

America's War-Weary Public

A new wave of neocon opinion is pounding President Obama for failing to keep troops in Iraq and resisting wars in Syria and Iran claiming U.S. prestige and power are in decline but these bellicose appeals are, for once, getting little traction with a war-weary public, as Lawrence S. Wittner observes.

By Lawrence S. Wittner

When it comes to war, the American public is remarkably fickle. The responses of Americans to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars provide telling examples.

In 2003, according to opinion polls, 72 percent of Americans thought going to war in Iraq was the right decision. By early 2013, support for that decision had declined to 41 percent. Similarly, in October 2001, when U.S. military action began in Afghanistan, it was backed by 90 percent of the American public. By December 2013, public approval of the Afghanistan war had dropped to only 17 percent.

In fact, this collapse of public support for once-popular wars is a long-term phenomenon. Although World War I preceded public opinion polling, observers reported considerable enthusiasm for U.S. entry into that conflict in April 1917. But, after the war, the enthusiasm melted away. In 1937, when pollsters asked Americans whether the United States should participate in another war like the World War, 95 percent of the respondents said "No."

And so it went. When President Truman dispatched U.S. troops to Korea in June 1950, 78 percent of Americans polled expressed their approval. By February 1952, according to polls, 50 percent of Americans believed that U.S. entry into the Korean War had been a mistake.

The same phenomenon occurred in connection with the Vietnam War. In August 1965, when Americans were asked if the U.S. government had made "a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam," 61 percent of them said "No." But by August 1968, support for the war had fallen to 35 percent, and by May 1971 it had dropped to 28 percent.

Of all America's wars over the past century, only World War II has retained mass public approval. And this was a very unusual war one involving a devastating military attack upon American soil, fiendish foes determined to conquer and enslave the world, and a clear-cut, total victory.

In almost all cases, though, Americans turned against wars they once supported. How should one explain this pattern of disillusionment? The major

reason appears to be the immense cost of war – in lives and resources.

During the Korean and Vietnam wars, as the body bags and crippled veterans began coming back to the United States in large numbers, public support for the wars dwindled considerably. Although the Afghanistan and Iraq wars produced fewer American casualties, the economic costs have been immense. Two recent scholarly studies have estimated that these two wars will ultimately cost American taxpayers from \$4 trillion to \$6 trillion.

As a result, most of the U.S. government's spending no longer goes for education, health care, parks, and infrastructure, but to cover the costs of war. It is hardly surprising that many Americans have turned sour on these conflicts. But if the heavy burden of wars has disillusioned many Americans, why are they so easily suckered into supporting new ones?

A key reason seems to be that that powerful, opinion-molding institutions the mass communications media, government, political parties, and even education are controlled, more or less, by what President Dwight Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex." And, at the outset of a conflict, these institutions are usually capable of getting flags waving, bands playing, and crowds cheering for war.

But it is also true that much of the American public is very gullible and, at least initially, quite ready to rally 'round the flag. Certainly, many Americans are very nationalistic and resonate to super-patriotic appeals. A mainstay of U.S. political rhetoric is the sacrosanct claim that America is "the greatest nation in the world" a very useful motivator of U.S. military action against other countries. And this heady brew is topped off with considerable reverence for guns and U.S. soldiers. ("Let's hear the applause for Our Heroes!")

Of course, there is also an important American peace constituency, which has formed long-term peace organizations, including Peace Action, Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and other antiwar groups. This peace constituency, often driven by moral and political ideals, provides the key force behind the opposition to U.S. wars in their early stages.

But it is counterbalanced by staunch military enthusiasts, ready to applaud wars to the last surviving American. The shifting force in U.S. public opinion is the large number of people who rally 'round the flag at the beginning of a war and, then, gradually, become fed up with the conflict. And so a cyclical process ensues.

Benjamin Franklin recognized it as early as the eighteenth century, when he

penned a short poem for *A Pocket Almanack For the Year 1744*: War begets Poverty, Poverty Peace; Peace makes Riches flow, (Fate ne'er doth cease.) Riches produce Pride, Pride is War's Ground; War begets Poverty &c. The World goes round.

There would certainly be less disillusionment, as well as a great savings in lives and resources, if more Americans recognized the terrible costs of war *before* they rushed to embrace it. But a clearer understanding of war and its consequences will probably be necessary to convince Americans to break out of the cycle in which they seem trapped.

