The ‘Merchant of Death’ Lobby

The U.S. gun industry doesn’t want any restrictions on its profit-making role as a global “merchant of death,” so its lobby has whipped half the Senate into line opposing a treaty aimed at curbing human rights crimes by regulating the illicit flow of weapons around the world, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Primitive opposition to the recently signed arms trade treaty surfaced again last week, in the form of a letter signed by 50 U.S. senators led by James Inhofe of Oklahoma, Jim Moran of Kansas, and Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

As with any time a group of American politicians says anything having to do with firearms, the Second Amendment gets invoked. But the treaty has nothing whatever to do with the Second Amendment or rights contained within it. The treaty not only has no effect on well-regulated militias but also no effect on gun ownership by individual Americans.

The treaty’s stated purpose is to establish “the highest possible common international standards” for regulating the international trade in conventional arms and to combat the illicit trade in such arms, thereby contributing to the further goals of “international and regional peace, security and stability,” “reducing human suffering,” and promoting “cooperation, transparency, and responsible action” by the parties to the treaty.

In short, it has to do above all with curbing the flow of munitions across international borders and into the hands of the likes of Joseph Kony or Charles Taylor. But the political subtext in the United States evidently is that the gun lobby gets nervous whenever “arms” and any conjugation of “regulate” appear in the same document (even though that is true of the Second Amendment itself).

Actually, there is one place where the treaty could be said to get into Second Amendment matters. Right up front in the preamble, the treaty reaffirms “the sovereign right of any State to regulate and control conventional arms exclusively within its territory, pursuant to its own legal or constitutional system.”

One would think this reassurance would be enough, but the objecting senators complain that this is only a “weak, non-binding reference” rather than a recognition of “fundamental individual rights.” So the senators would be more comfortable with having an international treaty determine what are the fundamental individual rights of Americans, rather than leaving it to America’s
own legal and constitutional system to do that? They had better be careful what they wish for.

The senatorial letter has some other comparably misdirected complaints. The letter notes, for example, that it is possible for the treaty to be amended by three-quarters of the parties if complete consensus for amendment is not achieved. But the letter does not mention that no amendment shall apply to a state until and unless it explicitly accepts the amendment, and that as with most international conventions there is provision for a state to withdraw from the treaty altogether.

Something else in the letter of opposition is noteworthy because it actually involves foreign policy and the transfer of arms across international boundaries, rather than spurious threats to domestic rights. The letter says that the treaty “includes language that could hinder the United States from fulfilling its strategic, legal and moral commitments to provide arms to key allies such as the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the State of Israel.”

A report in the *Times of Israel* identifies the language in question as a prohibition on exporting arms if the exporting state “has knowledge at the time of authorization that the arms or items would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, attacks directed against civilian objects or civilians protected as such, or other war crimes as defined by international agreements to which it is a Party.”

The treaty goes on to require exporting states to assess whether a prospective export of arms would “undermine peace and security” or could be used to commit or facilitate a “serious violation” of international humanitarian or human rights law or international conventions on terrorism and transnational organized crime, and that if it determines there is an “overriding risk” of any such consequences it should not authorize the export.

This raises two questions for the letter-writers. First, exactly what exported arms do they have in mind that would be used for war crimes or breaches of the Geneva Conventions or in the United States’s own judgment would lead to violations of human rights law or any of the other listed offenses? Second, why would it be in U.S. interests to export arms that would have such consequences?

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.)
Why Snowden’s Passport Matters

President Obama declares his love of “transparency,” but has an odd way of showing it, meting out harsh punishments to people who give the public a glimpse into the vast darkness of U.S. secrets, including revoking Edward Snowden’s passport to stop him from seeking asylum, an action addressed by Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

When the State Department revoked Edward Snowden’s passport four months ago, the move was a reprisal from a surveillance-and-warfare state that operates largely in the shadows. Top officials in Washington were furious. Snowden had suddenly exposed what couldn’t stand the light of day, blowing the cover of the world’s Biggest Brother.

Cancelation of the passport wasn’t just an effort to prevent the whistleblower from getting to a country that might grant political asylum. It was also a declaration that the U.S. government can nullify the right to travel just as surely as it can nullify the right to privacy.

“Although I am convicted of nothing,” Snowden said in a July 1 statement after a week at a Moscow airport terminal, the U.S. government “has unilaterally revoked my passport, leaving me a stateless person. Without any judicial order, the administration now seeks to stop me exercising a basic right. A right that belongs to everybody. The right to seek asylum.”

Since 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has affirmed with clarity: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” The only other words of Article 14 specify an exception that clearly doesn’t apply to Snowden: “This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”

The extent of the U.S. government’s scorn for this principle can be gauged by the lengths it has gone to prevent Snowden from gaining political asylum. It was a measure of desperation – and contempt for international law – that Washington got allied governments of France, Spain, Portugal and Italy to deny airspace to the plane of Bolivian President Evo Morales in early July, forcing the aircraft to land for a search on the chance that it was carrying Snowden from Moscow to political asylum in Bolivia.

Although Snowden was able to stay in Russia, revocation of his U.S. passport has been a crucial weapon to prevent him from crossing an international border for
any reason other than to come home to prison in the United States.

Just as the decision to revoke Snowden’s passport was entirely political, any remedy will be political. The law has nothing to do with it, other than giving the Secretary of State the power to revoke his passport.

Unfortunately, that option was established in the case of Philip Agee, the CIA agent who revealed wrongdoing and became a CIA foe. He lost a legal fight to regain his revoked passport when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against him in 1981.

