The Money Behind the Gun Madness

Since the American Right succeeded in reframing the Framers’ “well-regulated militia” context for the Second Amendment, gun madness punctuated by frequent mass slaughters has become the U.S. nightmare. But the real motivation is money, says Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

This is the way it goes, because this is the way it always goes. First, another horrific spree of violence and mass murder as we saw just last week in Santa Barbara, California, fueled by irrational fury, much of it perpetrated with guns obtained legally in the hands of someone who should never have been allowed one.

Then there’s mourning, the makeshift memorials of flowers and stuffed animals, candlelit processions and vigils, funerals. The families and friends cry out in despair and condemn a society that permits such things. They attack the National Rifle Association for preaching a libertine philosophy of unregulated firearms.

This time, most prominent was Richard Martinez, grief-stricken father of victim Chris Martinez. “Why did Chris die?” he asked. “Chris died because of craven, irresponsible politicians and the NRA. They talk about gun rights, what about Chris’ right to live?”

The NRA observes radio silence for a few days, out of respect for the dead, they’ll say, but in reality just keeping a low profile until the coast is clear and they can reemerge with statements from Wayne LaPierre and the like saying that they’re shocked, just shocked by this tragedy but don’t you dare blame it on guns. We might need tighter mental health guidelines but keep away from my right to own my personal weapons of mass destruction and carry them wherever I want.

Noise and promises will be made, some legislation will be introduced and, at the state level at least, maybe even passed. (Since Santa Barbara, a bill is now in the California legislature that would allow restraining orders to keep “people with a potential propensity for violence from buying or owning a gun.” Yet The New York Times reported that while in the year after the Sandy Hook/Newtown killings almost every state passed at least one new gun law, “Nearly two thirds of the new laws ease restrictions and expand the rights of gun owners.”)

And forget about Congress. Although the House did approve some more cash for the FBI’s National Instant Criminal Background Check System this week, there are no changes in the rules or regulations; any attempt is squelched by the gun lobby.
So nothing much happens. Until the next time there’s a killing spree and the maddening cycle begins all over again. It’s like beating our heads against a wall over and over because it feels so good when we stop. Only it never stops. Because we keep letting ourselves be bully into submission by loudmouths with guns.

As if on cue, here’s Joe “The Plumber” Wurzelbacher of election ’08 fame: “I am sorry you lost your child,” he wrote to the parents of the Santa Barbara dead. “I myself have a son and daughter and the one thing I never want to go through, is what you are going through now. But: As harsh as this sounds, your dead kids don’t trump my Constitutional rights.”

Yes, if brave Joe the Plumber had been there last Friday night, he would have shot it out with Elliot Rodger in Santa Barbara, or, more likely, offered to unclog his sink.

And check this out, just a couple of days before the Santa Barbara murders, Chris Cox, the NRA’s chief lobbyist, went after the pro-gun control group Doctors for America. He wrote, “While doctors know medicine, as a group they don’t have any specialized knowledge of firearms or firearm policy.”

This is rich. First, any doctor who has ever spent any time in an ER and tried to help a gunshot victim who’s bleeding and near death, could be said to have a certain “specialized knowledge of firearms.” Second, the NRA has done its damnedest to prevent doctors and scientists from getting hold of the research necessary to evaluate just how much harm guns are doing.

As Lois Beckett reported in April for the independent, investigative news agency ProPublica, “For nearly 20 years, Congress has pushed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to steer clear of firearms violence research. As gun violence spiked in the early 1990s, the CDC ramped up its funding of firearms violence research. Then, in 1996, it backed off under pressure from Congress and the National Rifle Association. Funding for firearms injury prevention activities dropped from more than $2.7 million in 1995 to barely $100,000 by 2012, according to CDC figures.”

As for FY 2014: $0.

Yes, the Justice Department spent $2 million last year and is offering $1.5 million for gun violence research this year. And the National Institutes of Health have put out a call for new research, although it’s still uncertain how much money is involved. But for the NRA to oppose such work, dismissing it as “propaganda” and describing increased funding as “unethical,” while at the same time saying doctors don’t know enough to judge, is reminiscent of the proverbial
kids who murder their parents and then beg for leniency because they’re orphans.

