over. A bully finds ways to intimidate others to establish control over them. The person who is the object of the bullying has three choices: submit, run away, or fight back. None of these standard responses produce good results.

I had a chance to reflect on the dynamics of bullying when the Palmer Arts Council in Alaska presented a play written by Brian Guehring, a teacher with degrees in children's theatre from Duke University and University of Texas. He wrote the play, "The Bully Show," for audiences of young people in grades 4 through 8. His goal was to educate teachers, administrators and students about the practice of bullying in the school setting.

A local fifth-grade teacher, a theater veteran, became the director. The play can be done with a three-person cast. An eighth grader, a sophomore and a senior were chosen for the parts. The play is interactive with the audiences and the cast developed excellent skills in handling unrehearsed and spontaneous responses from their young audiences.

In September 2012, The Arts Council presented "The Bully Show" 18 times at school sites. Nearly 5,000 students saw the production and teachers used the shows for classroom discussion. As an Arts Council board member, I traveled with the show and saw the production several times. I received a quick education in the dynamics of bullying.

In the play, the lead actor is the host of a television game show, called "The Bully Show." The host is presented as dedicated to bringing bullying among school children to an end. But she was very assertive in the way she ran her show. There was no doubt about who was in charge.

Near the end of play, she is confronted by an assistant producer for being a bully herself. When a closer look is taken, the game show host had used the very same tactics to gain the dominance and control that she found unacceptable in others. The confrontation between the game show host and her assistant was the high moment in the play; and it was my own moment of truth.

I, too, if placed in the right circumstance, can become a bully. Upon further reflection, I saw myself surrounded by bullying, living in a bully nation and

part of a bully Christianity. What we see in our school children, they have learned from parents, government and church. Bullying is an American way of life.

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## Tyranny of Deception

Truth has always been a challenging pursuit, often resulting in the persecution of its pursuers. But the modern era offers a special challenge as lies are now the mass-manufactured product of an industry that relentlessly serves the interests of the powerful, as Phil Rockstroh writes.

By Phil Rockstroh

Throughout the course of human affairs, scheming elitists – let's call them the Plundering Class – have devoted their days conceiving strategies and executing agendas that serve to enrich the fortunes of a ruthless few (namely themselves) by an exploitation of the harried and hapless multitudes.

They scheme, hire silver-tongued flacks and muster soldiers to do their bidding, while, all too often, the rest of us squander the fleeting days of our finite lives in their service. They plot while we hope. They hoard the bounty of the world while we hoard resentments (generally misplaced upon those equally as power-bereft as we are).

“The best people possess a feeling for beauty, the courage to take risks, the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity for sacrifice. Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable; they are often wounded, sometimes destroyed.” – Ernest Hemingway

Yet we vulnerable nobodies are free to stumble upon the truth, while self-impressed schemers merely lie. We can live artfully, while they have enclosed themselves in prisons of artifice.

They wage wars of choice to gain power, acquire plunder, and leave a wasteland of rubble and ashes in their wake. They pursue economic agendas that exploit the things of the world (and that includes rendering the inner landscapes of all concerned a psychological wasteland and, yes, that includes their own).

This is the meaning of the overused (yet terrifying in its implications) term

losing one's soul i.e., the dismal state of affairs of having a soulless agenda – but not a life. The soul – being an ever persisting, always dying multi-verse of living images – cannot be reduced to a PowerPoint presentation.

You cannot conceive and execute a scheme that will suffuse the hours of your life with resonance, depth and meaning, but you can scheme (as is the mode of mind and the modus operandi of the Plundering Class) your way into creating a hell on earth. In this way, the elites of our soul-decimated age have been successful beyond their most self-deceiving expectations.

Is not the relentless shallowness of the corporate/consumer culture a type of a lie – and a pernicious one at that? Not even taking into account the effects of being plied and pummeled by the relentless legerdemain of a nearly all-enveloping commercial media, a stultifying social milieu has evolved in which the individual is coerced, by means, both overt and subliminal, to construct a false self, a cipher persona, in order to adapt to the demeaning demands of corporate authoritarianism.

A tyranny of the reasonable is in place under corporate hegemony, in which the unique and unruly nature of human character is deemed inappropriate to a workplace environment – an outright affront to the “team player” *esprit de corps* of the corporate state.

Thus, those adapted to embodying the lie inherent to living a superficial life are considered a company asset (until, of course, perennial rounds of downsizing begin) while truth-tellers carry qualities of the chronically unemployable, and whistleblowers become objects for federal prosecution.

Yet, there is a place, an indomitable domain within you that allows you to live with truth that allows you to live so deeply within your authentic nature that you can live beyond yourself. Finding this place is crucial: For if you cannot bear what is true (often uncomfortably so) about yourself, it is impossible to discern the true nature of others.

Consequently, life is reduced to a series of provisional deceptions. The ability to love becomes atrophied. The world becomes a prison constructed of petrified longing and misapplied aggression. One falls easy prey to peddlers of false hope and propagandists who promote wars based on lies.

In contrast, it is essential to maintain a sanctuary within where shame cannot trespass – where your luminous (but inhuman) daimon is allowed rendezvous with transitory, mortal longing – where the daimon's outrageous demands cross-pollinate with grim, earth-shackled realities, thus allowing for not only the bloom of radiant possibility but the ability to apprehend a self-serving lie and

nip it in the bud.

This is the place where love is born and abides. It stands before us, every moment of every passing hour. It takes an acquired, all too common myopia, to lose sight of it.

Not all truths are created equal. At times, true statements can be launched with malevolent intent. Such declarations of fact should be avoided for the sake of all concerned (e.g., "Your child was served with a large dollop of the ugly gene distributed so generously in your family").

In contrast, calling out an insidious lie told in the pursuit of a selfish agenda serves the benefit of all, but the promulgator of the self-serving fiction, e.g., a lie such as: "Evidence indicates that the despotic ruler of (fill in the blank of a resource rich or strategically located nation) has become a threat to life and to the liberty of the world at large; therefore, we have no choice but to invade with the full force of our military might and establish the democracy that decent people everywhere yearn for."

The same applies to convictions borne of convenient self-deception, e.g., "I support the troops deployed (in the aforementioned invasion) or else people might accuse me of supporting the terrorists."

For an individual, by far, the biggest danger in trafficking in transactional lies arises from losing awareness of the demarcation point between where the lie starts and you begin – your existence reduced to a fixed smile (and a clutch of hidden resentments) that announces the presence of a counterfeit life. By losing the recognition that you are lying, your life becomes a lie.

Often, a comforting lie can be as insidious as an outright prevarication. Building a worldview based on comforting lies translates into a habitual muting of the senses – a white noise of the mind takes hold drowning out the unique music that forms the core of one's consciousness obliterating, the quality Kabir averred is: "The flute of interior time [that] is played whether we hear it or not. What we know as 'love' is its sound coming in."

"Where else," the poet asks, "have you heard a sound like this?"

Sometimes, in art, one must lie – create artifice – to trudge in the direction of truth. Yet when governments lie, and those lies, in time, are regarded as historical fact, the lies may become fixed in place, as obdurate as marble monuments in the collective mind of the populace, even as the culture that was created by those lies comes apart by the wisdom-bereft actions of an ignorant public.

Through it all – and despite the efforts of even the most relentless prevaricators – the mysterious nature of life – its unfathomable vastness, its endless intricacies, ambiguities, gradations of truths and variability of outcomes – provides life with a redemptive quality.

The phenomenon allows us, although not often enough, to avoid the hubris of claiming we are privy to all-encompassing, monolithic truth, for, as history reveals, that way lies oppression, stagnation of imagination, murder and madness.

Few things mitigate a compulsion to lie as does admitting bafflement and committing to a sustained attempt to learn to live within the unfolding mystery inherent to earthly life. Said mode of being should not be confused with the unfortunate fate of drifting through life as a wishy-washy cipher. Conversely, the approach allows one to remain open to, thus be enriched by, a wide range of life-enhancing, certainty-shattering, wisdom-garnering experiences.

Moreover, a tenacious angel resides in states of absence. To remain connected to the heart of existence, we must continue to love those things that have been irretrievably lost to us. Accepting one will never be privy to omniscience allows seeds of possibility to take root in the cracks and fissures of the soul that have been wrought by heartbreak.

Antithetical to the overreach of empire and the dynamic of addiction inherent to the consumer state, limits allow us to love the things of the world that stand before us. A kind of deliverance is achieved by arriving at the demarcation point yawning between What Is Gone Forever and Things That Can Never Be.

This is one of the locations of the soul where grace approaches us – a junction where we have been waylaid by circumstance and pierced by grief. Consequently, we are held in place long enough to not habitually rush past beauty.

The individual who finds an implicate order within – who keeps hold of the golden thread of his true nature as he wends through the baffling labyrinth of social convention and official deceit – will make an ally of fate. His true name will be emblazoned upon his heart and will ring across the devouring abyss of a conformist age.

In bleak contrast, how can a people whose consciousness and concomitant mode of being was forged in a furnace of cultural perfidy be capable of building anything of enduring worth? The facile fades, even as the lie that gave rise to millions of deceitful heirs lives on, e.g., The citizenry of the U.S. who have shunted from consciousness and expunged from memory the millions of slaughtered human beings (from Central America to Central Asia, from Southeast Asia to the

Persian Gulf) resultant from the imperial ambitions of the nation's ruling elites.

We claim we know who we are. We believe the fictions we spin regarding our identity and our interactions with the world. But, to a large degree, we are composed of the very things we are unaware of about ourselves – the things that we find too uncomfortable to admit inform our actions and form the foundation of our fate.

Propagandists, corporate and political, know this: They know how to manipulate those resistant to self-awareness, by plying them with flattering lies and pummeling them with contrived fears. These overpaid, professional liars know how to trap us in cages constructed of our cherished convictions. This is why, as a general rule, human beings prove so easy to control.

If you find what you have been habitually avoiding, you might blunder upon who you are.