Thurgood Marshall was one of the dissenting justices in that 7-2 decision on Haig v. Agee. The other was William Brennan, who wrote that “just as the Constitution protects both popular and unpopular speech, it likewise protects both popular and unpopular travelers.”

Justice Brennan added: “And it is important to remember that this decision applies not only to Philip Agee, whose activities could be perceived as harming the national security, but also to other citizens who may merely disagree with Government foreign policy and express their views.”

Clearly winning the right to travel for “both popular and unpopular travelers” is a political battle ahead. A step in that direction has begun with an online petition telling Secretary of State John Kerry to restore Snowden’s passport. Thousands of signers have posted cogent — and often eloquent — personal comments alongside their names.

“I urge you to immediately reinstate the passport of Edward Snowden, a U.S. whistleblower who has educated the public about threats to our privacy and precious constitutional rights,” the petition says. “Due process is fundamental to democracy. Your revocation of Mr. Snowden’s passport contradicts the words of many U.S. leaders who have often criticized other governments for violating the principle of freedom to travel.” (The petition, launched by RootsAction.org, has gained more than 25,000 signers since mid-October.)

Whether sending missiles across borders or using the latest digital technology to spy on vast numbers of people, the U.S. government relies on military violence and chronic secrecy in an ongoing quest to exert control over as much of the world as possible. The agenda reeks of impunity and arrogant power. Revoking Edward Snowden’s passport is in sync with that agenda.

Dangerous History of Regime Change

**Exclusive:** Official Washington justifies military and political interventions in other countries under the theory of “U.S. exceptionalism.” But these “regime changes” often have unexpected results, as with the bloody coup d’etat that removed South Vietnamese President Diem a half-century ago, recalls Beverly Deepe Keever.

By Beverly Deepe Keever

On Nov. 1, 1963, a half-century ago, the South Vietnamese government that the United States had backed for nearly a decade was toppled in a military coup d’etat, an act of regime change approved by President John F. Kennedy.

The Saigon coup ended in the murders of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and though Diem’s removal was intended to appease the country’s restless Buddhist majority upset with Diem’s favoritism toward his fellow Catholics the operation proved disastrous for the U.S. and its allies in their fight against communist-led forces.

After the assassination of Diem and the murder of President John F. Kennedy just 21 days later U.S. military involvement escalated. President Lyndon Johnson dispatched the first combat units and American forces grew to a peak of 543,000 on March 31, 1969, before a gradual withdrawal and acceptance of defeat. Some 58,000 U.S. soldiers died in the war and political discord deeply divided the home front.

Yet, the details of the Diem killing remained something of a mystery for years, with President Kennedy reportedly shocked that the coup had resulted in the death of the Diem brothers. So, what exactly did President Kennedy authorize? Why did the coup end with two grisly murders? Who was at fault for the coup fiasco and the political chaos that followed?

Some of the mystery was cleared up by the leaking of the secret Pentagon Papers in 1971. The internal U.S. government study revealed: “For the military coup d’état against Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. must accept its full share of responsibility. Beginning in August of 1963 we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government.”

That disclosure led to questioning what right the U.S. had to unleash such a
coup d’etat, a question that reverberates even more loudly today with the U.S.-backed or -botched “regime changes” in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. This question was one that Sen. J. William Fulbright said was being ignored, not even mentioned, in all the confidential cable traffic between U.S. officials that was later evaluated by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he headed.

In the preface to the committee’s 75-page staff report, Fulbright wrote: “What is omitted from the story of the Diem coup tells a great deal about the American policy process. Absent is any questioning by U.S. officials of the U.S. Government’s right to reform the Vietnamese government or to replace it.”

Zeroing in on the U.S. government’s self-anointed “exceptionalism” that undergirds the interventionist impulse of many American leaders, Fulbright summed up, “The right to manipulate the destiny of others is simply assumed.”

Lack of Debate

U.S. complicity revealed in the Pentagon Papers was further lamented by Fulbright: “Perhaps the most important omission, and that which made the others possible, is the exclusion of Congress and the public from the policy-process. The facts of U.S. policy toward the Diem regime were limited to such a tight circle of U.S. officials that significant debate over the desirability of support for Diem, much less of an Indochina presence, was precluded.”

Just why President Kennedy sanctioned the coup was not explained in the Pentagon Papers or other official disclosures. A transcript of audio-recordings of Kennedy’s National Security Council meeting on Oct. 29 just hours before the Saigon coup began reveal that Diem’s overthrow was opposed by CIA Director John McCone and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who warned that even a successful coup would help the communists.

Robert Kennedy, the President’s brother and Attorney General, interjected into the disjointed discussion, “I just don’t see that this makes any sense on the face of it.” He added, “We’re putting the whole future of the country and, really Southeast Asia, in the hands of somebody we don’t know very well.” If the coup fails, he summed up, “We risked a hell of a lot, with the war.”

I had been a public-opinion pollster during the 1960 election campaign that put JFK in the White House. Three years later, as a Newsweek reporter, I was racing through Saigon’s streets to the Presidential Palace as the last coup shots were fired.

I eventually concluded that Diem, who was a Catholic in a predominantly non-Catholic country, had become a political liability for America’s first Catholic president gearing up for re-election the next year. Whether the U.S. could or
would have prevailed in South Vietnam with Diem as president is still debated, though like all “alternative history” unanswerable.

A long-time witness to world events and a prime contributor to America’s defeat in Vietnam was North Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who died on Oct. 4 at age 102. He masterminded the political-military “people’s war” strategy that defeated America in Vietnam and to which the U.S. has yet to devise an effective counter-strategy.