Cox and his associates say the ultimate goal of gun control advocates is “civilian disarmament.” Please. We’ve said it over and over: Go ahead and keep your rifles for hunting and your handguns for target practice and home security, even though, as the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence repeatedly reports, “A gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used to kill or injure in a domestic homicide, suicide, or unintentional shooting than to be used in self-defense.”

Just explain why you have a need to possess an arsenal similar to that of an emerging nation-state, and give me a good reason that ultimately doesn’t have to do with insecurity about your manhood.

The NRA, which has the nerve to call itself “America’s longest-standing civil rights organization,” says it’s about freedom. Wrong. The bottom line is that it really is the bottom line: money. The NRA and its gun lobby pals keep the market jumping.

So firearms and ammunition manufacturers, including Remington Outdoor, Smith & Wesson, Sturm Rugar, and Olin (Winchester Ammunition), give the NRA millions. Depending on the company, this includes direct contributions, percentages of sales and sometimes even free NRA memberships with a purchase.

According to a report early last year by Walter Hickey in Business Insider, “Since 2005, the gun industry and its corporate allies have given between $20 million and $52.6 million to it through the NRA Ring of Freedom sponsor program. The NRA also made $20.9 million, about 10 percent of its revenue, from selling advertising to industry companies marketing products in its many publications in 2010, according to the IRS Form 990.”

Charlie Pierce, prodigious political blogger over at Esquire magazine put it well: “This is a country at war with itself for profit. This is a country at war with itself because its ruling elite is too cowed, or too well-bribed, or too cowardly to recognize that there are people who are getting rich arming both sides, because the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun, so you make sure that it’s easy for the bad guys to get guns in order to make millions selling the guns to the good guys.”

You’ve no doubt heard that this doesn’t happen in countries like Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada where the gun rules are strict and lives are saved. But here the cycle of death, denial, resistance and madness goes on. Leave it to The Onion, the satirical news site, to speak the truth. Its headline, after the heartbreak in Santa Barbara:
“‘No Way to Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens.”

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Obama’s Collapsing Syria Policy

Syria has long been on the neocons’ “regime change” list, so they eagerly supported a violent insurgency to topple the Assad regime even as it veered into extremism. Now, that policy is collapsing but President Obama won’t admit the failure, write Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

For over three years, the United States has sought to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by supporting an Al Qaeda-infused opposition that Washington either knew or should have known would fail. Yet, in his commencement address at West Point on Wednesday, President Obama promised the American people and the rest of the world more of the same.

Obama’s vague pledge to “ramp up” support for selected oppositionists is a craven sop to those claiming that U.S. backing for the opposition so far, nonlethal aid, training opposition fighters, coordination with other countries openly providing lethal aid, and high-level political backing (including three years of public demands from Obama that Assad “must go”), has been inadequate, and that Assad could be removed if only America would do more. This claim should be decisively rejected as a basis for policy-making, rather than disingenuously humored, for it is dangerously detached from reality.

From the start of the conflict, it has been clear that the constituencies supporting Assad and his government, including not just Christians and non-Sunni Muslims but also non-Islamist Sunnis, add up to well over half of Syrian society.

These constituencies believe (for compelling historical reasons) that the alternative to Assad’s regime will not be anything approximating a secular, liberal democracy; it will be some version of Sunni Islamist rule. As a result, since the start of the conflict in March 2011, polling data, participation in the February 2012 referendum on a new constitution, participation in May 2012
parliamentary elections, and other evidence have consistently shown a majority of Syrians continuing to back Assad.

Conversely, there is no polling or other evidence suggesting that anywhere close to a majority of Syrians wants Assad replaced by some part of the opposition. Indeed, the opposition’s popularity appears to be declining as oppositionists become ever more deeply divided and ever more dominated inside Syria by Al Qaeda-like jihadis. Just last year, NATO estimated that popular support for the opposition may have shrunk to as low as 10 percent of the Syrian public.

These readily observable realities notwithstanding, the Obama administration, most of America’s political class, and the mainstream media all jumped on, and have stayed with, a fantastical narrative about cadres of Syrian democrats ready, if just given the tools, to take down a brutal dictator lacking any vestige of legitimacy.

The administration, for its part, embraced this narrative largely because it desperately wanted to undermine Iran’s regional position by destabilizing Assad and his government.

In 2012, Obama compounded his fatally flawed choice by setting his infamous “redline” regarding chemical-weapons use in Syria, ignoring the potentially catastrophic risk that this would incentivize rebels to launch “false flag” chemical attacks, precisely to elicit U.S. strikes against the Syrian military.