Antithetical to the process of self-awareness: The quintessence of duplicity we know as corporate man is not interested in connection nor exploration; he craves control. He is not moved by mystery; he has an agenda. He does not know life; he possesses a facile contrivance of being.

But the currents of time will erode his counterfeit world. He will be left with nothing because, in the long run, he will only possess his own emptiness.

Yet, you cannot force truth upon the deceived. If a deluded soul is fortunate enough to stumble upon it, he will have found it beneath the rubble of his collapsed convictions. His most treasured, now shattered, verities will glint like shards in moonlight, as irascible circumstance has forced him to question all he insisted was true.

This is the means by which wars are avoided. Here is located the point of departure where a subversion of a corrupt order begins.

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## The Consensus Behind Militarism

While the U.S. media has some spirited debate over politics and social issues

i.e. Fox News vs. MSNBC there remains a broad consensus about foreign adversaries whose behavior is almost always cast in the harshest light, a reality that colors how America reacts to the world, as Jeff Cohen writes.

By Jeff Cohen

I spent years as a political pundit on mainstream TV at CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. I was outnumbered, outshouted, red-baited and finally terminated. Inside mainstream media, I saw that major issues were not only dodged, but sometimes not even acknowledged to exist.

Today there's an elephant in the room: a huge, yet ignored, issue that largely explains why Social Security is now on the chopping block. And why other industrialized countries have free college education and universal healthcare, but we don't. It's arguably our country's biggest problem a problem that Martin Luther King Jr. focused on before he was assassinated 45 years ago, and has only worsened since then (which was the height of the Vietnam War).

That problem is U.S. militarism and perpetual war.

In 1967, King called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and said, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Nowadays MSNBC hosts yell at Fox News hosts, and vice versa, about all sorts of issues but when the Obama administration expanded the bloody war in Afghanistan, the shouting heads at both channels went almost silent. When Obama's drone war expanded, there was little shouting. Not at MSNBC, not at Fox. Nor at CNN, CBS, ABC or so-called public broadcasting.

We can have raging debates in mainstream media about issues like gun control and gay marriage and minimum wage, but when the elites of both parties agree on military intervention as they so often do debate is nearly nonexistent. Anyone in the mainstream who goes out on a limb to loudly question this oversized creature in the middle of the room known as militarism or interventionism is likely to disappear faster than you can say "Phil Donahue."

I know something about mainstream journalists being silenced for questioning bipartisan military adventures because I worked with Phil Donahue at MSNBC in 2002/03 when Bush was revving up the Iraq invasion with the support of Democratic leaders like Joe Biden, John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and Harry Reid. That's when MSNBC terminated us for the crime of *JWI*. Not *DWI*, but *JWI* *Journalism* during *Wartime* while *Independent*.



JWI may be a crime in mainstream media, but it's exactly the kind of unauthorized, unofficial coverage you get from quality independent media today and from un-embedded journalists like Jeremy Scahill, Dahr Jamail and Glenn Greenwald.

Unfortunately, many liberal journalists who were vocal about war, human rights and civil liberties during the Bush era lost their voices as Obama continued and, in some cases, expanded Bush's "War on Terror" policies. It says something about the lack of serious national debate on so-called national security that last month one of the loudest mainstream TV news questioners of the president's right to assassinate Americans was Sean Hannity on Fox. That's obscene.

And it says something about mainstream TV that the toughest, most consistent questioners of militarism and defenders of civil liberties are not on a news channel they're on the comedy channel. A few weeks ago, I watched a passionate Jon Stewart taking on the U.S. military budget: "We already spend more on defense than the next 12 countries combined, including China, including Russia. We're like the lady on Jerry Springer who can't stop getting breast implants." (On screen was a photo of the Springer guest.)

What our mainstream media so obediently call the "War on Terror" is experienced in other countries as a U.S. war OF terror kidnappings, night raids, torture, drone strikes, killing and maiming of innocent civilians that creates new enemies for our country. Interestingly, you can easily find that reality in mainstream media of allied countries in Europe, but not in the mainstream media of our country. Needless to say, it's *our* country that's waging this global perpetual war.

In a democracy, war must be subjected to questioning and debate. And not just on the comedy channel.

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## What's the End Game for Iran Talks?

The mainstream U.S. news media is blaming Iran for the impasse over nuclear talks, but many stumbling blocks like refusal to accept Iran's right to a

peaceful nuclear program are the fault of Western negotiators, raising Iran's concerns about what is actually afoot, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.



 By Paul R. Pillar

While realizing that criticism of someone's approach to a negotiation needs to be done with some diffidence if the critic does not have direct access to either the negotiating room or either side's planning sessions, the United States and its P5+1 partners do seem to be persisting in some major errors in how they are approaching the nuclear negotiations with Iran. That's a shame, given that a deal a good deal, from the standpoint of nuclear nonproliferation objectives is very much attainable through well-handled negotiations.

One mistake is an apparent expectation that agreement will be reached not through hard bargaining in which the negotiators on both sides tenaciously try to extract the best possible terms for their own side, but instead through a highly asymmetric process in which there will only be some modest dickering over implementation of whatever proposal the P5+1 has put on the table. Western diplomats at the most recent round of talks expressed "puzzlement" over Iranian unwillingness to engage in the latter type of process.

A pertinent question to ask about where the talks stand now is: if Tehran is serious, really serious, about reaching a deal, how should we expect their negotiators to behave? Well, Iranians are inveterate hard bargainers. If they are serious, they would behave pretty much the way they've been behaving. Maybe the expressions of puzzlement on the P5+1 side are just part of that side's own hard bargaining. Let's hope so.

One of the biggest problems in the P5+1 approach is an unwillingness to make full use of the sanctions against Iran as leverage in negotiating a nuclear agreement. In their latest proposal the P5+1 did include slightly more sanctions relief than in their previous proposal, but this still constitutes little more than tidbits in comparison with the large panoply of sanctions that have been piled onto Iran over the years. In contrast, what the P5+1 were demanding from Iran in return involved most of the curtailment of the Iranian nuclear program they are seeking, including a halt to operations at the Fordo enrichment facility. It is no surprise that the Iranians quickly declared the proposal to be unbalanced.

Using the sanctions as leverage does not mean lifting any sanctions gratis.

(Although such a goodwill gesture would be helpful, it is politically infeasible in Washington.) It does mean coupling sanctions relief with curbs on the Iranian nuclear program in proposals that are not so unbalanced as to have little hope of advancing the negotiations.

Intelligent use of the sanctions also does not require incorporating a lifting of all sanctions as part of one grand bargain. Partial deals, some sanctions relief for some restraint in the nuclear program, are probably more feasible for now, and would build momentum and trust for more extensive deals later on.

Exactly how partial is something that would need to be determined at the negotiating table. Because neither side's concessions are infinitely divisible, deciding how big or how small to make a deal is part of the process of finding terms that each side would consider fairly balanced.

Another problem on the P5+1 side is an apparent failure to realize that an impediment to negotiating progress is a lack of confidence among the Iranians that the West wants an agreement, or at least an agreement that would leave the Iranians with anything that could be called a nuclear program.

More broadly, the Iranians suspect that the West doesn't really want to deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran at all. The West and especially the United States have given the Iranians ample basis to have these suspicions. There is the inflexibility regarding sanctions relief. There is the talk about damage that sanctions inflict on Iran and in which some Westerners take pleasure, for reasons that have nothing to do with negotiating an agreement. And there is all the talk about regime change (an outcome that some in the West openly hope sanctions will hasten).

In short, the West has given the Iranians plenty of reasons to believe that they are being strung along, with negotiations continuing as the sanctions work their effects, both economic and, as some would hope, political. The Iranians fear that this is not only a losing game for them but that the game has no end. As Scott Peterson reports in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the Iranians are "concerned that P5+1 demands could mount including a requirement to stop all enrichment with only marginal sanctions relief."

It is thus understandable that at Almaty the Iranian deputy negotiator told journalists that if Iran was to make any concessions or take any steps as confidence-building measures this had to be "part of a larger, more comprehensive plan" with a clear "final outcome." Part of that outcome has to be acceptance by the P5+1 of a peaceful Iranian nuclear program, including enrichment of uranium.

The deputy's comments point to a harmless way to help quell the well-founded Iranian suspicions that are impeding negotiating progress. The Iranians consider it important to get some positive statement in principle from the other side that Iran, like any other party to the Nonproliferation Treaty, has a right to a peaceful nuclear program. The P5+1 seem to consider any such statement as a concession to Iran that ought not to be made, if it is made at all, until some real curbs to the Iranian program are implemented.

But the P5 +1 need to ask themselves, and to provide a clear answer to this question, whether they really want to reach agreement with Tehran (and as a subsidiary question, whether the real purpose of all those sanctions is the same as their ostensible purpose, which is to provide inducement to reach such an agreement). If the answer is no, then the negotiations are a charade, the Iranians really are just being strung along, and there would be no reason to expect the Iranians to take more risks and make more concessions.

If the answer is yes, then the kind of statement the Iranians are looking for would not be a concession at all. It instead would just be a joint declaration of what these negotiations are all about. Far from being a P5+1 concession, it would be an opportunity to get Iranian agreement to a general but clear statement of the need, if the P5 +1 are to have the confidence needed to conclude a deal, for significant restrictions on, and exceptional monitoring of, the Iranian program.

So without precluding more extensive agreements with Iran in the future (including, but going beyond, issues about the nuclear program), the P5 +1 should reformulate their stance to make two sorts of interim agreements possible. One would be a partial and balanced trade of some sanctions relief for some restrictions on the Iranian program. The other would be a statement of principles that describes in general terms, with the details to be negotiated later, what a final agreement about the program should look like.

Arriving at mutually acceptable language for such a declaration, even without details, would still require some hard bargaining, but the effort would be worth it.