Instead of Huey helicopters and green-bereted Special Forces that JFK unsuccessfully relied on for victory against Giap and his dedicated guerrillas, the U.S. today employs drones and Seal Team 6s to try to take down Islamic “terrorists.”

Over the last dozen years, the U.S. military has attacked Afghanistan to oust the Taliban who were blamed for giving safe haven to al-Qaeda terrorists; invaded Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein for purportedly hiding WMDs (though he wasn’t); and providing air assets to support the overthrow and murder of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi.

However, these “regime changes” have given rise to insurgencies and civil wars that the U.S. has been unable to counter successfully. The result: more bloodshed, anguish and uncertainty across a strategically important region and the loss of American ideals, prestige, credibility, lives and money.

Of course, the U.S. involvement in “regime change” did not begin in 1963 with the Diem coup. A decade before, the CIA engineered the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was perceived as undermining U.S. and British interests by nationalizing his nation’s oil wealth.

The 1953 coup installed the Shah of Iran, a U.S. puppet who ruled as a tyrant for 26 years until he was swept aside in 1979 by the Islamic revolution that has bedeviled U.S. interests for more than three decades. Although broad outlines of the Mossadegh coup have been known for years, only two months ago did a declassified document obtained through the Freedom of Information Act explicitly confirm the CIA’s orchestration.

Latin America, what some old hands in Official Washington still call “America’s Backyard,” has been the scene of many U.S.-engineered “regime changes” going back almost two centuries to the Monroe Doctrine and including the 1954 coup against Guatemala’s elected president Jacobo Arbenz and the 1973 coup against Chile’s elected president Salvador Allende. Typically such ousters are followed by years of bloodshed, repression and popular resentment toward the U.S.

Transcending this expanse of time and space was Giap’s prophetic observation of
1969 just as American forces in Vietnam were peaking in numbers: “The United States has a strategy based on arithmetic. They question the computers, add and subtract, extract square roots, and then go into action. But arithmetical strategy doesn’t work here. If it did, they’d already have exterminated us.”

What the American strategy failed to take into account, he warned, was the determination of the Vietnamese people to chart their own future. “They don’t reckon on the spirit of a people fighting for what they know is right,” Giap said.

It is a lesson that Official Washington has found difficult to learn.

Beverly Deepe Keever was a Saigon-based correspondent who covered the Vietnam War for a number of news organizations. She has published a memoir, Death Zones & Darling Spies.

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**Treating Anti-Syria Charges as Flat-Fact**

**Exclusive:** More than two months after the chemical weapons attack near Damascus, President Obama has still not released any proof to support his allegations blaming the Syrian government. But the New York Times has embraced the accusations as flat fact, a replay of the run-up to invading Iraq, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

With the blessing of the New York Times, the Obama administration has succeeded in cementing a dubious conventional wisdom about the Syrian government’s alleged use of chemical weapons last Aug. 21 without presenting a shred of actual evidence.

In a front-page story co-written by Michael R. Gordon, who also co-wrote the infamous “aluminum tube” article falsely accusing Iraq of building nuclear centrifuges in 2002, the Times included the U.S. allegations about Syria’s chemical weapons use into its storyline as flat fact, not a point in serious dispute.

The Times reported on Wednesday that the State Department warned the White House in June that Syrian officials would see inaction on initial chemical weapons incidents that the U.S. government was also blaming on the Syrian government as a “green light for continued CW use.” The Times then wrote that the State
Department’s warning “proved to be prophetic. A devastating poison gas attack on Aug. 21 killed hundreds of civilians.”

The story continues in that vein, accepting as indisputable fact that the Syrian government was behind the Aug. 21 attack on a suburb of Damascus despite significant doubts among independent analysts, UN inspectors and, I’m told, U.S. intelligence analysts.

Indeed, the reported lack of consensus in the U.S. intelligence community helps explain why a four-page U.S. “Government Assessment” of the incident was released on Aug. 30 not by the Director of National Intelligence but by the White House press office and was touted not by the DNI but Secretary of State John Kerry. The U.S. government’s white paper contained no evidence to support its assertions blaming the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Though the Aug. 21 incident brought the United States to the brink of another Middle East war, the Obama administration has refused over the past two months to release any proof that it claims to possess, such as communications intercepts, images of rocket launches or even the basis for its precise count, “1,429,” of those supposedly killed by Sarin gas.

The U.S. government has even denied a U.S. congressman, Rep. Alan Grayson, D-Florida, access to the supposed evidence undergirding President Barack Obama’s request for authorization to use force against Syria, a proposal that is now in abeyance pending Syria’s compliance with a Russian plan for destroying Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons.

Grayson, who has publicly questioned why the administration insists on withholding its evidence, was informed by the House Intelligence Committee that he would not be allowed to look at the intelligence because he gave an unrelated floor speech citing published charts about National Security Agency spying that were leaked by ex-NSA contractor Edward Snowden.

The committee chairman, Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Michigan, also justified the denial, in part, because Obama’s request to use force is not currently before the House. According to an article in Politico, Rogers said requests to review intelligence information are weighed against “the sensitivity to the national defense or the confidential conduct of the foreign relations of the United States of the information sought the likelihood of its being directly or indirectly disclosed [and] the jurisdictional interest of the member making the request.”

However, there remains the distinct possibility that the fluid developments in Syria could suddenly put Obama’s war resolution back before Congress amid demands for an immediate up-or-down vote, while leaving no time for a careful
review of the dubious *casus belli*.

**Time for Examination**

In the heat of a new war fever, there would be little patience for unwinding the conventional wisdom blaming the Aug. 21 attack on the Syrian government. That’s especially true now that the New York Times and much of the mainstream U.S. news media has accepted the allegations as undisputable truth.