The consequences of crafting policy on the basis of such a surreal distortion of political reality in Syria and of strategic reality across the Middle East have, not surprisingly, been dismal.

Given that the popular base for opposition to Assad is too small to sustain a campaign that might actually bring down his government, it was utterly predictable that external support for armed oppositionists could only translate into death and existential distress for Syrians. Over 150,000 have been killed so far in fighting between opposition and government forces, with millions more displaced. How many more Syrians need to die before Washington rethinks its policy?

Supporting an armed challenge to Assad was also bound to invigorate Al Qaeda and dramatically escalate sectarian violence. Well before March 2011, it was evident that, among Syria’s Sunni Islamist constituencies, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Syrian branch was historically more radical and violent than most Brotherhood elements, was being displaced by more extreme, Al Qaeda-like groups.

External support for anti-Assad forces after March 2011 both accelerated this
trend and reinforced it with an infusion of foreign jihadists at least partially financed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab American allies. The U.S. Intelligence Community estimates that 26,000 “extremists” are now fighting in Syria, more than 7,000 from outside the country.

U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper warns that many of these militants want not just to bring down Assad; they are preparing to attack Western interests, including the American homeland, directly. It is hard to imagine a more dysfunctional outcome for U.S. interests.

Likewise, picking the losing side in Syria’s externally-fueled civil war has further eroded American standing and influence in the Middle East and globally. Most notably, Washington’s Syria policy has contributed substantially to the ongoing polarization of Western relations with Russia and China.

In particular, the Obama administration’s declared determination to oust Assad has prompted much closer Sino-Russian cooperation to thwart what both Moscow and Beijing see as an ongoing campaign to usurp the Middle East’s balance of power by overthrowing regional governments unwilling to subordinate their foreign policies to Washington’s preferences.

This collaboration, in turn, has helped to bring Russia and China into broader geopolitical alignment, deliberately working to turn a postCold War world defined by overwhelming U.S. hegemony into a more genuinely multipolar order, the opposite of what U.S. policy should be trying to achieve.

The Syrian conflict will end in one of two ways. In one scenario, the Assad government continues to extend and consolidate its military gains against opposition forces. Over time, opposition elements make their peace with the government, in piecemeal fashion. However, because of ongoing external support, enough opposition groups are able to keep fighting that significant portions of Syria’s population will continue to face serious humanitarian and security challenges for several more years.

In the alternative scenario, the main external supporters of the opposition (the United States, Britain and France, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states, Turkey) and of the Assad government (Russia, China, Iran) pursue serious diplomacy aimed at helping the government and those opposition elements with some measure of genuine support in Syria reach a political settlement based on power sharing.

The current trajectory of U.S. policy makes the first scenario, with the unnecessary deaths of more Syrians, further revitalization of Al Qaeda, and continued erosion of America’s strategic position, virtually inevitable. The
second scenario happens to be favored by Russia, China, Iran and even the Assad government; it is also, far and away, the morally and strategically preferable scenario as far as America’s real, long-term interests are concerned.

But shifting from the first scenario to the second will require fundamental changes in America’s Syria policy. Above all, U.S. officials need to recognize, and to act as if they recognize, that serious diplomacy means engagement with all relevant parties (even those Washington does not like), with such engagement informed by an accurate understanding of on-the-ground reality (rather than wishful thinking).

For Syria, this means acknowledging that resolving the conflict there will require the United States to come to terms with a Syrian government still headed by President Bashar al-Assad.

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 *Going to Tehran*. [This article previously appeared at The National Interest, click here, or go to http://goingtotehran.com/obama-at-west-point-doubling-down-on-a-failed-syria-policy]

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**Covert US Military Training Goes to Africa**

New U.S. plans for training security forces in four African countries recall similar programs around the world, which often ended in the hand-picked trainees slaughtering civilians or staging military coups, as ex-State Department official William R. Polk recalls.

By William R. Polk

With everyone’s attention focused on the European elections or President Barack Obama’s speech at West Point or the Ukraine, a story by Eric Schmitt in *The New York Times* on Tuesday may not have caught your attention. I believe, however, that it provides an insight into some of the major problems of American foreign policy.
What Mr. Schmitt reports is that the U.S. has set up covert programs to train and equip native teams patterned on their instructors, the U.S. Army Delta Force, in several African countries. The program was advocated by Michael A. Sheehan who formerly was in charge of special operations planning in the Department of Defense and is now, according to Mr. Schmitt, holder of the “distinguished chair at West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center.”