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# Demonizing Realism on Iran

Venturing outside Official Washington's conventional wisdom to apply realistic analysis to U.S. foreign policy can be dangerous to one's reputation, especially when challenging cherished myths about a designated enemy. Then, the realist can expect to be dismissed as a loon, as Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett have seen.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

Mainstream reaction to our new book, *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran*, underscores some important realities about America's Iran debate, and about the political and cultural obstacles to truly constructive change in American foreign policy.

Flynt addressed this point last week on "The Monitor," a news analysis program hosted by Mark Bebawi and Otis McClay for KPFT, Pacifica Radio's Houston station.

In his first question, Mark Bebawi underscores that both of us are people who have spent "a lot of time in the institutions of power," with connections to "all sorts of fairly well respected within the mainstream" organizations (e.g., the Council on Foreign Relations, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and, at various points, prominent Washington think tanks).

He commends *Going to Tehran* as "full of logical thinking based on history." He notes, though, that because the book's analyses and arguments are "going against the tide," mainstream reaction to *Going to Tehran* is "full of all sorts of accusations about what your motives might be" for having written it, including "everything from accusations of being agents of the Iranian government to being a disgruntled employee."

Flynt responds, "We are taking on a very well entrenched mythology about Iran, about its foreign policy, about its internal politics, about how the United States deals with it. Particularly in the post-Cold War era, America has embraced some very, very dangerous mythologies about different parts of the world, about America's role in the world, I think that's an important part of how we got into the terrible blunder and crime of the Iraq War.

"My wife and I watched that one from the inside, when all the institutions that Americans are supposed to rely on to push back against bad policy ideas, against bad analysis, against bad arguments, institutions like Congress, media, think tanks, public intellectuals, with a few honorable and courageous exceptions, those institutions basically rolled over for the Executive Branch.

“And we were determined that, this time around, someone was going to ask the hard questions, make the kind of countervailing arguments that should have been made before the Iraq invasion, but weren’t. But if you’re going to take that task on, you’re going to be confronting, as I said, a lot of well entrenched myths, with some very powerful constituencies and groups and interests that are identified with those myths. And they will come at you with everything they’ve got.”

The interview goes on to consider whether American policy toward Iran has changed very much during Barack Obama’s presidency, to dissect some of the specific myths that distort America’s Iran debate (on Israel, nuclear weapons, and terrorism), and to explore why America’s Iran policy continues on such a dysfunctional course. We, however, want to focus on Mark’s initial question on mainstream reaction to *Going to Tehran* and what it says about the obstacles to really serious debate over American foreign policy.

In this context, we also want to highlight a brilliant piece by Glenn Greenwald in The Guardian last month, “How Noam Chomsky Is Discussed.” Glenn argues that “one very common tactic for enforcing political orthodoxies is to malign the character, ‘style’ and even mental health of those who challenge them as a means of impugning, really avoiding, the substance of the critique.” As Glenn lays out in compelling detail, “Nobody has been subjected to these vapid discrediting techniques more than Noam Chomsky.”

To illustrate his thesis about mainstream media treatment of dissident voices, Greenwald dissects The Guardian’s own reporting on Prof. Chomsky’s recent Edward W. Said Lecture in London; the address, “Violence and Dignity, Reflections on the Middle East,” focuses to a considerable degree on Iran as a target of U.S. and Western efforts to dominate the region.

Greenwald aptly describes The Guardian’s reporting on the speech as “infused with these standard personality caricatures that offer the reader an easy means of mocking, deriding and scorning Chomsky without having to confront a single fact he presents. And that’s the point [for Chomsky] rationally but aggressively debunks destructive mainstream falsehoods that huge numbers of people are taught to tacitly embrace. But all of that can be, and is, ignored in favor of hating his ‘style,’ ridiculing his personality, and smearing him with horrible slurs (‘self-hating Jew’).”

Though Greenwald does not include it in this litany, Chomsky has also periodically been pilloried as an “apologist” for various resistance movements and non-Western leaders who displease the United States. Greenwald goes on to comment:

“What’s particularly strange about this set of personality and style attacks is what little relationship they bear to reality. Far from being some sort of brutal, domineering, and angry ‘alpha-male’ savage, Chomsky, no matter your views of him, is one of the most soft-spoken and unfailingly civil and polite political advocates on the planet. It’s true that his critiques of those who wield power and influence can be withering, that’s the central function of an effective critic or just a human being with a conscience, but one would be hard-pressed to find someone as prominent as he who is as steadfastly polite and considerate and eager to listen when it comes to interacting with those who are powerless and voiceless.

“What is at play here is this destructive dynamic that the more one dissents from political orthodoxies, the more personalized, style-focused and substance-free the attacks become. That’s because once someone becomes sufficiently critical of establishment pieties, the goal is not merely to dispute their claims but to silence them. That’s accomplished by demonizing the person on personality and style grounds to the point where huge numbers of people decide that nothing they say should even be considered, let alone accepted.”

By referencing Greenwald’s article here, we do not mean to compare ourselves to Noam Chomsky, among other reasons, whatever abuse we have suffered from our critics hardly comes close to the accumulated ad hominem vituperation directed at Prof. Chomsky for decades. But we want to make the analytically crucial point that much of the critical reaction to *Going to Tehran* and our other work on Iran and U.S.-Iranian relations, including attacks on our character, our motivations, our personalities, our “style”, is, in important respects, reminiscent of the assaults launched against Prof. Chomsky over the years.

And such attacks are directed against us for much the same reason that they have been directed against Chomsky, as Greenwald puts it so well, to enable “the substance of [our] critique to be avoided in lieu of alleged personality flaws.”

Consider just a few examples of mainstream media treatment of us and our book:

Expatriate Iran “experts” whose own analytic records are marked by serial misreadings of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and internal politics are given platforms in mainstream outlets like The New Republic, Survival (the journal of the International Institute for Strategic Studies), and the Wall Street Journal, not to take on, in any intellectually serious way, our historically documented, thoroughly referenced assessments of these matters, but to dismiss us as “morally deformed” and “apologists” for evil.

(Anti-Islamic Republic Iranian expatriates aren’t the only ones to label us as “apologists.” No less than Dennis Ross describes us this way, and, to be fair,

what American knows more about explaining away another country's crimes than Dennis Ross, as has The New Republic in its own editorials.)

Because Hillary is Jewish, interned at AIPAC as a young student, worked at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy early in her career, but has clearly moved far beyond the pro-Israel mantras that warp America's Middle East debate, Jeffrey Goldberg opined in The Atlantic that she has "lost her bearings."

Not content to go after us with unfounded assertions about our mental health, pro-Israel publications and Iranian expatriate opponents of the Islamic Republic also claim that we are somehow cashing in by arguing for a fundamentally different U.S. strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran (another lie that has been given wider circulation by Jeffrey Goldberg).

The New York Times assigned its "review" of our book to one of the leading journalistic cheerleaders for the Green movement which, after Iran's 2009 presidential election, was romanticized by Western pundits as a mass popular uprising poised to sweep away the Islamic Republic, perhaps within a few months.

The mainstream commentariat has never forgiven us for our utterly accurate appraisal of the Greens' weaknesses and our spot-on assessment that, even at its height, the movement never represented anything close to a majority of Iranians living in their country. The Times review would have readers think that, by being right when everyone else (including the reviewer) were spectacularly wrong, we are morally dubious "partisans" whose analyses shouldn't be taken seriously.

Those specimens all come from our declared intellectual and political enemies. One of the more remarkable aspects of critical reaction to *Going to Tehran* is how even some commentators who profess openness to the basic idea of "engaging" Iran want to read us out of proper policy debate because we refuse to endorse conventional but ill-informed and un-nuanced criticisms of human rights conditions in the Islamic Republic. So, for example, the National Journal's Michael Hirsh writes,

"Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, husband-and-wife renegade former officials in the George W. Bush administration, have an idea. President Obama should execute a Nixon-in-China approach with Tehran: Leap 180 degrees from a policy of isolation to all-out engagement.

"Maybe they have a point, but the Leveretts don't stop there. They say accommodation is imperative because Tehran is gaining strength (despite the imminent loss of its only ally, Syria's besieged Bashar al-Assad); the legitimacy of the regime is unquestioned (the once-powerful 'Green' democracy



movement was always marginal, they say); and Washington has no choice but to embrace the mullahs. Besides, are the mullahs really so much worse than we are? 'The U.S. government simply has no credibility to address human-rights issues in Iran,' Flynt Leverett said. It seemed a bit much."

"It seemed a bit much." Notwithstanding pages of analysis of Iran's regional position and strategy, notwithstanding the reality that Assad's government isn't going anywhere anytime soon, notwithstanding a whole chapter with reams of actual data on the 2009 election and the Greens' brief rise and rapid fall, all that is dismissed with five words: "It seemed a bit much."

Likewise, the sad reality that the United States, as a matter of policy, is only interested in the selective, instrumental leveraging of human rights concerns to undermine governments it doesn't like has been very clearly documented. Washington has co-opted, and corrupted, the human rights agenda; that's why it has no credibility to address human rights in Iran.

Those who believe that, as long as America is running a dirty war against the Islamic Republic (including economic warfare, cyber-attacks, and support for groups doing things inside Iran that, most other places in the world, Washington would condemn as "terrorism"), it can credibly champion human rights there are deluded. But this, too, seemed a bit much for Hirsh.

To further discredit us, Hirsh compares us and our book, and he doesn't mean it as a compliment, to John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, and their *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Like Chomsky, Mearsheimer and Walt have by-now considerable experience with people attacking their characters, motives, and personalities rather than dealing with the arguments they raise in their book.

For the record, while we disagree with a few specific points in their book, we admire its authors tremendously not just for their courage, but also for the bounty of important insights their book offers. We are proud and humbled to be compared with them; we hope that *Going to Tehran* might contribute as much as their book to opening up additional intellectual space for serious discussion of what's wrong with America's Middle East policy.