Ideally, the careful scrutiny that a case for war should demand would come when passions are tempered as they are now not at their hottest. But the Obama administration, the House Intelligence Committee and, indeed, the major U.S. news media seem to believe that the public and even members of Congress should just fall in line.

Over the past two months, I’ve heard repeatedly that the public shouldn’t expect to see the intelligence that justifies war despite the bitter and bloody experience of the Iraq invasion (not to mention a long and sorry history of other U.S. government lies and propaganda justifying wars).

President Obama has a curious understanding of the word “transparency,” by which he seems to mean: keeping the public in the dark and giving a peak at the “evidence” only to officials who won’t ask any tough questions. Though he is not the first president to obsess over secrecy, some presidents have shown more respect for American and world public opinion, even if that requires sacrificing some modest intelligence advantage.

Think of President John Kennedy exposing the U-2’s high-resolution-photo capabilities to show the world the Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962; President Ronald Reagan revealing the U.S. ability to intercept Soviet air communications after the KAL-007 shoot-down in 1983; even President George W. Bush authorizing Secretary of State Colin Powell to reveal phone intercepts in support of the Iraq invasion in 2003. Granted, some of those revelations (like the KAL-007 and Iraqi intercepts) were doctored to make a propaganda case, but exposure of the intelligence capabilities was real.

It’s hard to believe that the Obama administration’s sources and methods regarding the Aug. 21 incident are any more sensitive than the intelligence techniques released by earlier presidents. The world surely knows that the United States can intercept phone calls and has satellites that can record both visual and infrared images with great precision.

The only logical reasons why the Obama administration would refuse to release any U.S. evidence in support of its accusations on Syria especially after the bogus case for invading Iraq is that the evidence is weak to non-existent or
provided by “sources,” such as Israel, Saudi Arabia or the Syrian rebels, who have a vested interest in drawing the United States into the Syrian civil war.

The UN Report

While refusing to release any of its own evidence, the Obama administration has argued that a 38-page report by UN inspectors contained indications that some non-governmental organizations and media outlets, including the New York Times, have interpreted as implicating the Syrian government.

But the UN report itself offered no findings of responsibility and actually contained information casting doubt on some U.S. claims, including finding no Sarin or other chemical weapons agents at one of two sites inspected outside Damascus. The inspectors also reported that they detected signs that people associated with the rebels had tampered with the two sites before the inspectors arrived. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Murky Clues from UN’s Syria Report.”]

In the field, Robert Fisk, a veteran reporter for London’s Independent newspaper, found a lack of consensus among UN officials and other international observers despite the career risks that they faced by deviating from the conventional wisdom on Assad’s guilt.

“Grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad’s army,” Fisk wrote. “Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in? As one Western NGO put it ‘if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God’s sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?’”

New evidence also has surfaced on how the U.S. government worked aggressively over the past dozen years to ensure that the leaders of key UN agencies, including the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, will present findings in ways most favorable to U.S. policies. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “How US Pressure Bends UN Agencies.”]

Ideally, the role of the press corps should be to examine all such claims skeptically and to insist as much as possible that the various sides in a dispute present their evidence so the information can be carefully evaluated, especially when the issue is one of war or peace.

If a government refuses to present any evidence at all even hiding the facts from a legislator like Grayson who isn’t just going to toe the line that press skepticism should be ratcheted up even higher. Instead, the New York Times on
Syria does what it did during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, simply make itself available as a willing propaganda vehicle.

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). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only $34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, click here.

Dick Cheney’s Heartless Hypocrisy

Exclusive: Dick Cheney’s new book about his life-saving heart transplant has drawn much fawning coverage. But little attention has gone to the hypocrisy of the ex-vice president accepting expensive government-funded surgeries while endorsing the Tea Party’s campaign to deny health coverage to millions of Americans, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Former Vice President Dick Cheney, out promoting his new book Heart about how his life was saved by very expensive heart-transplant surgery, is simultaneously praising the Tea Party, which is hard at work trying to prevent less fortunate Americans from getting anything close to the government-financed care that spared Cheney.

In an appearance on NBC’s “Today” show, Cheney called the Tea Party and its fierce opposition to government spending a “good thing.” He also noted how the Tea Party made possible the insurgent Wyoming Senate campaign of his daughter Liz because she was “partly motivated” by the same concerns about high taxes, high national debt and the cost of the Affordable Care Act.

Out of that zeal to repeal Obamacare, the Tea Party and its congressional adherents provoked this month’s government shutdown and near credit default. Yet, Cheney declared, “I’ve got a lot of respect for what the people are doing.”

But what the Tea Party has been doing is trying to prevent the federal government from implementing reforms in the health-insurance system that would enable some 30 million Americans, including many with pre-existing conditions, to obtain insurance often at reduced or subsidized prices. The Tea Party is also
fighting expansion of Medicaid for poor families in states controlled by Republicans.

In other words, the Tea Party wants to force Americans with pre-existing medical conditions like, say, a diseased heart to remain at the mercy of greedy insurance companies that have made a lucrative business plan out of denying coverage to the people who need it most.

Such a victim of America’s perverse health-care system would have been Dick Cheney, who has had at least five heart attacks dating back to when he was 37. But Cheney was lucky enough to qualify for government-funded health care as a federal employee for most of his adult life, including his time in the Nixon administration, his service in Congress, and his eight years as vice president. As a retired official who is now over 65, he further qualifies for Medicare and other health benefits.

The cost of the heart transplant alone over the first year is estimated at $1 million, and the 72-year-old Cheney has received a variety of other expensive heart procedures over the decades.