Mr. Schmitt quotes him as saying, “Training indigenous forces to go after threats in their own country is what we need to be doing.” So far allocated to this effort, Mr. Schmitt writes, is $70 million, and the initial efforts will be in Libya, Niger, Mali and Mauritania.

How to do this, according to the senior U.S. officer in Africa, Major General Patrick J. Donahue II, is complex: “You have to make sure of who you’re training. It can’t be the standard, ‘Has the guy been a terrorist or some sort of criminal?’ but also, what are his allegiances? Is he true to the country or is he still bound to his militia?”

So let me comment on these remarks, on the ideas behind the program, its justification and the history of such efforts. I begin with a few bits of history. (Disclosure: I am in the final stages of a book that aims to tell the whole history, but the whole history is of course much too long for this note.)

Without much of the rhetoric of Mr. Sheehan and General Donahue and on a broader scale, we have undertaken similar programs in a number of countries over the last half century. Iran, Turkey, Indonesia, Guatemala, Egypt, Iraq, Thailand, Chad, Angola to name just a few. The results do not add up to a success almost anywhere.

Perhaps the worst (at least for America’s reputation) were Chad where the man we trained, equipped and supported, Hissâ¨ne Habrâ©, is reported to have killed about 40,000 of his fellow citizens. In Indonesia, General Suharto, with our blessing and with the special forces we also had trained and equipped, initially killed about 60,000 and ultimately caused the deaths of perhaps 200,000. In Mexico, the casualties have been smaller, but the graduates of our Special Forces program have become the most powerful drug cartel. They virtually hold the country at ransom.

Even when casualties were not the result, the military forces we helped to create and usually paid for carried out the more subtle mission of destroying public institutions. If our intention is to create stability, the promotion of a powerful military force is often not the way to do it. This is because the result of such emphasis on the military often renders it the only mobile, coherent and centrally directed organization in societies lacking in the
balancing forces of an independent judiciary, reasonably open elections, a
tradition of civil government and a more or less free press.

Our program in pre-1958 Iraq and in pre-1979 Iran certainly played a crucial
role in the extension of authoritarian rule in those countries and in their
violent reactions against us.

General Donahue suggests that we need to distinguish among the native soldiers
we train and empower those who are “true to the country.” But how? We supported
Hissène Habré so long that we must have known every detail of his life. He is
now on trial as war criminal. General Suharto has never been charged (nor have
those Americans who gave him a “green light”) for his brutal invasion of East
Timor. Both probably believed that they met General Donahue’s definition of
patriotism.

And in Mali, our carefully trained officers of the Special Forces answered what
they thought was both patriotic and religious duty by joining the insurgency
against the government we (and we thought they) supported. We have a poor record
of defining other peoples’ patriotism.

And, in the interest of more urgent objectives, we have been willing to support
and fund almost anyone as long as we think he might be of value. General Manuel
Noriega, our man in Panama, went on to spend 22 years in an American prison
after we invaded his country and fought the soldiers we had trained.

Indeed, we have a poor record of even knowing who the people we train are. After
the Turkish army carried out one of its coups in the 1960s, when I was the
member of the Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East, I asked
the appropriate branch of the Defense Department who were the new leaders, all
of whom had been trained in America, often several times during the years. The
answer was that no one knew. Even in army records, they were just Americanized
nicknames.

And, more generally, our sensitivity to the aspirations, hopes and fears of
other people is notoriously crude or totally lacking. Growing out of the Cold
War, we thought of many of them as simply our proxies or our enemies.

Thus, we found Chad not as a place with a certain population but just as a piece
of the Libyan puzzle, and today we think of Mali in the same way. Now we are
talking to training “carefully selected” Syrian insurgents to overthrow Bashar
al-Assad. Do we have any sense of what they will overthrow him for?

Beyond these, what might be considered “tactical” issues are “strategic,” legal
and even moral considerations. I leave aside the legal and moral issues – such
as what justification we have to determine the fate of other peoples – as they
do not seem very persuasive among our leaders.

But just focus on the long-term or even middle-term results of the new policy: the most obvious is that we meddle in and take some responsibility for the politics of an array of countries in which we have little direct interest. And often with the obvious danger of a deeper, more expensive and more painful result. We are close to this commitment in Syria.