We should perhaps credit Hirsh with using more than five words to dismiss us. He also describes how, a few days after hearing us talk about *Going to Tehran*, he saw the debut of Maziar Bahari's new movie, "Forced Confessions", which, according to Hirsh, "describes how secret police have turned Iran into a brutal world of Kafkaesque detentions and tortured confessions. Bahari was put on public display in 2009 and forced to state that foreign agents incited the Green movement, evidence the regime was actually terrified of the uprising." But the most damning part? "Flynt and Hillary did not attend the screening."

That's right, probably because we're too busy trying to keep our country from starting another strategically and morally calamitous war to indulge an expatriate Iranian-Canadian dissident with a burning desire that the Islamic Republic fall and Iran become a secular liberal state, even if that's not what most Iranians living inside their country want.

More broadly, Hirsh's rejection of our argument for strategically grounded engagement with the Islamic Republic (an argument for which he professes sympathy) because we won't pay obeisance to Washington norms requiring those advocating better relations with Iran to modulate their advocacy with periodic expressions of disgust with human rights conditions there highlights a powerful barrier to a more rational Iran debate. For Hirsh is not alone.

We've had any number of people, including some for whom we have great respect and even affection, privately counsel us, before *Going to Tehran* was published and after, to moderate our "tone." For some, this meant fewer references to "the Islamic Republic" and more to "Iran." For others it meant regular acknowledgement, even if only in passing, of various "deplorable acts" by Iran's government.

We have declined to follow such advice, regardless of how well-intended we knew it to be from some of its sources. We haven't followed it because doing so would mean buying into and advancing a narrative crafted (whether everyone espousing it realizes or not) to delegitimize the Islamic Republic of Iran and, ultimately, to take America to war against it, a point that Chomsky, in his own way, has also made.

Overwhelmingly, the available evidence indicates that the majority of Iranians in Iran support the basic model of the Islamic Republic, which has delivered vastly better lives for most Iranians than was possible at the time of the Iranian Revolution. A significant number of Iranians may want the Islamic Republic to evolve in important ways, but they don't want to get rid of it entirely. To suggest otherwise is both intellectually and morally irresponsible.

Those who believe they can indulge self-gratifying criticisms of human rights conditions in Iran while continuing to insist that they are opposed to American military aggression against the Islamic Republic are, in some ways even more dangerously deluded. You can't have it both ways.

For in the narratives Americans construct to justify their wars, the United States does not go to war to defend its interests; it does so to liberate others. Until those trying to have it both ways understand that they can't, too many of those who claim to oppose a U.S.-initiated war against Iran will, with their facile criticisms of "human rights" there, be making such a war more

likely.

Similarly, those who think Washington can somehow “engage” Tehran but make human rights and secular democratization a core part of the diplomatic dialogue are also dangerously deluded. For what political order, especially one focused on restoring and protecting its country’s independence and effective sovereignty after decades of Western domination, would agree to negotiate its internal political transformation with the leading Western power?

To avoid war, the United States will have to pursue rapprochement with the Islamic Republic as it is, not as some wish it to be. And this means accepting the Islamic Republic as, for most Iranians, a legitimate (even if flawed) state.

In closing, we are very pleased to note that we will be taking part in an event, “Iran and American Foreign Policy: Where the US Went Wrong,” with Noam Chomsky at MIT next month, sponsored by MIT’s Technology and Culture Forum. We are excited at the prospect and grateful to Prof. Chomsky. We hope that this event will contribute to expanding the range of “acceptable” debate about Iran in American political discourse.

**Flynt Leverett served as a Middle East expert on George W. Bush’s National Security Council staff until the Iraq War and worked previously at the State Department and at the Central Intelligence Agency. Hillary Mann Leverett was the NSC expert on Iran and from 2001 to 2003 was one of only a few U.S. diplomats authorized to negotiate with the Iranians over Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and Iraq. They are authors of the new book, *Going to Tehran*. Direct Link:**

**<http://goingtotehran.com/suppressing-reality-based-analysis-chomsky-the-leveretts-and-americas-iran-debate>**

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## Hollywood’s Dangerous Afghan Illusion

**Special Report:** A newly discovered document undercuts a key storyline of the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s that it was “Charlie Wilson’s War.” A note inside Ronald Reagan’s White House targeted the Texas Democrat as someone “to bring into circle as discrete Hill connection,” Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

Official Washington’s conventional wisdom about Afghanistan derives to a dangerous degree from a Hollywood movie, “Charlie Wilson’s War,” which depicted the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s as a fight pitting good “freedom fighters” vs.

evil “occupiers” and which blamed Afghanistan’s later descent into chaos on feckless U.S. politicians quitting as soon as Soviet troops left in 1989.

The Tom Hanks movie also pushed the theme that the war was really the pet project of a maverick Democratic congressman from Texas, Charlie Wilson, who fell in love with the Afghan mujahedeen after falling in love with a glamorous Texas oil woman, Joanne Herring, who was committed to their anti-communist cause.



However, “Charlie Wilson’s War” like many Hollywood films took extraordinary license with the facts, presenting many of the war’s core elements incorrectly. That in itself might not be a serious problem, except that key U.S. policymakers have cited these mythical “facts” as lessons to guide the current U.S. military occupation of Afghanistan.

The degree to which Ronald Reagan’s White House saw Wilson as more puppet than puppet-master is underscored by a newly discovered document at Reagan’s presidential library in Simi Valley, California. I found the document in the files of former CIA propaganda chief Walter Raymond Jr., who in the 1980s oversaw the selling of U.S. interventions in Central America and Afghanistan from his office at the National Security Council.

The handwritten note to Raymond appears to be initialed by then-National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and instructs Raymond to recruit Wilson into the Reagan administration’s effort to drum up more Afghan war money for the fiscal 1985 budget. The note reads:

“Walt, Go see Charlie Wilson (D-TX). Seek to bring him into circle as discrete Hill connection. He can be very helpful in getting money. M.” (The notation may have used the wrong adjective, possibly intending “discreet,” meaning circumspect and suggesting a secretive role, not “discrete,” meaning separate and distinct.)

Raymond appears to have followed up those instructions, as Wilson began to play a bigger and bigger role in unleashing the great Afghan spending spree of 1985 and as Raymond asserted himself behind the scenes on how the war should be sold to the American people.

Raymond, a 30-year veteran of CIA clandestine services, was a slight, soft-spoken New Yorker who reminded some of a character from a John le Carre spy novel, an intelligence officer who "easily fades into the woodwork," according to one Raymond acquaintance. But his CIA career took a dramatic turn in 1982 when he was reassigned to the NSC.

At the time, the White House saw a need to step up its domestic propaganda operations in support of President Reagan's desire to intervene more aggressively in Central America and Afghanistan. The American people still stung by the agony of the Vietnam War were not eager to engage in more foreign adventures.

So, Reagan's team took aim at "kicking the Vietnam Syndrome" mostly by wildly exaggerating the Soviet threat. It became crucial to convince Americans that the Soviets were on the rise and on the march, though in reality the Soviets were on the decline and eager for accommodations with the West.

Yet, as deputy assistant secretary to the Air Force, J. Michael Kelly, put it, "the most critical special operations mission we have ... is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us."

The main focus of the administration's domestic propaganda was on Central America where Reagan was arming right-wing military juntas engaged in anti-leftist extermination campaigns. Through the CIA, Reagan also was organizing a drug-tainted terrorist operation known as the Contras to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

To hide the ugly realities and to overcome popular opposition to the policies, Reagan granted CIA Director William Casey extraordinary leeway to engage in CIA-style propaganda and disinformation aimed at the American people, the sort of project normally reserved for hostile countries. To oversee the operation while skirting legal bans on the CIA operating domestically Casey moved Raymond from the CIA to the NSC staff.

Raymond formally resigned from the CIA in April 1983 so, he said, "there would be no question whatsoever of any contamination of this." But from the beginning, Raymond fretted about the legality of Casey's involvement. Raymond confided in one memo that it was important "to get [Casey] out of the loop," but Casey never backed off and Raymond continued to send progress reports to his old boss well

into 1986.

It was “the kind of thing which [Casey] had a broad catholic interest in,” Raymond shrugged during a deposition given to congressional Iran-Contra investigators in 1987. Raymond offered the excuse that Casey undertook this apparently illegal interference in domestic politics “not so much in his CIA hat, but in his adviser to the president hat.”

Raymond also understood that the administration’s hand in the P.R. projects must stay hidden, because of other legal bans on executive-branch propaganda. “The work down within the administration has to, by definition, be at arms length,” Raymond noted in an Aug. 29, 1983, memo.

As one NSC official told me, the campaign was modeled after CIA covert operations abroad where a political goal is more important than the truth. “They were trying to manipulate [U.S.] public opinion ... using the tools of Walt Raymond’s trade craft which he learned from his career in the CIA covert operation shop,” the official said.

From the NSC, Raymond organized inter-agency task forces to bombard the U.S. public with hyped-up propaganda about the Soviet threat in Central America and in Afghanistan. Raymond’s goal was to change the way Americans viewed these dangers, a process that the Reagan administration internally called “perception management.”

Scores of documents about this operation were released during the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987, but Washington-based journalists never paid much attention to the evidence about how they had been manipulated by these propaganda tactics, which included rewarding cooperative reporters with government-sponsored “leaks” and punishing those who wouldn’t parrot the lies with whispering campaigns in the ears of their editors and bureau chiefs. [See Robert Parry’s *Lost History*.]

Even after the Iran-Contra scandal was exposed in 1986 and Casey died of brain cancer in 1987, the Republicans fought to keep secret the remarkable story of this propaganda apparatus. As part of a deal to get three moderate Republican senators to join Democrats in signing the Iran-Contra report, Democratic leaders dropped a draft chapter on the CIA’s domestic propaganda role.

Thus, the American people were spared the chapter’s troubling conclusion: that a covert propaganda apparatus had existed, run by “one of the CIA’s most senior specialists, sent to the NSC by Bill Casey, to create and coordinate an inter-agency public-diplomacy mechanism [which] did what a covert CIA operation in a foreign country might do. [It] attempted to manipulate the media, the Congress and public opinion to support the Reagan administration’s policies.” [See

Consortiumnews.com's "[Iran-Contra's Lost Chapter.](#)" ]

## Raping Russians

Hiding the unspeakable realities of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan was almost as high a priority as concealing the U.S.-backed slaughter in Central America. Reagan's pet "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan as in Nicaragua were tainted by the drug trade as well as by well-documented cases of torture, rape and murder.

