

America's Long History of Bloodletting

Americans like to think of themselves as peace-loving, but their history belies that self-image. From the genocidal wars against Native Americans through the current multi-front "war on terror," the United States has been fighting and killing for most of its history, as Lawrence Davidson notes.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is an American tradition of frequent war. Indeed, over the course of the country's history the United States has been at war almost constantly. Some of these have been relatively short conflicts like interventions in various Central American venues. Some have been much larger and longer affairs, like the Civil War, World War II and Vietnam.

The point to be drawn from this is that the people of the United States are (perhaps unconsciously) acclimated to always being in one sort of armed conflict or another. Unfortunately, this history renders a recent public statement by the Pentagon's general counsel, Jeb Johnson, into just a bit of fanciful idealism. He insisted "war must be regarded as a finite, extraordinary and unnatural state of affairs." Certainly not for Americans.

With their active assumption that the U.S. represents the world's best chance for the victory of "good" against "evil," Americans seem willing to battle on as long as they are convinced they are winning and the casualties are low. That may be why there was no popular protest when Michael Sheehan, Obama's assistant secretary of defense for "special operations," told a Senate hearing that the country's "war on terror" might last "at least 10 or 20 years" longer (it has already been going on 12 years). In the mainstream media, there was not even a noticeable raising of an anchorperson's eyebrows!

The reason given for Sheehan's prognosis was that al-Qaida, and its franchise allies, keep recreating themselves as fast as their alleged leaders can be droned into oblivion. Missing from the congressional and media reaction was the obvious question of "how come" such groups keep recreating themselves?

Many middle-echelon State Department analysts familiar with the Middle East know the answer has something to do with the fact that U.S. policies in the region have not significantly changed since the 9/11 attacks. Most of the personnel above the middle echelon are political appointees who keep asserting that what motivates the al-Qaida types is religious fanaticism.

Of course there are religious fanatics at work on both sides of the "war on

terror,” but those in the Middle East have grievances to focus on and U.S. policies are seen as one source of those. The fact that the “war on terror” is largely a consequence of American policies cemented into place by powerful special interests calls into question President Barack Obama’s recent assertion that “this is a just war, a war waged proportionally in last resort and in self-defense.”

It also suggests that the struggle is likely to go on and on until its ruinous consequences become so obvious to the voting public that the politicians are forced to break with their special-interest supporters. This is the real criterion for change, for, under the present circumstances, there will always be “terrorists” out there who, to reword (and correct) an assertion by President George W. Bush, “hate our policies.”

And what is there not to hate about draconian sanctions, the arming of dictators, and giving opened-ended support to the most racist state in the region?

Rules of Engagement

In the meantime, President Obama has been trying to create “rules of engagement” for the use of the government’s primary weapon in this endless war: those remote controlled bombs we call drones. These rules will, he says, provide “clear guidelines, oversight and accountability” and satisfy partisan congressional grumblings, if not the more pertinent questions of human rights advocates.

To this end the White House has issued guidelines concerning procedures for counterterrorism operations such as drone attacks. The guidelines tell us “there must be a legal basis for using lethal force” and decisions to use such “force against individual terrorists outside the United States and areas of active hostilities are made at the most senior levels of the U.S. Government.” The document then lays out other specific preconditions for the use of lethal force, among which are:

1. “Near certainty” that the terrorist target is present.
2. “Near certainty” that noncombatants will not be injured or killed.
3. An assessment that “capture is not feasible at the time of the operation.”
4. An assessment that the relevant governmental authorities in “the country where action is contemplated cannot or will not effectively address the threat to U.S. persons.”
5. An assessment that “no other reasonable alternatives exist” to effectively

address the threat to U.S. persons.

Finally, "International legal principles, including respect for sovereignty and the law of armed conflict, impose important constraints on the ability of the United States to act unilaterally and on the way in which the United States can use force. The United States respects national sovereignty and international law."

The problem with these guidelines, beyond a number of undefined terms such as "near certainty," "reasonable" and "feasible," is that its criteria misrepresent reality or are utterly unreliable. For instance, under international law there is no "legal" basis for this sort of use of "lethal force."

What the Obama administration (and the Bush regime before it) has done is take up the illegal Israeli "targeted assassination" program, which constitutes the behavior of a rogue state. Even from a domestic legal prospective, Obama's criteria for targeted assassination will be carried out behind closed doors. There will be no due process. And there will be no accountability for "mistakes."

Finally, nothing in the guidelines is enacted into legislation and therefore, assuming an effort to actually follow their criteria, they are specific to the Obama presidency and have no authority over his successors. As Kenneth Roth, director of Human Rights Watch, put it, "a mere promise that the U.S. will work within established guidelines . . . provides little confidence that the U.S. is complying with international law."

Throughout the country's history of one war following another, there has been a parallel history of cyclical deterioration and recovery of constitutional rights.