Less obvious is that our activities, no matter how carefully differentiated, will be seen to add up to an overall policy of militarism, support of oppressive dictatorships, and opposition to popular forces. They also meld into a policy of opposition to the religion of over a billion people, Islam. And they do so at great expense to our expressed desires to enable people everywhere, including at home, to live healthier, safer and decent lives.

I end with a prediction: in practically every country where Mr. Sheehan’s and General Donahue’s program is employed, it will later be seen to have led to a military coup d’etat.

William R. Polk is a veteran foreign policy consultant, author and professor who taught Middle Eastern studies at Harvard. President John F. Kennedy appointed Polk to the State Department’s Policy Planning Council where he served during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His books include: Violent Politics: Insurgency and Terrorism; Understanding Iraq; Understanding Iran; Personal History: Living in Interesting Times; Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times; and Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change.

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**Congress Bends to Israel’s Iran Demands**

Congressional mischief-making to undermine a deal to restrict Iran’s nuclear program continues, much of it orchestrated by the Israel Lobby which supports the Israeli government’s threats of a military strike against Iran, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Those who want permanent pariahdom for Iran and thus oppose any agreement with the government in Tehran keep looking for ways to use the U.S. Congress to sabotage the deal that has been under negotiation in Vienna and would restrict
Iran’s nuclear program.

A recent previous effort by the saboteurs was a bill that would have violated the preliminary agreement that was reached with Iran last November by imposing still more sanctions on Iran. That effort was beaten back, partly with an explicit veto threat by President Barack Obama.

Even more recently Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, introduced an amendment that would have Congress holding a “vote of disapproval” within days after the negotiators reach agreement.

If something like Corker’s proposal were adopted, the vote of disapproval would be exactly that, but based on the politics of the issue rather than on the merits of the agreement. Such a snap vote would allow little time for weighing the merits of the deal, or for alternatives to the agreement to be considered. It would allow no time for Iran to accumulate a track record of compliance with the full agreement.

The political habits, among members from both parties, that would kick in when voting would be the ones that have been demonstrated time and time again with the parade of previous sanctions legislation. Bashing Iran is seen as good politics, and it is seen as “pro-Israel” (i.e., whatever the current government of Israel wants, as distinct from what is in the larger interests of the state of Israel).

A vote against the agreement would be seen as bashing Iran, even though the agreement would restrict rather than expand what Iran could do with its nuclear program. As with any negotiated agreement, the deal will be a compromise and not perfect and it thus will always be easy to find specific provisions to be grounds for disapproval, without members being held accountable for considering the entire deal against the alternatives.

Congress is a co-equal policy-making branch, and it can and will be involved in resolution of this issue. But in shaping how the legislative branch will be involved one has to consider the political realities, not just procedural formalities. The saboteurs certainly have considered those realities, although they do not openly acknowledge them.

A recent op ed by Eric Edelman, Dennis Ross, and Ray Takeyh does not explicitly endorse the Corker proposal but argues more generally for more congressional involvement, the earlier the better. They would have us believe that the issue at hand is no different from strategic arms control treaties with the USSR or earlier multilateral efforts to remake the international order after World War
II. The writers' history is faulty and tendentious in several respects, but two items in particular stand out.

Edelman et al., in commenting on Richard Nixon's handling of strategic arms control, mention in passing that Nixon may be better known for the opening to China, as well as ending the Vietnam War. They do not mention that the opening to China, which truly was a historic and beneficial achievement, was one of the most closely held foreign policy initiatives ever, with not only Congress but even the State Department cut out of all the preparation.

The political realities on that issue at that time dictated Nixon's secretive approach. The President was beginning a rapprochement with a despised and distrusted revolutionary regime, which had come to power more than two decades earlier and with which there had since been almost no interaction with the United States.

In that regard the China opening is a far closer historical analogy to what is happening today between the United States and Iran than are strategic arms control treaties with the Soviet Union.

In the early 1970s, Nixon was facing not only widespread distrust of the Chinese Communist regime but also narrower sources of resistance. Back then AIPAC had not yet hit its stride and become able to get 70 senators to sign a napkin, and the NRA had not yet experienced the change in leadership that would turn it into a lobby powerful enough to effectively rewrite the Second Amendment, but there was something called the China lobby. That lobby included diehard supporters of the Nationalist regime on Taiwan who resisted any dealing with the mainland regime and continued to resist full diplomatic recognition of Communist China even after Nixon's initiative.