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US Foreign Policy – If Obama Had Lost

Some progressives see little difference between the foreign policies of a President Obama and a President McCain or Romney or Hillary Clinton. But those shades of gray can mean invading Syria or bombing Iran or continuing the occupation of Iraq or not, as Adil E. Shamoo notes.

By Adil E. Shamoo

President Barack Obama's foreign policy over the past six years has come under attack from progressives and conservatives alike. From the progressive point of view, there is much to criticize: the killing of civilians by drones, excessive surveillance here and abroad in the name of national security, supporting corrupt regimes when it suits. For this and more, I have opposed Mr. Obama's foreign policy.

But, in the early days of the new year, it might be good to take a moment to recognize that however disappointing President Obama's policies may be, it could have been a lot worse if any of his key opponents, Republican or Democrat, were sitting in the White House today.

If a Republican were president, say Sen. John McCain, who lost to Obama in 2008, or Mitt Romney, who failed to unseat him in 2012, he would have found a way to keep as many as 30,000 American combat troops in Iraq, making Iraq a violent client state rather than the distant disaster it is today. Troops would continue coming home in coffins, and Iraq would feel the wrath of continued air strikes and raids.

If Hillary Clinton had won the primary in 2008 and became president, she would have rallied to keep combat troops in Iraq, too, perhaps only half as many as President McCain. But backlash from continued occupation, no matter the numbers, would be persistent and severe.

If a Republican or Ms. Clinton were president, American troops would still be in Afghanistan, but a higher number of them than the current 50,000 troops there, with slightly reduced numbers for decades to come. Significant numbers of American troops would have continued to suffer casualties monthly.

Meanwhile, the Syrian crisis may or may not have been averted under a different president. But if a Republican were in the White House, American troops would likely be in Syria right now and President Bashar Assad and his goons toppled from power. This would have pleased many Americans, including some liberals who see Syria as a humanitarian disaster in which intervention cannot be avoided.

Yet like Iraq and Afghanistan, there would be heavy American casualties, with the Syrian death toll in the tens of thousands. The fighting would have spilled into Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, far more than even today. Possibly the war would have also engulfed Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. Iran might become a target of a sustained bombing and possibly a military invasion, pleasing the war hawks in Congress, Israel and American friends in the Gulf, all whom have long pushed for intervention there.

On the other hand, if Hillary Clinton were president, she would have, at a minimum, established a no-fly zone over Syrian air-space and likely dragged the U.S. into a land war in the region, with similar outcomes just described under a Republican administration.

If a Republican were in power during the Egyptian revolution in 2011, he might have supported the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, but he would've done everything he could to prevent the election of any new president hailing from the Muslim Brotherhood. And if Mohamed Morsi had won anyway, the American president would have instituted policies to undermine him.

In retrospect, this policy would have pleased many Americans, and certainly the Egyptian military, too. In fact, the outcome would not be dissimilar to what is happening in Egypt today. But with flagrant Republican meddling, the U.S. would be blamed more directly for the political crisis there, fomenting more terrorism and an increase in anti-Americanism overall.

In short, the Middle East and Afghanistan would be hotbeds of wars and hostilities if the outcome of the 2008 or 2012 elections had been any different. In that context, progressives should take a deep breath and appreciate President

Obama for avoiding the conflicts his opponents would have blundered straight into, or in the case of Iraq, continued to fight.

It is important to remember this discussion when Hillary Clinton runs for president in 2016.

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Robert Gates's Narcissistic 'Duty'

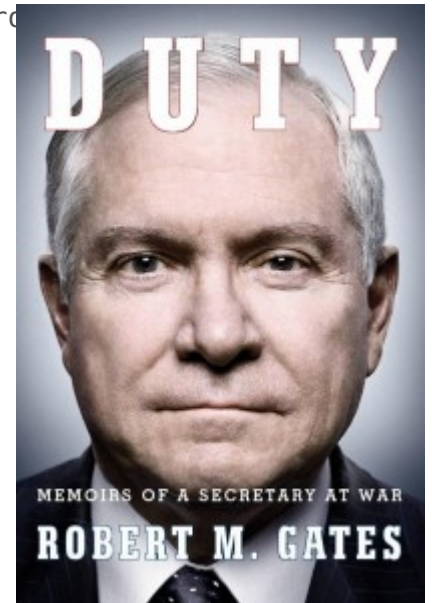
The Inside-the-Beltway acclaim bestowed on Robert Gates is perhaps the clearest evidence of the failure of Washington's media/political elite to recognize reality and impose accountability on incompetent or corrupt government officials, a point addressed by ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman.