Yet, Raymond and his propagandists were always looking for new ways to "sell" the wars to the American people, leading to a clash with CIA officer Gust Avrakotos, who was overseeing the Afghan conflict and who had developed his own close ties to Rep. Charlie Wilson.

According to author George Crile, whose book *Charlie Wilson's War* provided a loose framework for the movie of the same name, Avrakotos clashed with Raymond and other senior Reagan administration officials when they proposed unrealistic propaganda themes regarding Afghanistan.

One of Raymond's ideas was to get some Russian soldiers to "defect" and then fly them from Afghanistan to Washington where they would renounce communism. The problem, as Avrakotos explained, was that the Afghan mujahideen routinely tortured and then murdered any Soviet soldier who fell into their hands, except for a few who were kept around for anal rape.

"For Avrakotos, 1985 was a year of right-wing craziness," Crile wrote. "A band of well-placed anti-Communist enthusiasts in the administration had come up with a plan they believed would bring down the Red Army, if the CIA would only be willing to implement it. The leading advocates of this plan included Richard Perle at the Pentagon. [NSC aide] Oliver North also checked in briefly, but the man who set Avrakotos's teeth on edge most was Walt Raymond, another NSC staffer who had spent twenty years with the CIA as a propagandist.

"Their idea was to encourage Soviet officers and soldiers to defect to the mujahideen. As Avrakotos derisively describes it, 'The muj were supposed to set up loudspeakers in the mountains announcing such things as "Lay down your arms, there is a passage to the West and to freedom."' Once news of this program made its way through the Red Army, it was argued, there would be a flood of defectors.

"Avrakotos thought North and Perle were 'cuckoos of the Far Right,' and he soon felt quite certain that Raymond, the man who seemed to be the intellectual ringleader, was truly detached from reality. 'What Russian in his right mind would defect to those fuckers all armed to the teeth,' Avrakotos said in

frustration. 'To begin with, anyone defecting to the Dushman would have to be a crook, a thief or someone who wanted to get cornholed every day, because nine out of ten prisoners were dead within twenty-four hours and they were always turned into concubines by the mujahideen. I felt so sorry for them I wanted to have them all shot.'

"The meeting [with Raymond's team] went very badly indeed. Gust [Avrakotos] accused North and Perle of being idiots. Avrakotos said to Walt Raymond, 'You know, Walt, you're just a fucking asshole, you're irrelevant.'"

However, as Crile wrote, Avrakotos "greatly underestimated the political power and determination of the group, who went directly to [CIA Director] Bill Casey to angrily protest Avrakotos's insulting manner. The director complained to [CIA operations official] Clair George, who responded by forbidding Avrakotos to attend any more interagency meetings without a CIA nanny present.

"Avrakotos arrived for one of these White House sessions armed with five huge photographic blowups. One of them showed two Russian sergeants being used as concubines. Another had a Russian hanging from the turret of a tank with a vital part of his anatomy removed. 'If you were a sane fucking Russian, would you defect to these people?' he had demanded of Perle.

"But the issue wouldn't go away. Perle, Raymond, and the others continued to insist that the Agency find and send back to the United States the many Russian defectors they seemed to believe, despite Avrakotos's denials, the mujahideen were harboring.

"It had been almost impossible to locate two prisoners, much less two defectors. The CIA found itself in the preposterous position of having to pony up \$50,000 to bribe the Afghans to deliver two live ones. 'These two guys were basket cases,' says Avrakotos. 'One had been fucked so many times he didn't know what was going on.'"

Despite this knowledge about the true nature of the Afghan "freedom fighters," the Reagan administration and the "Charlie Wilson's War" moviemakers concealed from the American people the inhuman brutality of the jihadists who were receiving billions of dollars in U.S. and Saudi largesse. The movie depicted the Soviet soldiers as sadistic monsters and the mujahideen as noble warriors, just as Ronald Reagan and Walter Raymond would have wanted. (Raymond died in 2003; Reagan in 2004; the movie appeared in 2007.)

But the Reagan administration did calculate correctly that Wilson from his key position on a House Appropriations defense subcommittee could open the spigot on funding for the Afghan muj.



## Learning Wrong Lessons

While it's not unusual for Hollywood to produce a Cold War propaganda film, what was different about "Charlie Wilson's War" was how it was treated by Official Washington as something close to a documentary. That attitude was somewhat a tribute to the likeable Tom Hanks who portrayed the womanizing and hard-drinking Charlie Wilson.

Yet, perhaps the biggest danger in viewing the movie as truth was its treatment of why the anti-Soviet jihad led to Afghanistan becoming home to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorists in the 1990s. The movie pushed the myth that the United States abruptly abandoned Afghanistan as soon as the Soviet troops left on Feb. 15, 1989.

All across Official Washington, pundits and policymakers have embraced the lesson that the United States must not make that "mistake" again and thus must leave behind a sizeable force of U.S. troops.

For instance, the New York Times' lead editorial on May 1, 2012, criticized President Barack Obama for not explaining how he would prevent Afghanistan from imploding after the scheduled U.S. troop withdrawal in 2014, though the Times added that the plan's "longer-term commitment [of aid] sends an important message to Afghans that Washington will not abandon them as it did after the Soviets were driven out."

The abandonment myth also has been cited by senior Obama administration officials, including U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as they explained the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and al-Qaeda's use of Afghanistan for plotting the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

In late 2009, Defense Secretary Gates reprised this phony conventional wisdom, telling reporters: "We will not repeat the mistakes of 1989, when we abandoned the country only to see it descend into civil war and into Taliban hands." However, that narrative was based on a faux reality drawn from a fictional movie.

Gates knew the real history. After all, in 1989, he was deputy national security adviser under President George H.W. Bush when the key decisions were made to continue covert U.S. aid to the mujahedeen, not cut it off.

The truth was that the end game in Afghanistan was messed up not because the United States cut the mujahedeen off but because Washington pressed for a clear-cut victory, rebuffing Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's proposals for a power-sharing arrangement. And we know that Gates knows this reality because he

recounted it in his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows*.

## **The Real History**

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

Gates, who in 1988 was deputy CIA director, opposed Gorbachev's plan, disbelieving that the Soviets would really depart and insisting that if they did the CIA's mujahedeen could quickly defeat Najibullah's army.

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

But Gates prevailed in the policy debates, pushing the CIA's faith in its mujahedeen clients and expecting a rapid Najibullah collapse if the Soviets left. In the memoir, Gates recalled briefing Secretary of State George Shultz and his senior aides on the CIA's predictions prior to Shultz flying to Moscow in February 1988.

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

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

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

At the time, I was a Newsweek national security correspondent and asked my CIA contacts why the U.S. government didn't just collect its winnings from the Soviet withdrawal and agree to some kind of national-unity government in Kabul that could end the war and bring some stability to the country. One of the CIA hardliners responded to my question with disgust. "We want to see Najibullah strung up by a light pole," he snarled.

Back in Afghanistan, Najibullah's regime defied the CIA's expectation of a rapid collapse, using Soviet weapons and advisers to beat back a mujahedeen offensive in 1990. As Najibullah hung on, the war, the violence and the disorder continued.

Gates finally recognized that his CIA analysis had been wrong. In his memoir, he wrote: "As it turned out, Whitehead and Abramowitz were right" in their warning that Najibullah's regime might not fall quickly. Gates's memoir also acknowledged that the U.S. government did *not* abandon Afghanistan immediately after the Soviet departure.

"Najibullah would remain in power for another three years [after the Soviet pull-out], as the United States and the USSR continued to aid their respective sides," Gates wrote. Indeed, Moscow's and Washington's supplies continued to flow until several months after the Soviet Union collapsed in summer 1991, according to Gates.

### **Crile's Account**

And other U.S. assistance continued even longer, according to Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War*. In the book, Crile described how Wilson kept the funding spigot open for the Afghan rebels not only after the Soviet departure in 1989 but even after the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

Eventually, the mujahedeen did capture the strategic city of Khost, but turned it into a ghost town as civilians fled or faced the mujahedeen's fundamentalist fury. Western aid workers found themselves "following the liberators in a desperate attempt to persuade them not to murder and pillage," Crile wrote.

U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley began to wonder who were the worse bad guys, the Soviet-backed communists or the U.S.-supported mujahedeen.

"It was the leaders of the Afghan puppet government who were saying all the right things, even paying lip service to democratic change," Crile reported. "The mujahideen, on the other hand, were committing unspeakable atrocities and couldn't even put aside their bickering and murderous thoughts long enough to capture Kabul."

In 1991, as the Soviet Union careened toward its final crackup, the Senate Intelligence Committee approved nothing for Afghanistan, Crile wrote. "But no one could just turn off Charlie Wilson's war like that," Crile noted. "For Charlie Wilson, there was something fundamentally wrong with his war ending then and there. He didn't like the idea of the United States going out with a whimper."

Wilson made an impassioned appeal to the House Intelligence Committee and carried the day. The committee first considered a \$100 million annual appropriation, but Wilson got them to boost it to \$200 million, which with the Saudi matching funds totaled \$400 million, Crile reported.

“And so, as the mujahideen were poised for their thirteenth year of war, instead of being cut off, it turned out to be a banner year,” Crile wrote. “They found themselves with not only a \$400 million budget but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen.”

But even then the Afghan rebels needed an external event to prevail on the battlefield, the stunning disintegration of the Soviet Union in the latter half of 1991. Only then did Moscow cut off its aid to Najibullah. His government finally fell in 1992. But its collapse didn't stop the war or the mujahideen infighting.