However, with the government's wholehearted embrace of targeted assassination, as well as modern surveillance technology and the precedent of offshore prisons for "enemy combatants," one wonders if, from now on, the recovery of rights will ever be fully equal to their loss. Maybe now it really will be all downhill for freedom in the "land of the free."

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Bad Mind-Reading on Iran

Propagandists often speculate about the evil intentions of some rival state and then bait anyone who suggests that the other side is just looking out for its own interests or harboring its own fears. This propaganda technique has been honed into a fine art form regarding Iran, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Many who offer opinions on policy toward Iran, and particularly on how to handle negotiations over its nuclear program, implicitly claim an unusual ability to read the minds of Iranian decision-makers. Assertions are made with apparent confidence about what the Iranians want, fear or believe, even without any particular evidence in support. Several possible explanations can account for the misplaced confidence.

One is that we are seeing common psychological mechanisms in action. A well-established human tendency is, for example, to interpret cooperative behavior on another person's part as a response to one's own behavior, while ascribing uncooperative conduct to innate orneriness on the part of the other person.

Thus there is a failure to understand how firmness in Iran's negotiating position is a response to firmness on the Western side, and there is an accompanying tendency to interpret a lack of Iranian concessions as indicating an Iranian desire to stall and drag out negotiations.

Another explanation is that a particular frame of mind is imputed to the Iranians because it implies a U.S. policy that is politically popular for other reasons. Loading ever more onerous sanctions on Iran is a popular political sport, especially on Capitol Hill, to show toughness or love for Israel. The politicians who play that sport therefore favor a view of the Iranian mindset according to which the Iranians are simply not hurting enough and need to hurt some more, after which they will cry uncle.

A third explanation is that the supposed interpretation of Iranian thinking is a cover for another policy agenda held by the person offering the interpretation. This is especially the case with some of those arguing for more vehement threats of military attack against Iran.

Some of those proponents have made no secret of the fact that they believe (for whatever strange reason) that war with Iran would be a good thing. Saber-rattling gives them a better chance of reaching that goal, because if an

agreement is not reached with Iran then the advocates of saber-rattling would be among the first to cry that U.S. credibility would be damaged if the military threats were not carried out.

These possibilities come to mind in reading an op-ed by Dennis Ross and David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. In particular, they are brought to mind by Ross and Makovsky's statement, in explaining lack of progress in the negotiations, that "Iranian leaders seem not to believe that we will use force if diplomatic efforts fail."

What is their basis for that observation? Have the Iranian leaders themselves said anything like that? No, they haven't. Ross and Makovsky seem to be basing such an observation solely on the Iranian negotiating position itself, and in so doing they are implying only a single cause for that position.

Whatever Iran does in the way of making or not making concessions is all supposedly a matter of whether the Iranians see the possibility of U.S. military force being employed. Every other carrot, stick, belief or perception evidently does not matter at all.

Actually, those other things matter a lot. There is the little business of sanctions, for example. Ross and Makovsky are to be complimented for stating that if Iran is prepared to make the kind of concessions we are looking for, then "we should be prepared to lift the harsh economic sanctions."

But they do not mention that the United States and its negotiating partners have given the Iranians little or no reason to believe that we are so prepared. Instead, the only sanctions relief that has been incorporated in the Western proposals is stingy in comparison with the panoply of sanctions that Congress keeps piling on.

We do not need any magical insight into secret Iranian thoughts to realize how important this dimension is in shaping Iran's negotiating behavior. We only have to look at the demands and proposals that Iran has advanced at the negotiating table, as well as the actual economic damage that the sanctions have inflicted.

Ross and Makovsky get something else right, but for the wrong reason. Their piece is partly an argument in favor of making a comprehensive proposal rather than taking a step-by-step approach; they pooh-pooh the idea of confidence-building that is associated with step-by-step.

A comprehensive proposal is a good idea, but precisely because a lack of confidence, which is glaring on both sides, *is* a major part of the problem. The Iranians lack confidence that the United States and its P5+1 partners ever want to get to an end state in which they fully and formally accept a peaceful

nuclear program, with uranium enrichment, in the hands of the Islamic Republic of Iran, rather than indefinitely stringing out negotiations while the sanctions continue to inflict their damage.

Again, we do not need to be mind-readers to realize this; the Iranians have been quite explicit in stating that they require a clearer idea of where the negotiations are heading.

So a “going big” comprehensive proposal is a good idea, but not as Ross and Makovsky pitch it, as some kind of ultimatum with a threat of military force functioning as an “or else” clause of the proposal. That kind of clause only stokes Iranian doubts about the West’s ultimate intentions and feeds Iranian interest in a possible nuclear weapon as a deterrent.

What is the explanation for Ross and Makovsky’s assertions about Iranian thinking? Are they exhibiting one of those psychological heuristics, or covering a hidden agenda, or something else? I don’t know; I don’t pretend to be able to read their minds.

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