By Melvin A. Goodman

Unlike the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which received room service on the delivery of *Duty*, the controversial memoir of former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, I will have to wait for Amazon to deliver my copy next week.

In the meantime, since I have known Bob Gates for nearly 50 years, working with him for more than a decade; working for him for five years; and testifying against him before the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1991, I believe that I have some warnings about the author as well as the leading lights of the mainstream media, such as David Brooks of the *Times* and Walter Pincus of the *Post*, who believe that Gates made major contributions to the national security

policy of the United States. Nothing could be further from



There are several things that need to be understood regarding Gates's career at the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense. First of all, Gates has been a sycophant in all of his leadership positions, catering to the policy interests of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft at the NSC; William Casey at the CIA; and the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon.

Gates catered to the right-wing ideology of Bill Casey in the 1980s, playing a major role in the politicization of intelligence and dangerous crossing the line of policy advocacy in private memoranda to the CIA director. For the most part, Gates has been a windsock when it came to policy decisions and typically supported his masters.

Second, Gates has never demonstrated the integrity that his important positions have demanded. As a result, when he was nominated by President Ronald Reagan in 1987 to be CIA director, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren, D-Oklahoma, told him that the committee did not believe his denials of knowledge of Iran-Contra.

Before Gates removed his name from the nomination process, there was considerable laughter in the hearing room when Gates referred to Casey as a model CIA director and stated that he would have resigned from the CIA if had known about the "off-the-shelf" capability to run the Iran-Contra operation out of the NSC.

Gates was nominated a second time by President George H.W. Bush in 1991 and attracted more negative votes from the Senate (31) than all directors of central intelligence in the history of the CIA. I testified against his confirmation at that time (and I lobbied against his appointment as Secretary of Defense in 2006

to replace Donald Rumsfeld).

The day after the Senate Intelligence Committee approved Gates's appointment to run the CIA in 1991, the *Post's* legendary cartoonist, Herblock, pictured the CIA headquarters building with a big banner proclaiming, "Now under old management."

Regarding Gates's selection in 2006 to head the Defense Department, I encountered many key Senate staffers who opposed his appointment but believed that it was important to abort the stewardship of Rumsfeld. At that time, I labeled Gates the "morning after" pill.

Third, it is astounding that Gates, who had been a senior CIA Kremlinologist, could be so wrong about the central issues of his day and yet make it to the top of the intelligence ladder.

For example, in the late 1980s, there were these key questions facing CIA analysts on the Soviet Union: Who was Gorbachev? Was he serious? Would he make a difference? Was he serious about detente and arms control?

As late as 1989, Gates told various congressional committees that a "long, competitive struggle with the Soviet Union still lies before us" and that the "dictatorship of the Communist Party remains untouched and untouchable."

In many ways, the most stunning aspect of Gates's national security stewardship was his reappointment at the Defense Department by President Barack Obama in 2009. Indeed, the appointment of Hillary Clinton and the reappointment of Bob Gates were rather cynical gestures, naming Clinton to keep the Clinton Foundation (Bill and Hillary) inside the White House tent pissing out instead of outside the tent pissing in.

Gates was left in place so that the President could signal to the uniformed military that there would be no significant changes at the Pentagon. Gates's Cold War ideology (which caused him to miss the end of the Cold War) and his politicization of intelligence were completely forgotten.

By the time that Gates's decided to retire in 2011, President Obama was no longer following the Secretary of Defense's advice on Afghanistan; the raid against Osama bin Laden; the handling of the insubordination of General Stanley McChrystal; and Gates's heel-dragging on ending the cynical policy of "don't ask, don't tell."

Gates decided to retire because he would not support a smaller military that would do fewer things and go to fewer places, but that is exactly what the President had finally endorsed.

President Obama would have saved himself a great deal of aggravation if he had consulted with former Secretaries of State George Shultz and James Baker, whose memoirs record their difficulties with the efforts of Gates to weaken their policies and their diplomacy.

Shultz charged Gates with “manipulating” him, and reminded Gates that his CIA was “usually wrong” about Moscow. Gates was wrong about the biggest intelligence issues of the Cold War and he made sure that the CIA was wrong as well.

I can hardly wait for Amazon to deliver my copy of the memoir.

[For more on Gates’s curious history, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Robert Gates Double-Crosses Obama.”](#)]

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