The capital of Kabul came under the control of a relatively moderate rebel force led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Islamist but not a fanatic. However, Massoud, a Tajik, was not favored by Pakistan's ISI, which backed more extreme Pashtun elements of the mujahideen.

Rival Afghan warlords battled with each other for another four years destroying much of Kabul. Finally, a disgusted Washington began to turn away. Crile reported that the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program, which was the only sustained U.S. program aimed at rebuilding Afghanistan, was cut off at the end of 1993, almost five years after the Soviets left.

### **Rise of the Taliban**

While chaos continued to reign across Afghanistan, the ISI readied its own army of Islamic extremists drawn from Pashtun refugee camps inside Pakistan. This group, known as the Taliban, entered Afghanistan with the promise of restoring order.

The Taliban seized the capital of Kabul in September 1996, driving Massoud into a northward retreat. The ousted communist leader Najibullah, who had stayed in Kabul, sought shelter in the United Nations compound, but was captured. The Taliban tortured, castrated and killed him, his mutilated body hung from a light pole just as the CIA hardliner had wished seven years earlier.

The triumphant Taliban imposed harsh Islamic law on Afghanistan. Their rule was especially cruel to women who had made gains toward equal rights under the communists, but were forced by the Taliban to live under highly restrictive rules, to cover themselves when in public, and to forgo schooling.

The Taliban also granted refuge to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, who had fought with the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s. Bin Laden then used Afghanistan as the base of operations for his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, setting the stage for the next Afghan War in 2001.

So, the real history is quite different from the Hollywood version that Official Washington has absorbed as its short-hand understanding of the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s.

The newly discovered document about bringing Charlie Wilson into the White House “circle as discrete Hill connection” suggests that even the impression that it was “Charlie Wilson’s War” may have been more illusion than reality. Though Wilson surely became a true believer in the CIA’s largest covert action of the Cold War, Reagan’s White House team appears to have viewed him as a useful Democratic front man who would be “very helpful in getting money.”

Most significantly, the mythology enshrined in the movie and embraced by the policymakers obscured the key lessons of the 1980s: the dangerous futility of trying to impose a Western or military solution on Afghanistan as well as the need to explore negotiation and compromise even when dealing with unsavory foes. It wasn’t the mythical U.S. “abandonment” of Afghanistan in February 1989 that caused the devastation of the past two decades, but rather the uncompromising policies of the Reagan-Bush-41 administrations.

First, there was the ascendance of propaganda over truth. The U.S. government was well aware of the gross human rights crimes of the Afghan “muj” but still sold them as honorable “freedom fighters” to the American people. Second, there was the triumphalism of Gates and other war hawks, who insisted on rubbing Moscow’s nose in its Afghan defeat and thus blocked cooperation on a negotiated settlement which held out the promise of a less destructive outcome.

Those two factors the deceit and the hubris set the stage for the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a renewed Afghan War bogging down tens of thousands of U.S. troops, America’s disastrous detour into Iraq, and now a costly long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan that is expected to last at least until 2024. With a distorted account of “Charlie Wilson’s War,” Tom Hanks and Hollywood didn’t help.

**[For a limited time, you can purchase Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush family for only \$34. For details, [click here.](#)]**

**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](#)).

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## Reagan's 'Death Squad' Tactics in Iraq

Official Washington has long ignored [the genocide and terrorism that Ronald Reagan inflicted](#) on Central America in the 1980s, making it easier to genuflect before the Republican presidential icon. That also helped Reagan's "death squad" tactics resurface in Iraq last decade, as William Boardman reports.

By William Boardman

A recent British documentary *Death squads, torture, secret prisons in Iraq, and General David Petraeus* are among the featured atrocities in a new British documentary "James Steele: America's Mystery Man in Iraq" the result of a 15-month investigation by Guardian Films and BBC Arabic, exploring war crimes long denied by the Pentagon but confirmed by thousands of military field reports made public by WikiLeaks.

The hour-long film explores the arc of American counterinsurgency brutality from Vietnam to Iraq, with stops along the way in El Salvador and Nicaragua. James Steele is now a retired U.S. colonel who first served in Vietnam as a company commander in 1968-69. He later made his reputation as a military adviser in El Salvador, where he guided ruthless Salvadoran death squads in the 1980s.

When his country called again in 2003, he came out of retirement to train Iraqi police commandos in the bloodiest techniques of counterinsurgency that evolved into that country's Shia-Sunni civil war that at its peak killed 3,000 people a month. Steele now lives in a gated golf community in Brian, Texas, and did not respond to requests for an interview for the documentary bearing his name.

News coverage of this documentary has been largely absent in mainstream media. The Guardian had a [report](#), naturally, at the time of release and "Democracy Now" had a long [segment](#) on March 22 that includes an interview with veteran, award-winning [reporter](#) Maggie O'Kane, as well as several excerpts from the movie she directed. The documentary is available [online](#) at the Guardian and several other websites.

"James Steele" opens with a montage of soldiers, some masked, taking prisoners, some hooded, as the woman narrator sets the stage:

"This is one of the great untold stories of the Iraq War, how just over a year

after the invasion, the United States funded a sectarian police commando force that set up a network of torture centers to fight the [Sunni] insurgency.

“This is also the story of James Steele, the veteran of America’s dirty war in El Salvador. He was in charge of the U.S. advisers who trained notorious Salvadoran paramilitary units to fight left-wing guerrillas. In the course of that civil war, 75,000 people died, and over a million people became refugees. Steele was chosen by the Bush administration to work with General David Petraeus to organize these paramilitary police commandos.”

### **Secret Prisons, Torture, Death Squads**

The documentary concentrates on the creation and activities of the Iraqi police commandos who executed American policy in the face of Iraqi resistance the U.S. had never anticipated, having expected to be greeted as liberators.

There are only glancing references to the policy failures that created the crisis, such as disbanding the army and most of the government of Iraq or assuming that six U.S. police professionals would be sufficient to train a civilian police force capable of keeping peace in a nation of 30 million people.

Steele was in Iraq early in 2003 as an “energy consultant” with easy access to authorities like Gen. Petraeus, even though what he actually did in Iraq remained a mystery to most people. As the Sunni insurgency developed, Steele was brought in to organize counterinsurgency. Though still, technically, a civilian, he worked closely with Gen. Petraeus and reported directly to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Steele set about working with Iraqi officers to organize “special police units” under military control, as the notion of a civilian police force faded. By April 2005, there were nine battalions of these police commandos operating in Iraq, with some 5,000 in Baghdad alone.

With more and more bodies left on the streets during the night, with secret prisons spreading across the country, with reports of disappearances and torture proliferating, the New York Times took notice, at least to the extent of publishing a Sunday magazine cover [story](#) on May 1, 2005, by Peter Maass titled, “The Salvadorization of Iraq.”

By then, anyone who wanted to know the level of American-sanctioned brutality in Iraq would have had little difficulty doing so. Conditions worsened and reports kept coming throughout 2005 and 2006.

On October 2005, one of the Iraqi generals involved in the secret prisons fled Iraq and spoke out publicly from Jordan about what was happening in his

country. Steele came to visit the general in Jordan, the general recalled, apparently to see if the general had any evidence pictures, documents, tapes that could give Steele cause for concern. None have yet appeared.

Of course American media did not pursue the terror-fighting-terror story very hard, and the U.S. government denied most bad news. At a news conference on Nov. 29, 2005, a reporter asked a timid question about the killings and Secretary Rumsfeld said he had not seen any reports. Following a weak follow-up question, he said he had no data from the field even though the truth was that Steele had reported six weeks earlier that the Shia death squads were operating effectively from his perspective.

### **Cold, Heartless, Ruthless, Fruitless**

In the documentary, Steele is described as a cold and ruthless man by an Iraqi who knew him. "He lacks human feeling," the Iraqi general says, "his heart has died."

The moral vacuity of the American leadership during the Iraq War is illustrated in an exchange at a press briefing on international human rights law, in particular the treatment of prisoners, that illustrates Secretary Rumsfeld's polite but ignorant numbness:

Gen. Peter Pace: It is absolutely the responsibility of every U.S. service member, if they see inhumane treatment being conducted, to intervene, to stop it.

Rumsfeld: But I don't think you mean they have an obligation to physically stop it; it's to report it.

Pace: If they are physically present when inhumane treatment is taking place, sir, they have an obligation to try to stop it.

Rumsfeld, presumably never present during inhumane treatment of a prisoner, apparently never made any effort to stop it, or to report it, or even to know about it. In that he was following the classic pattern of a cover-up as articulated by Nixon fund-raiser Maurice Stans during Watergate: "I don't want to know, and you don't want to know."

The Guardian/BBC investigation into torture and death squads on Rumsfeld's watch started after WikiLeaks provided the Guardian with almost 400,000 previously secret U.S. Army field reports, whose release is attributed to Bradley Manning. The Pentagon has not disputed the truth of the documents.

The U.S. government has arrested and tortured Manning, 25, a former intelligence



officer who is currently on trial in a military court where he has pled guilty to 10 of 22 charges for which he could be sentenced to 20 years in prison. The prosecution is demanding a life sentence.

After the Steele documentary was released March 6, the Guardian invited comment from the Pentagon. Having declined to take part in the documentary as it was being made, the Pentagon said it would study the film and perhaps comment at a later date.

Unhappy with the documentary in a completely different way is Kieran Kelly whose blog critiques the movie under the headline: "The Guardian's Death Squad Documentary May Shock and Disturb, But the Truth is Far Worse" a claim he argues at length. For example, he criticizes the movie's acceptance that "only" 120,000 Iraqis died in this American war, and he wonders how that "fact" squares with a million widows in Iraq?

Realistically, ten years after the American invasion, the Iraq war isn't close to over. It's just that, having prompted the Iraqis to kill each other the U.S. has left them to it.

[For more details on Reagan's policies in Central America, see Consortiumnews.com's "How Reagan Promoted Genocide."]