Saving the Cheney Family

But Cheney’s personal hypocrisy regarding the federal government’s role to “provide for the general Welfare” when it comes to less fortunate Americans did not start with the life-saving gift of a new heart. It traces back to the Cheney family’s rise from the hard-scrabble life that confronted many hard-working Americans who were buffeted by the periodic financial crises of unrestrained capitalism, the system idealized by the Tea Party.

In Cheney’s 2011 memoir, In My Time, he acknowledges that his personal success was made possible by Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and the fact that Cheney’s father managed to land a steady job with the federal government. “I’ve often reflected on how different was the utterly stable environment he provided for his family and wondered if because of that I have been able to take risks, to change directions, and to leave one career path for another with hardly a second thought,” Cheney wrote.

In that sense, Cheney’s self-assuredness may be as much a product of the New Deal as the many bridges, dams and other public works that Roosevelt commissioned in the 1930s to get Americans back to work. By contrast, the insecurity that afflicted Cheney’s father was a byproduct of the vicissitudes from laissez-faire capitalism.

In sketching his family’s history, Cheney depicted the struggles of farmers and small businessmen scratching out a living in the American Midwest and suffering
devastating reversals whenever the titans of Wall Street stumbled into a financial crisis and the bankers cut off credit.

After his ancestors would make some modest headway from their hard work, they would find themselves back at square one, again and again, because of some “market” crisis or a negative weather pattern. Whenever there was a financial panic or a drought, everything was lost.

“In 1883, as the country struggled through a long economic depression, the sash and door factory that [Civil War veteran Samuel Fletcher Cheney] co-owned [in Defiance, Ohio] had to be sold to pay its debts,” Cheney wrote. “At the age of fifty-four, Samuel Cheney had to start over,” moving to Nebraska.

There, Samuel Cheney built a sod house and began a farm, enjoying some success until a drought hit, again forcing him to the edge. Despite a solid credit record, he noted that “the banks will not loan to anyone at present” and, in 1896, he had to watch all his possessions auctioned off at the Kearney County Courthouse. Samuel Cheney started another homestead in 1904 and kept working until he died in 1911 at the age of 82.

His third son, Thomas, who was nicknamed Bert (and who would become Dick Cheney’s grandfather), tried to build a different life as a cashier and part owner of a Sumner, Kansas, bank, named Farmers and Merchants Bank. But he still suffered when the economy crashed.

“Despite all his plans and success, Bert Cheney found that, like his father, he couldn’t escape the terrible power of nature,” Dick Cheney wrote. “When drought struck in the early 1930s, farmers couldn’t pay their debts, storekeepers had to close their doors, and Farmers and Merchants Bank went under. My grandparents lost everything except for the house in which they lived.”

Bert Cheney’s son, Richard, ventured off in a different direction, working his way through Kearney State Teachers College and taking the civil service exam. He landed a job as a typist with the Veterans Administration in Lincoln, Nebraska. “After scraping by for so long, he found the prospect of a $120 monthly salary and the security of a government job too good to turn down,” his son, Dick Cheney, wrote. “Before long he was offered a job with another federal agency, the Soil Conservation Service.

“The SCS taught farmers about crop rotation, terraced planting, contour plowing, and using ‘shelter belts’ of trees as windbreaks techniques that would prevent the soil from blowing away, as it had in the dust storms of the Great Depression. My dad stayed with the SCS for more than thirty years, doing work of which he was immensely proud. He was also proud of the pension that came with
federal employment a pride that I didn’t understand until as an adult I learned about the economic catastrophes that his parents and grandparents had experienced and that had shadowed his own youth.”

Like many Americans, the Cheney family felt it had been pulled from the depths of the Great Depression by the New Deal efforts of Franklin Roosevelt, cementing the family’s support for the Democratic president and his party. “When I was born [on Jan. 30, 1941] my granddad wanted to send a telegram to the president,” Cheney wrote in his memoir. “Both sides of my family were staunch New Deal Democrats, and Granddad was sure that FDR would want to know about the ‘little stranger’ with whom he now had a birthday in common.”

After growing up in the relative comfort of middle-class, post-World War II America, Dick Cheney would take advantage of the many opportunities that presented themselves, attaching himself to powerful Republican politicians, most notably an ambitious congressman from Illinois named Donald Rumsfeld.

When Rumsfeld left Congress for posts in the Nixon administration, he brought the hard-working Cheney along. Eventually Rumsfeld became White House chief of staff to President Gerald Ford and when Rumsfeld was tapped to become Defense Secretary in 1975 he recommended his young aide, Dick Cheney, to succeed him.

Cheney’s career path through the ranks of Republican national politics, with occasional trips through the revolving door into lucrative private-sector jobs, was set. He would become a major player within the GOP Establishment, establishing for himself a reputation as one of the most conservative members of Congress and a foreign policy hawk.

Cheney is now recognized as a right-wing Republican icon, inspiring a new generation of conservatives to dismantle what’s left of Roosevelt’s New Deal and shrink the federal government so it won’t be there to help some other struggling family trying to make it into the middle class and achieve the American Dream.

Indeed, if the father in that struggling family suffers from heart disease and if the family is denied affordable health insurance due to that pre-existing condition Cheney’s right-wing Tea Party policies would coldly calculate that the father’s life would not be worth saving.