Lobbies wax and wane, but some of the sorts of challenges they pose to presidents undertaking important diplomatic initiatives have stayed pretty much the same.

The op-ed writers also refer to the early Cold War years, when President Harry S. Truman "had to bring along a Republican Party skeptical of international engagement. He cultivated influential Republican lawmakers such as Sen. Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan and paid close attention to their advice and suggestions."

This comment implies a grossly mistaken version of Vandenberg's political biography. He was indeed an isolationist in the interwar years, but Pearl Harbor changed all that. By the time Truman became president Vandenberg considered himself an energetic internationalist. The cooperation between the Truman
administration and the Republican leader of the Foreign Relations Committee was fruitful not because the administration was reaching out to an isolationist but rather because Vandenberg’s inclinations regarding such things as the creation of NATO were already going in the same direction as Truman’s.

They don’t make Arthur Vandenburgs any more. The Vandenberg of the 1940s, the one who cooperated with Truman, would not be welcome in today’s Republican Party. Perhaps the closest thing to a modern-day counterpart is Richard Lugar, who isn’t in Congress anymore, after losing a primary election to a Tea Party candidate a couple of years ago.

In the political reality on Capitol Hill today, any administration outreach regarding Iran immediately runs into two strong, obstinate, and uncooperative tendencies. One is the determination by the rightist government of Israel to do all it can to prevent agreement between the United States and Iran, with everything that determination implies regarding effects on U.S. politics. Some of AIPAC’s napkins have become frayed over the last year or so, but the lobby is still formidable.

The other is the tendency among many Republican members of Congress to oppose whatever Barack Obama proposes, and especially anything that would be considered a signature achievement for the President. If members vote more than three dozen times to repeal a health care law, some of the same members will similarly and reflexively oppose what would be a leading foreign policy achievement by Obama, next to getting out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but members cannot do anything to prevent the commander-in-chief from doing that, just as diehard proponents of the Vietnam War could not prevent Nixon from getting out of that conflict.

The terms of an Iranian nuclear agreement are still under negotiation, but probably the implementation of each side’s obligations will be phased and gradual. It would be sensible, as well as politically realistic, for Congress’s necessary involvement to be phased in gradually as well, and certainly not to take the form of quickie votes. Probably the initial phases of sanctions relief would rely on executive action. Only later, after implementation of the agreement has become a going concern and both sides have had a chance to demonstrate their seriousness about compliance with the agreement, will Congress have to play its role with legislation.

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.)
Finding an End to Endless Wars

For Official Washington’s neocons all wars should go on indefinitely and any timetable for leaving Iraq, Afghanistan or any other country subject to American military assault in recent years represents defeatism. But such open-ended commitments would likely mean endless occupations, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The United States has a hard time ending wars, at least any wars beyond the limited category of those whose size and shape appeal to Americans’ appetite for clear-cut victories over evil-doers. The American involvement in the civil war in Afghanistan, at 12 ½ years and counting, is a prime case.

Our understanding of this war has not been helped by the repeated coupling of it in public discussion with the misadventure in Iraq. How the United States got into each of these wars was vastly different. One involved a manufactured and illegitimate rationale; the other was a legitimate and understandable response to a direct attack on the United States by a terrorist group that at the time was resident in Afghanistan and in alliance with the regime that ruled most of Afghanistan.

The United States could have and should have concluded its mission in Afghanistan once it rousted the group and ousted the regime, which it did in the first few months of its involvement. The Afghanistan War came to resemble the Iraq War only after it became an endless involvement with insurgency and civil war, with an inability to identify an obvious off-ramp.

The United States does not have any significant or direct interest in nation-building in Afghanistan or in the internal social and political arrangements of that country. The Taliban, who became our opponent, have no interest in the United States except insofar as the United States interferes with the Taliban’s ambitions for those social and political arrangements. Even the U.S. counterterrorist interest in Afghanistan is nothing like it was before al-Qaeda was pushed out of its once-comfortable home.

There is nothing unique about Afghanistan as a potential origin of anti-U.S. terrorism, and anyone who has paid attention to the evolution of international terrorism over the past decade realizes that other lands are at least as likely, and probably more likely, to be points of origin in this regard as Afghanistan is.
The United States, having affected events in Afghanistan for so long (actually going back to stoking the insurgency against the Soviets in the 1980s) may have some responsibility under the Pottery Barn rule to extract itself in an orderly rather than a precipitate manner.