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

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## Behind the North Korean Crisis

U.S. propagandists and the mainstream media present foreign crises, like the current one with North Korea, as black-and-white morality plays with Official Washington behaving wisely and the adversaries as crazy. But the reality is always more complex, as Christine Hong told Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

In early March, the U.S. and South Korea launched an expanded set of war games on the Korean Peninsula, prompting concerns in some circles that the military exercises might touch off an escalation of tensions with North Korea.

Christine Hong, a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, worried that the U.S. "was lurching towards war" since "the military exercises that the U.S. and South Korea just launched are not defensive exercises" but

rather appear to promote a “regime change” strategy.

Those military pressures have, indeed, led to threats of escalation from North Korea’s young leader, Kim Jong Un, and have set the Korean security situation at “hair-trigger dangerous,” Professor Hong said in the following interview with Dennis J. Bernstein.

DB: There’s a lot of disinformation and patriotic reporting coming out of the U.S. Why don’t you tell us what is going on right now. What is the situation and how dangerous is it?

CH: You put your finger on it. All we see is media reporting that singularly ascribes blame to North Korea, which is portrayed as a kind of unquestionable evil, so what the U.S. is doing in response to the supposed provocation seems eminently justified. I think we are in a crisis point. It doesn’t feel dissimilar to the kind of media rhetoric that surrounded the run-up to the U.S. invasion in Iraq. During that time also, there was a steady drumbeat to war.

If we were to look at the facts, what do those facts tell us? I will give one example of the inverted logic that is operative, coming out of the media and U.S. administration. In a recent Pentagon press conference, [Defense Secretary] Chuck Hagel was asked whether or not the U.S. sending D2 stealth bombers from Missouri to fly and conduct a sortie over South Korea and drop what the DOD calls inert munitions in a simulated run against North Korea could be understood as provocative. He said no, they can’t be understood as provocative. And it was dutifully reported as such.

What we have is a huge informational landscape in which the average person who listens to these reports can’t make heads or tails of what is happening. What has happened since Kim Jong Un has come into his leadership position in North Korea is that the U.S. has had a policy of regime change.

We tend to think of regime change operations and initiatives as a signature or hallmark policy of the Bush administration. But we have seen under President Barack Obama a persistence of the U.S. policy of getting rid of those powers it finds uncooperative around the world. To clarify what I mean, after Kim Jong Il passed away [in December 2011], the U.S. and South Korea launched the biggest and longest set of war exercises they ever conducted. And for the first time it openly exercised O Plan 5029, which is a U.S. war plan that essentially simulates regime collapse in North Korea. It also envisions U.S. forces occupying North Korea.

What is routine during these war exercises, which are ongoing right now, as we speak, is they simulate nuclear strikes against North Korea. These workings are

a combination of simulated computer-assisted activity as well as live fire drills. Last year, the first year of Kim Jong Un's leadership, a South Korean official was asked about the O Plan 5029 and why he was exercising this regime collapse scenario. He said the death of Kim Jong Il makes the situation ripe to exercise precisely this kind of war plan.

It's almost impossible for us in the United States to imagine Mexico and the historic foe of the U.S., Russia, conducting joint exercises that simulate an invasion of the United States and a foreign occupation of the United States. That is precisely what North Korea has been enduring for several decades.

DB: For some time now, the press has been stenographers for the State Department. There is no independent reporting about this. You don't see it in either the conservative or the liberal press. We do not understand the level and intensity of the so-called war games that happen offshore of North Korea. You made a dramatic point about imagining if North Korea wanted to conduct war games off the coast of the United States. The press plays a key role here in fanning the flames of a dangerous situation. How dangerous do you perceive the situation is now?

CH: I think that it's hair-trigger dangerous. There are many reasons for this. Even the commanding general of the U.S. armed forces in Korea, James Thurman, said that even the smallest miscalculation could lead to catastrophic consequences. Even though many blame North Korea, I think everyone realizes this is a very volatile situation that has gone entirely unreported in the U.S. media.

China has stepped up its military presence. You have a situation where China is amassing its forces along the North Korea-China border, sending military vehicles to this area, conducting controlled flights over this area. It's also conducted its own live fire drills in the West Sea. So you have a situation which is eerily reminiscent of the Korean War, in which you can envision alliances like the U.S. and South Korea, with China in some echo that slips into a relationship with North Korea.

I think it's a very dangerous situation we are in right now. The abysmal nature of the reporting is that all you hear is jingoistic. One thing we need to understand is that U.S. and North Korean relations must be premised on peace. For over six decades, the relations have been premised on war. U.S. policy toward North Korea throughout the existence of North Korea has been one of regime change.

If you understand the basis of the relations of war, you realize that war doesn't just get conducted on the level of battles or simulated battles. It gets

conducted on terrain of information. So when you think about it that way, it's easy to understand why misinformation and disinformation prevails with the reporting of U.S. and North Korean relations.

DB: Secretary of State John Kerry called North Korea's actions dangerous and reckless and he continues to be part of a policy to send the most advanced stealth fighting weaponry, as if they could name enough weapons that would back down the North Koreans.

You can't document this, but what is your take on the many countries in the world who are cheering, maybe not in the foreground, that somebody finally said, "no, you can't make believe that we are an aggressor. You can't turn us into an enemy when you are having exercises with 60,000 troops. You can't plan to invade us and expect us to just stand by." I'm sure there are many countries and leaders, many revolutionaries in this world, who are taking note.

CH: Of course. That is the other inverted reality. There is the reality of those of us who are in the U.S. and locked into the limitations of our positions here, and the rest of the world. This is classic U.S. Cold War foreign policy. So much of what goes on in our name in U.S. foreign policy is far from pretty. It is a blood-soaked history.

If you pause to think about the lived reality of those people who are unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of U.S. foreign policy, then you realize that George Bush had that plaintive cry, "Why do they hate us?" It was a kind of soul-searching incapacity to understand the causes of anti-Americanism around the world. But as you say, if we are going to have a sensible approach to procuring any kind of common future with the rest of the world, we are going to have to reckon with our foreign policy. And that is something that has yet to be done.

DB: I do get the feeling that the U.S. foreign policy is at least in part predicated on keeping a divide between the North and the South.

CH: Let's go back to history. You nailed it. Since the inception of something called North Korea and South Korea, the U.S. has been instrumental throughout. If you go back to 1945, you see that scarcely three days after the bombing of Nagasaki, two junior U.S. army officers, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel retired to a small room armed with nothing more than a National Geographic map of the Korean peninsula, through which, in a 30-minute session, with absolutely no consultation of any Korean, divided the Korean peninsula. This division of the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel into north and south, and the creation of a southern government, had no popular legitimacy.

North Korea had a very long anti-colonial history relative to the Japanese. What was created is a divided system in which one in three Korean families at that time were separated. So a kind of state is visited on the Koreans who were colonized by the Japanese and were not a war aggressor during WW II. What this eventually assured is that there would be a civil war of national unification that would be fought by both sides, the North and South.

That tension has hurt U.S. purposes. The U.S. claims that it is doing all these very provocation actions, the stealth bombers, etc, because it needs to give a show of support to its South Korean ally. But of course, this fundamentally misunderstands history and the fact that the U.S., from the beginning, has exploited the division for its own geopolitical advantage.

DB: What do we know about what is happening in the South? Is there a grassroots movement that includes unity and shows concern for this kind of U.S. hegemony in the region?

CH: Absolutely. The specter of a nuclear war and a U.S. nuclear strike against North Korea would not just impact those people who live above the 38th parallel. It would inevitably impact the rest of the peninsula, environmentally, and in every way. These are two countries that are very much tied through families, communities, etc. This is an unimaginable outcome.

When the South Korean people have been polled as to which country they think is the greater threat, the United States or North Korea, they point to the United States. In the South, as well as in the North, 60 years represents a full lifetime.

South Korean progressive activists have said "We had 60 years of a war system." 2013 will be the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Korean War armistice that brought the Korean War to a temporary halt, but did not end the Korean War. After six decades of a war system, they have said 2013 is the first year of Korean peace. We've had 60 years of war, and we are inaugurating a new era of peace.

Heaven forbid the U.S. continues its strategy for de-nuclearizing North Korea. North Korea believes that nuclear power is the basis of its sovereignty. Heaven forbid that the U.S., rather than finding a way of co-existing with North Korea, actually deploys nuclear power to stop nuclearization. That would be the greatest irony of all.

DB: Amazing. If you had ten minutes to advise Barak Obama about what U.S. foreign policy might be helpful, what would you say?

CH: I would say that the U.S. would secure so many gains were it seriously to

consider peace. Both Donald Gregg, the head of CIA in South Korea for many years and also the former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, and Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, and someone who actually runs a humanitarian aid organization that provides food relief in North Korea, both said, after Dennis Rodman returned from North Korea, that the message he was conveying to Obama was “Call me. We don’t want war.” They both stated that however irregular the form of the message, it could not be ignored.

Most U.S. presidents get a vision in their second term. In regard to North Korea, even G.W. Bush said engagement and diplomacy was the only way forward. I would only hope that Barack Obama would come to his senses about North Korea as well.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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## The Whys of American Ignorance

Since the social upheavals of the Sixties, the American Establishment has sought to constrain critical thinking through a variety of techniques, from propaganda to government secrecy to the celebrated ignorance of Fox News. But there are broader societal pressures as well, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

In 2008, Rick Shenkman, the Editor-in-Chief of the History News Network, published a book entitled *Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth about the American Voter*. In it he demonstrated, among other things, that most Americans were: (1) ignorant about major international events, (2) knew little about how their own government runs and who runs it, (3) were nonetheless willing to accept government positions and policies even though a moderate amount of critical thought suggested they were bad for the country, and (4) were readily swayed by stereotyping, simplistic solutions, irrational fears and public relations babble.

Shenkman spent 256 pages documenting these claims, using a great number of polls and surveys from very reputable sources. Indeed, in the end it is hard to argue with his data. So, what can we say about this?

One thing that can be said is that this is not an abnormal state of affairs. As

has been suggested in prior analyses, ignorance of non-local affairs (often leading to inaccurate assumptions, passive acceptance of authority, and illogical actions) is, in fact, a default position for any population.