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). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only $34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on
Saudi Arabia is upset President Obama didn’t bomb Syria and join the Saudis’ crusade to fight Shiite influence in the Mideast. It’s not enough that the U.S. tolerates Saudi support for radical Sunni jihadists. So, Saudi leaders are boycotting their own seat on the UN Security Council, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has just had a tantrum. A day after winning one of the rotational seats on the United Nations Security Council, the Saudis announced they would not take the seat. This move undoubtedly has annoyed and even angered many others in member states and at the United Nations, not least of all in states that campaigned unsuccessfully for one of the non-permanent seats on the council.

Diplomatic heads are shaking over this unprecedented situation. The closest thing to a precedent was a boycott of council proceedings in 1950 by the Soviet Union, which came to regret its tactic when in its absence the council authorized a U.S.-led intervention in Korea. But the Soviets had a permanent seat not to be filled by anyone else. It is unclear after the Saudi announcement whether the General Assembly will be picking a replacement member for the Security Council or there will be an empty chair.

Some predict that the Saudis, like the Soviets, will come to regret their move, and that prediction probably is correct. Although some Saudis may have genuinely believed that an unusual move such as this would help direct attention to their favored issues, plenty of smart Saudi officials would recognize multiple flaws in the tactic.

Annoyance with Saudi Arabia probably will be a stronger international reaction than any felt need to pay more attention to the Saudis’ favorite causes. Action on the issues of high concern to Riyadh is stymied by factors other than merely insufficient attention to them. It also is not entirely clear exactly who or what is the target of the Saudis’ disapproval. Ostensibly it is the Security Council itself, but according to some interpretations the Saudis are trying to express disapproval of U.S. policies.
A different and credible way to look at the Saudi move is as simple pique, less a matter of any calculation than of emotion and frustration at high levels, probably the level of the king. In this respect it is the result of a flawed policy-making system that does not do a good job of weeding out high-level emotion. The United States probably has done a better job of weeding such stuff out. Think of a short-tempered Harry Truman and all of the angry letters that he wrote but never got sent.

An explanation involving more calculation is that the Saudis had second thoughts about how casting votes at the Security Council would force them to be more specific and open in their preferences. This is different from the sort of behind-the-scenes influence with which they are more comfortable and is better suited to the type of power they wield. That still does not explain or excuse, of course, their earlier decision to seek the council seat.

The proper posture for the United States and others to take is a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger disapproval of what the Saudis have done, with the disapproval based on procedure rather than substance. Substantively some of the Saudis’ favorite causes and positions are consistent with U.S. interests, and others are not.

But the United Nations Security Council serves a useful function regardless of one’s position on any of the issues it addresses. Shunning it, especially in a way that screws up the long-established procedures for filling seats on the council, does not help the council do its job any better. And it would be a mistake to encourage the notion that an absence of talk and engagement about controversial issues is better than the alternative.

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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Thanks again.

Robert Parry

In Case You Missed…

Some of our special stories in September, featuring exclusive reports that challenged the U.S. government’s hidden evidence for attacking Syria, articles that contributed to the public resistance which first delayed and then deterred another war.


“All Scrubbed Up, Nowhere to Show” by Robert Parry, Sept. 4, 2013.


“Obama Warned on Syrian Intel” by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, Sept. 6, 2013.


Right-Wing Ideology Run Wild

The Radical Right reflecting the overlapping ideologies of Ayn Rand capitalists, Christian fundamentalists and neo-Confederate white supremacists is set on crippling the federal government and humiliating the first African-American president. But the extremism could shatter the Republican Party, writes Lawrence Davidson.
In the Eighteenth Century, the western world shifted from mercantilism to capitalism. Mercantilism was an economic system that gave governments wide-ranging regulatory powers over commerce, mostly to ensure a positive balance of trade. It also allowed for strong guild structures and protection for domestic industries. But the Industrial Revolution ended mercantilism and brought to power a business class that wanted to be free to operate without government oversight.

In the generations that followed, as this capitalist worldview evolved, the business class made a fetish out of the “free market” and viewed government as, at best, a necessary evil. Any sort of regulation was seen as the equivalent of slavery, and the proper role of officialdom was reduced to maintaining internal order (police), defending the realm (military) and enforcing contracts (the courts).

Any government involvement in social welfare was disapproved of because it allegedly promoted laziness among the poor, but this was just a convenient myth. The real reason for keeping government activity to an absolute minimum was the rising business class’ fear and loathing of taxes.

In Europe, the rationalizations for capitalism remained primarily secular, looking to the maximization of efficiency for the sake of profit. In the United States, however, where little happens that one side or the other does not ascribe to an overseeing God, secular rationalizations were soon complemented with the notion of divine will. God wanted unregulated economic freedom and minimalist government to prevail.

This religious view continues to exist. Today’s struggle to return us to minimalist government and maximum economic “freedom” is led by a collection of fundamentalist Christian right-wingers and Tea Party mad-hatters. Journalist Chris Hedges lays out a worst-case scenario of the drive for power by the Christian Right in his recent article, “The Radical Christian Right and the War on the Government.”

He tells us that “the public face” of this political force is “on display in the House of Representatives” and its main ideological aim is to “shut down the government.” Hedges also points to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, as the archetypal fundamentalist politician leading the charge against big government. Hedges thinks this is just the first step toward the real goal of men like Cruz, which is to make the U.S. a Christian fundamentalist nation.

The Ensuing Struggle
In the struggle that has ensued, the radical conservatives’ enemy is the Democratic (or “big government”) Party in general and President Barack Obama in particular.

As an indication of just how isolating and distorting ideology can be, focus groups of conservative Republicans have revealed a deeply held conspiracy theory. According to researchers who conducted this study, “What drives the Republican base . . . [is] a genuine belief that Obama has a secret agenda to drive the country in a socialist direction.” They also believe that he is the head of a cabal, that he seems to be a politician who “came from nowhere,” and that he is “propelled by some secret forces.”