President Barack Obama’s announcement of a drawing down of remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan over the next two years, to what will be an ordinary embassy presence by the end of 2016, sounds like it involves an arbitrary deadline that will enable him to say when he leaves office that he got the United States out of its foreign wars. Of course it does. And we should not fret about that.

If we can’t find an obvious off-ramp, the end of a presidential term is as good a ramp to use as any other. Give Mr. Obama’s successor more of a clean foreign policy slate, all the better to concentrate on other matters.

Unsurprisingly, this approach engenders strong criticism from the usual quarters. Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Kelly Ayotte (the last of whom appears to have replaced Joe Lieberman in a trio that never meets a war it doesn’t like) quickly issued a statement that blasts what they call the president’s “monumental mistake.” The three senators assert that the alternative to the President’s decision “was not war without end.” Actually, it was.

The senators say they want a “limited assistance mission to help the Afghan Security Forces preserve momentum on the battlefield and create conditions for a negotiated end to the conflict.” They give us no idea what such conditions would look like or when they would arise.

We may be forgiven in suspecting that the senators have no idea either, or that if they do, the sort of conditions that would permit the kind of negotiated end they would consider acceptable would never occur. It is fantasy to think that we could win a test of wills with the Taliban over who will persevere longer in determining the political make-up of their own home country. There is no reason to think that the next one, two, or 12 years will be any different in that regard from the last 12.

Go ahead and criticize the President for setting an arbitrary deadline that is determined as much by his musing over his political legacy as it is by anything else. He no doubt expected plenty of such criticism. But no one has come up with any other ending for this war.

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.)
How Neocons Constrain Obama’s Message

Exclusive: President Obama said that just because the U.S. military is “the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail” a wise observation but he then confused his foreign policy speech by pandering to neocon narratives on crises in Ukraine and elsewhere, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As American neocons continue to shape the narratives that define the permissible boundaries for U.S. foreign policy thinking, the failure to enforce any meaningful accountability on them for their role in the criminal and disastrous invasion of Iraq has become painfully clear.

In any vibrant democratic system, it would be unthinkable that the neocons and other war hawks who yahooed the United States into Iraq a little more than a decade ago would still be exercising control over how Americans perceive today’s events. Yet, many of the exact same pundits and pols who misled the American people then are still misleading them today.

Thus, we’re stuck reading the Washington Post’s deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl reinforce the myth that the Ukraine crisis was caused by “the aggression of Russian President Vladimir Putin,” when the reality is that it was the United States and the European Union that stirred up the unrest and set the stage for neo-Nazi militias to overthrow elected President Viktor Yanukovych and plunge the country into a nasty little civil war.

Yet, you’re not supposed to know that. Anyone who dares explain the actual narrative of what happened in Ukraine is immediately accused of spreading “Russian propaganda.” The preferred U.S. narrative of white-hat “pro-democracy” protesters victimized by black-hat villain Yanukovych with the help of the even more villainous Vladimir Putin is so much more fun. It lets Americans cheer as ethnic Russians in the east are burned alive by neo-Nazi mobs and mowed down by Ukrainian military aircraft.

Diehl and his boss, editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, are precisely the same neocon propagandists who told Americans in 2002 and early 2003 that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. Hiatt and Diehl didn’t write that as an allegation or a suspicion, but as flat fact. Yet, it turned out to be flatly untrue and hundreds of thousands of people, including nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers, died as a result of the war.
But don’t worry: the careers of Diehl and Hiatt didn’t suffer. They’re still in their same influential jobs a dozen years later, framing how we should understand Syria, Ukraine and the rest of the world.

And, if Hiatt and his editorial board had their way, American troops would still be patrolling Iraq. On Wednesday, the Post’s lead editorial condemned President Barack Obama for not maintaining permanent U.S. military forces in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan and not getting deeper into the Syrian civil war.

“You can’t fault President Obama for inconsistency,” the Post’s editorial sneered. “After winning election in 2008, he reduced the U.S. military presence in Iraq to zero. After helping to topple Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi in 2011, he made sure no U.S. forces would remain. He has steadfastly stayed aloof, except rhetorically, from the conflict in Syria. And on Tuesday he promised to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

“The Afghan decision would be understandable had Mr. Obama’s previous choices proved out. But what’s remarkable is that the results also have been consistent, consistently bad.”