To put it another way, the majority of any population will pay little or no attention to news stories or government actions that do not appear to impact their lives or the lives of close associates. If something non-local happens that is brought to their attention by the media, they will passively accept government explanations and simplistic solutions.

The primary issue is “does it impact my life?” If it does, people will pay attention. If it appears not to, they won’t pay attention. For instance, in Shenkman’s book unfavorable comparisons are sometimes made between Americans and Europeans. Americans often are said to be much more ignorant about world geography than are Europeans.

This might be, but it is, ironically, due to an accident of geography. Americans occupy a large subcontinent isolated by two oceans. Europeans are crowded into small contiguous countries that, until recently, repeatedly invaded each other as well as possessed overseas colonies.

Under these circumstances, a knowledge of geography, as well as paying attention to what is happening on the other side of the border, has more immediate relevance to the lives of those in Toulouse or Amsterdam than is the case for someone in Pittsburgh or Topeka. If conditions were reversed, Europeans would know less geography and Americans more.

### **Ideology and Bureaucracy**

The localism referenced above is not the only reason for widespread ignorance. The strong adherence to ideology and work within a bureaucratic setting can also greatly narrow one’s worldview and cripple one’s critical abilities.

In effect, a closely adhered to ideology becomes a mental locality with limits and borders just as real as those of geography. In fact, if we consider nationalism a pervasive modern ideology, there is a direct connection between the boundaries induced in the mind and those on the ground.

Furthermore, it does not matter if the ideology is politically left or right, or for that matter, whether it is secular or religious. One’s critical abilities will be suppressed in favor of standardized, formulaic answers provided by the ideology. Just so work done within a bureaucratic setting.

Bureaucracies position the worker within closely supervised departments where success equates with doing a specific job according to specific rules. Within

this limited world, one learns not to think outside the box, and so, except as applied to one's task, critical thinking is discouraged and one's worldview comes to conform to that of the bureaucracy. That is why bureaucrats are so often referred to as cogs in a machine.

That American ignorance is explainable does not make it any less distressing. At the very least it often leads to embarrassment for the minority who are not ignorant. Take for example the facts that polls show over half of American adults don't know which country dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, or that 30 percent don't know what the Holocaust was.

We might explain this as the result of faulty education; however, there are other, just as embarrassing, moments involving the well educated. Take, for instance, the employees of Fox News. Lou Dobbs (who graduated from Harvard University) is host of the Fox Business Network talk show *Lou Dobbs Tonight*. Speaking on March 23 about gun control, he and Fox political analyst Angela McGlowan (a graduate of the University of Mississippi) had the following exchange:

McGlowan: "What scares the hell out of me is that we have a president . . . that wants to take our guns, but yet he wants to attack Iran and Syria. So if they come and attack us here, we don't have the right to bear arms under this Obama administration."

Dobbs: "We're told by Homeland Security that there are already agents of Al Qaeda here working in this country. Why in the world would you not want to make certain that all American citizens were armed and prepared?"

Despite education, ignorance plus ideology leading to stupidity doesn't come in any starker form than this. Suffice it to say that nothing the President has proposed in the way of gun control takes away the vast majority of weapons owned by Americans, that the President's actions point to the fact that he does not want to attack Syria or Iran, and that neither country has the capacity to "come and attack us here."

Finally, while there may be a handful of Americans who sympathize with Al Qaeda, they cannot accurately be described as "agents" of some central organization that dictates their actions.

Did the fact that Dobbs and McGlowan were speaking nonsense make any difference to the majority of those listening to them? Probably not. Their regular listeners may well be too ignorant to know that this surreal episode has no basis in reality. Their ignorance will cause them not to fact-check Dobbs's and McGlowan's remarks. They might very well rationalize away countervailing facts



if they happen to come across them. And, by doing so, keep everything comfortably simple, which counts for more than the messy, often complicated truth.

Unfortunately, one can multiply this scenario many times. There are millions of Americans, most of whom are quite literate, who believe the United Nations is an evil organization bent on destroying U.S. sovereignty. Indeed, in 2005, George W. Bush actually appointed one of them, John Bolton (a graduate of Yale University), as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Likewise, so paranoid are gun enthusiasts (whose level of education varies widely) that any really effective government supervision of the U.S. gun trade would be seen as a giant step toward dictatorship. Therefore, the National Rifle Association, working its influence on Congress, has for years successfully restricted the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives from using computers to create a central database of gun transactions.

And, last but certainly not least, there is the unending war against teaching evolution in U.S. schools. This Christian fundamentalist effort often enjoys temporary success in large sections of the country and is ultimately held at bay only by court decisions reflecting (to date) a solid sense of reality on this subject. By the way, evolution is a scientific theory that has as much evidence to back it up as does gravity.

### **Teaching Critical Thinking?**

As troubling as this apparently perennial problem of ignorance is, it is equally frustrating to listen to repeated schemes to teach critical thinking through the public schools. Of course, the habit of asking critical questions can be taught. However, if you do not have a knowledge base from which to consider a situation, it is hard think critically about it.

So ignorance often precludes effective critical thinking even if the technique is acquired. In any case, public school systems have always had two primary purposes and critical thinking is not one of them. The schools are designed to prepare students for the marketplace and to make them loyal citizens.

The marketplace is most often a top-down, authoritarian world and loyalty comes from myth-making and emotional bonds. In both cases, really effective critical thinking might well be incompatible with the desired end.

Recently, a suggestion has been made to forget about the schools as a place to learn critical thinking. According to Dennis Bartels's article "Critical Thinking Is Best Taught Outside the Classroom" appearing in *Scientific American* online, schools can't teach critical thinking because they are too busy teaching

to standardized tests.

Of course, there was a time when schools were not so strongly mandated to teach this way and there is no evidence that at that time they taught critical thinking. In any case, Bartels believes that people learn critical thinking in informal settings such as museums and by watching the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

He concludes that “people must acquire this skill somewhere. Our society depends on them being able to make critical decisions.” If that were only true it would make this an easier problem to solve.

It may very well be that (consciously or unconsciously) societies organize themselves to hold critical thinking to a minimum. That means to tolerate it to the point needed to get through day-to-day existence and to tackle those aspects of one’s profession that might require narrowly focused critical thought.

But beyond that, we get into dangerous, de-stabilizing waters. Societies, be they democratic or not, are not going to encourage critical thinking about prevailing ideologies or government policies. And, if it is the case that most people don’t think of anything critically unless it falls into that local arena in which their lives are lived out, all the better.

Under such conditions people can be relied upon to stay passive about events outside their local venue until the government decides it is time to rouse them up in some propagandistic manner.

The truth is that people who are consistently active as critical thinkers are not going to be popular, either with the government or their neighbors. They are called gadflies. You know, people like Socrates, who is probably the best-known critical thinker in Western history. And, at least the well educated among us know what happened to him.

**Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest*; *America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.**

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## The Right’s Anti-Treaty Bias

A key argument of the American Right is that treaties are an affront to U.S. “sovereignty” and “constitutional governance,” even though the Founders embraced

treaties with other nations. Today's anti-treaty bias threatens to undermine U.S. influence in the world, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The United States has an inveterate domestic opposition, concentrated primarily on one side of its political spectrum, to any participation in international institutions, broadly defined. Institutions for this purpose include not only general-purpose international organizations but also the legal structures provided by multilateral treaties.

Often there are specific, legitimate objections involved, but most of the opposition is of a more general and visceral nature. It is opposition rooted primarily in the mistaken belief that participation in such institutions somehow compromises one's sovereignty, even though voluntary participation is itself an act of sovereignty.

The Law of the Sea convention is one of the most familiar subjects of such opposition. The convention has now been in force for nineteen years. The United States is one of only a handful of non-landlocked countries that is not a party, even though U.S. adherence to the convention has been recommended by Republican and Democratic presidents alike as well as by the Defense Department, environmentalists, the oil and gas industries, and, in the words of former Republican Senator Richard Lugar, almost everyone who deals "with oceans on a daily basis."

Opposition cannot disguise or negate the respects in which some of these institutions can serve useful purposes and meet practical needs. They can do so for the United States just as they can for many other countries, which is why many other countries subscribe to them.

To pay international institutions this compliment is not, by the way, to weigh in on the sort of the debate that political scientists have among themselves about the role of international organizations. One school of thought holds that international organizations have a life of their own, with their own independent effects on world politics.

An opposing school, populated by realists, contends that international organizations are fundamentally creatures of nation-states and especially of great powers, and they continue in existence only as long as they serve a purpose for those states. That realist observation underscores how such institutions can be useful to the United States. It also shows that one does not have to be an international-organization-hugger to perceive that usefulness.

The International Criminal Court is an example of an international organization that the United States, despite having some continued well-founded reservations about the scope of its authority, has found useful. So the United States has been quietly cooperating with the court.

The most recent defendant to come into the court's custody, one of those rapacious warlords operating in eastern Congo, gave himself up by walking into the U.S. embassy in Rwanda. Without the ICC to turn him over to, it would have been hard to imagine a good way for the United States to handle the situation.

The most recent multilateral convention to be opened for signature is a treaty to regulate the international arms trade. The United Nations General Assembly approved the treaty this week with 154 votes in favor and only three against. The U.S. administration had the good sense to vote yes and avoid being in a small minority consisting of odious company.

But the prospects of the United States eventually subscribing to the treaty are dim, because the National Rifle Association, lining up on the same side of this issue as the regimes in Iran, North Korea and Syria, has made it clear it will oppose ratification.

In staying out of many of these institutions the United States is paying a price, whether the opposition to participation is purely an ideological statement or, as with the NRA's opposition to the arms trade treaty, an absolutist resistance to any of the sort of controls the opponent doesn't happen to like.

The price comes not just in the form of being isolated or part of a mostly loathsome minority. It comes as a forgoing of tools the United States otherwise could use to help it solve real problems.

**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.)**

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