The focus groups revealed this belief to be held by “two out of every three self identified Republicans.”

In the 2010 election, a high conservative turnout gave the Republican Party control of the House of Representatives and at state levels the power to aggressively gerrymander congressional districts that enabled Republicans to retain control of the House in 2012 despite losing the national popular vote by about 1½ million ballots.

The 2010 election also infused the House Republican caucus with many radical right-wing conservatives whose districts often were made politically safer by redistricting in 2012. These radical politicians and many of their constituents shunned the sort of compromise that is, or should be, at the heart of democracy.

For the radicals, principle was more important than compromise. That attitude led to the recent political confrontation with its shutdown of the federal government and the near default on the public debt.

Within days of the shutdown, moderate Republicans began deserting the radical conservatives and expressed their willingness to end demands for such things as the defunding of federally subsidized health care, popularly known as “Obamacare,” the elimination of the government deficit, and a radical reduction in government programs and regulatory power.

However, it was only when House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, finally allowed a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives that these moderate House Republicans could join their Senate colleagues on a bipartisan resolution which restored the flow of funds that reopened the government and saved the nation from default. In so doing, however, the moderates split the Republican Party in two.

Victory Denied
What the moderate Republicans did was deny the radical conservatives their “victory” for that was what a shutdown of the federal government and a default on the debt represented to the conservatives. Ideologically, the goal of these radicals is to reduce government’s role in society to a minimum. They had hoped that shutting down the entire federal operation would position them for negotiating its eventual minimization.

Second, the campaign to reduce federal taxes to a minimum through the creation of a bare-bones balanced budget was to be aided by their ability to push the Treasury Department to the brink of default. All the hard-Right Republicans had to do was sustain these two tactics long enough to make the Democrats concede. But that was what the extreme conservatives could not do, thanks in good part to the desertion of the more moderate Republicans.

But the battle is not over. The resolution, supported by the moderate Republicans, keeps the federal government open through Jan. 15, 2014, and allows sufficient funding of the debt through February 2014. So we may well face a second round of disruptive confrontation in a few more months.

In the long run, however, things do not look good for the Republican Party. Many radical conservatives have come to see their moderate compatriots as worse than any liberal Democrat. They see them as traitors to principle — as politicians who ran scared in the face of Obama’s “socialist” agenda. Under these circumstances, most of the party’s energies might well be taken up with self-destructive infighting.

The Republican Party now runs the risk of shrinking down to its radical base while its moderates are defeated in primaries, flee to the Democratic Party, or stake out positions as independents. Democratic voters may now be motivated by the recent spectacle of disruption to turn out in higher numbers to win back the House from the Republicans. If that happens, the Republican Party will be hard put to stay alive as a single entity.

Ideology is a form of debilitating shortsightedness. It replaces reality with an idealized version that usually has too little to do with the real world to be workable. The economic aspect of radical conservative ideology is fatally anachronistic.

Earlier, in the Nineteenth Century, it led to devastating business cycles of boom and bust and left much of the population without basic services. The Great Depression should have been its death knell.

As to the size of government and range of its activities, we must keep in mind that there are nearly 317 million people in the United States. Going back to a
pre-Great Depression government much less one sized for Eighteenth Century needs would undermine social stability by withdrawing all the protections that keep destitution at bay and unleashing all the prejudices that current federal law discourages.

Ignore these facts and eventually you will have real revolution on your hands. The radical conservatives are stubbornly blind to these problems because this reality calls into doubt their “principles.”

All such shortsighted ideologies, be they of the Right or the Left, have proven unrealistic and so have failed. Unfortunately, they have wreaked havoc in the meantime. We have only seen a shadow of the potential for damage of the present ideological challenge. Let’s hope we can avoid its full force.

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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**A Fascist Revival Stirs in Spain**

**Exclusive:** The economic pain from the Wall Street crash of 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession has fueled the right-wing Tea Party movement in the United States and a revival of fascism in parts of Europe, including hard-hit Spain where some leaders are promoting the brutal Franco era, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

Last week, a mayor of a Madrid suburb threatened through his Twitter account to send some “skinheads” to target opposition political leaders. The mayor, a member of the ruling conservative Popular Party, later said he was just joking and no “skinheads” actually showed up to rough up the mayor’s opponents.

In Galicia, an area in Spain’s northwest, the mayor of another town under Popular Party rule proudly showcases in his office a picture of fascist dictator Francisco Franco. The mayor also plays the fascist anthem to anyone who will listen. Yet, he has faced no official reprimand. (Last week, a small bomb believed set by anarchists damaged one of his municipal buildings.)

And earlier this month, a small town near Madrid, also governed by the Popular Party (or PP), allowed a fascist group to put up a stand in a public school
exhibiting Franco-era and Nazi memorabilia. Officials later apologized and said that they weren’t aware of the stand.

Though anecdotal, these incidents fit with a rising public nostalgia for the Franco era in Spain and are symptomatic of a broader resurgence of extreme right-wing ideology in Europe and globally. Renewed sympathy for fascism in Spain also stirs troubling memories because the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s was an early victory for European fascism. Spain also was the last European state to cast off fascism in 1975.

Another point of concern is that nationalist, populist and fascist movements have historically found fertile ground during times of economic pain, like that felt across much of the world since the Wall Street crash of 2008. In reacting to the financial crisis and in grappling with the public’s anger over lost jobs and lost benefits mainstream democratic parties have seen their legitimacy questioned and their political support drained.

In Spain and to a lesser extent in some other European countries the immediate danger is not so much from a handful of incipient reactionary movements, but rather from the underlying official permissiveness from more mainstream conservative parties, like the Popular Party, bordering on patronage.

Some elected Popular Party officials and party militants are openly making the Nazi salute, proudly displaying fascist flags and other memorabilia, and posting pro-Franco messages on social media sites.

Rewriting History

And this trend is not limited to the party’s lower-level officials and the rank-and-file. As part of this effort to make fascism more palatable, the Popular Party is institutionally trying to rewrite history, blaming the civil war that started in 1936 on the defeated republican side. At least half a million people died in the war in which Franco received vital support from Adolf Hitler of Germany and Benito Mussolini of Italy. More than a million fled in the aftermath to escape death squads.

Yet, some Popular Party officials have said and posted on social networking sites that those killed by Franco’s forces deserved it. The party’s second most powerful legislator in parliament has equated Franco’s crimes to those of the democratically elected republican government that Franco’s fascist regime defeated. The same legislator also has minimized the risk from today’s rising fascist tide.

Amid the Popular Party’s recent political success, with its latest high-water mark the gaining of an absolute majority in parliament, many of the party’s
stalwarts have reminisced about the Franco era as a prosperous time, though it wasn’t. By the time Franco died in 1975, Spain had become an economic backwater in Europe. In 1986, when Spain entered the European Community (now the European Union), it was one of the poorest members, requiring substantial help to raise its living standards to what was normal in other western European states.

But the severe economic recession that spread across the world after the Wall Street crash and the EU’s austerity-oriented policies imposed in response hit Spain especially hard with the country’s unemployment rate soaring to around 27 percent. The loss of jobs and the failure of the democratic political structure to devise an adequate response created an opening for the rightists to revive nationalistic and other traditional cultural messages that had underpinned Franco’s politics.

Though the Popular Party is generally considered conservative not extreme right it absorbed the pro-Franco fascist “base” after that movement lost its political representation in parliament in 1982, seven years after Franco died. That extreme right now amounts to about 10 percent of the Popular Party’s constituency, according to some studies.

The numbers of far-right members are high enough so that the Popular Party is politically unwilling to chastise fascist sympathies and thus alienate a significant portion of its support. But the party is making a dangerous bet that the pro-Franco faction will not gain effective control of the Popular Party and thus fully hoist the banner of fascism again.

Last week, along the lines of that risky appeasement, Populist Party legislators voted down for a second time a motion backed by all opposition parties calling on the government to declare fascism, Franquism and Nazism as ideologies “inciting violence and hate.”

The proposal was in line with the policies of most European countries that since the devastation of World War II and the genocide against Jews and other minorities have forbidden sympathetic displays of fascism. But Popular Party legislators said inclusion of such restrictions in an overhaul of the penal code was unnecessary.

**Nationalist Tendencies**

On their own, extreme-right parties in Spain have so far been insignificant, although five groups including violent neo-Nazi cells and a political party that the Supreme Court is considering banning in July formed a platform called “Spain on the March.” Its leaders have warned they will resort to violent acts if required to preserve Spain’s territorial unity, which they feel is threatened
especially by regional independence aspirations.

Secessionist plans from Catalonia, Spain’s economic motor, have served to unite nationalist forces and radical fascist groups, but the most forceful opposition to Catalanian separation is coming from the right wing of the Popular Party, led by former Prime Minister Jose MarÃ­a Aznar.

Last month, a dozen radicals of the new coalition forced their way into a library where Catalonians were commemorating their national day, injuring several people, including legislators, and tearing down Catalanian symbols. Police arrested them in the aftermath, but Catalonians have suggested authorities did little to protect the commemoration.

Also, in September, several rightist groups formed a new coalition to try to gain political representation ahead of European elections.

Police estimate there are about 10,000 Spaniards involved in violent extreme-right groups. But the concern is not so much over these very small violent groups. These are mostly contained, experts agree. The bigger worry is that Franco’s political heirs retain significant influence within the ruling Popular Party and amid the euro crisis they could gain greater political clout.

For condoning fascist sympathies among Popular Party followers, the government has been criticized by the opposition, regional governments and human rights groups. However, although Spain stands out in Europe for these public pro-fascist expressions, the extreme right is making gains across much of Europe.

Perhaps the biggest game-changer is the renaissance of the French National Front party, once a pariah. Its leader, Marie Le Pen, won 18 percent of the votes in the first round of presidential elections in 2012 and her party is leading the polls for 2014 elections to the European Parliament.

In Greece, the leaders and legislators of the openly neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party will soon face court action for their role in promoting hate crimes, but the fact remains that the party won 7 percent of the national vote in 2012, and official efforts to shut it down could only embolden its followers.

This past week, Norway’s extreme right Progress Party was invited to join the government for the first time after making electoral gains. In Austria, extreme-right parties retain strong parliamentary representation, as do their equivalents in the Netherlands, Poland, Italy and Bulgaria.

Though there is little official patronage for this right-wing resurgence across Europe unlike what the Popular Party is doing in Spain the electoral prowess of these European right-wing movements gives them increased negotiating power and
even some ruling authority.

In Spain, the chief concern is that an increasingly desperate public will be attracted to the historical glow that is being created around a mythical era of successful fascism under Franco.

“It’s true that this is not Greece or France, where the extreme right has become a political power,” Félix Ortega, a sociology professor and expert in public opinion in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, told me recently. “But you never know, especially if it seems that the PP tolerates it.”

Andrés Cala is an award-winning Colombian journalist, columnist and analyst specializing in geopolitics and energy. He is the lead author of America’s Blind Spot: Chávez, Energy, and US Security.