The neocons, including the Post’s editorialists, voice outrage when Obama paints them with a broad brush as obsessed with putting American boots on the ground. But how can one read that editorial and not recognize that what the neocons want is not just temporary U.S. boots on the ground but to have them cemented into these countries as permanent occupiers?

Mr. Overrated

Then, over at the New York Times, you can read the wisdom of Thomas L. Friedman, another star promoter of the Iraq War who infamously kept telling Americans every six months that the grinding war would look better in six months but it never did.

Friedman, who may be the most overrated columnist in American history, is now asserting what he trusts will become the new conventional wisdom on Ukraine, that Putin lost the Ukraine crisis. On Wednesday, Friedman wrote “In the end, it was Putinism versus Obamamism, and I’d like to be the first on my block to declare that the ‘other fellow’, Putin, ‘just blinked.’”

According to Friedman, the Ukraine crisis “may be the first case of post-post-Cold War brinkmanship, pitting the 21st century versus the 19th. It pits a Chinese/Russian worldview that says we can take advantage of 21st-century globalization whenever we want to enrich ourselves, and we can behave like 19th-century powers whenever we want to take a bite out of a neighbor, versus a view that says, no, sorry, the world of the 21st century is not just interconnected
but interdependent and either you play by those rules or you pay a huge price.”

As with Hiatt and Diehl, one has to wonder how Friedman can be so disconnected from his own record as an eager imperialist when it came to U.S. desires for “regime change” in a variety of disliked countries. While it may be true that the United States hasn’t taken bites out of its immediate neighbors recently although there were U.S.-backed coups in Honduras, Haiti and Venezuela in the 21st Century the U.S. government has taken numerous bites out of other countries halfway around the world.

And, as for playing by the “rules,” Friedman’s “exceptional” America sets its own rules. [For more on how this style of propaganda relates to Ukraine, see Consortiumnews.com’s “NYT’s One-Sided Ukraine Narrative.”]

Friedman’s schoolyard taunt about Putin having “blinked” also is at best a superficial rendering of the recent developments in Ukraine and a failure to recognize the long-term harm that Official Washington’s tough-guy-ism over Ukraine has done to genuine U.S. national interests by shoving Russia and China closer together. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Premature US Victory-Dancing on Ukraine.”]

Even newspaper columnists are supposed to connect their writings to reality once in a while. But I guess since the likes of Hiatt, Diehl and Friedman advocated the gross violation of international law that was the Iraq War, got their facts wrong, and paid no career price for doing so, they have little reason to think that they should change their approach now.

During my four-decade-plus career in journalism, I have seen reporters take on tough stories and do so with high professional standards, yet still have their careers ruined because some influential people accused them of some minor misstep, the case of Gary Webb and his Contra-cocaine series being one tragic example. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Warning in Gary Webb’s Death.”]

In contrast, Hiatt, Diehl and Friedman can provide false propaganda to justify an illegal war that gets hundreds of thousands of people killed while squandering about $1 trillion in taxpayers’ money, yet they faced no consequences. So, today, they are still able to frame new trouble spots like Syria, Libya and Ukraine and cramp President Obama’s sense of how far he can go in charting a less violent foreign policy.

Obama’s Timid Speech

Even though Obama did oppose the Iraq invasion last decade, he has been sucked into the same barren rhetoric about American “exceptionalism”; he makes similar hyperbolic denunciations of American “enemies”; and he plays into new false
narratives like those that paved the way to hell in Iraq.

On Wednesday in addressing the graduating class at West Point, Obama had what might be his last real chance to shatter this phony frame of propaganda, but instead he delivered a pedestrian speech that tried to talk tough about crises in Ukraine and Syria as a defense against neocon critics who will predictably accuse him of weakness.

In Obama’s speech, the United States is still “the one indispensable nation,” so “when a typhoon hits the Philippines, or schoolgirls are kidnapped in Nigeria, or masked men occupy a building in Ukraine, it is America that the world looks to for help.” By the way, his reference to the “masked men” occupying a building in Ukraine wasn’t a reference to the masked neo-Nazi militias who seized buildings during the Feb. 22 coup against Yanukovych, but rather a shot at eastern Ukrainians who have resisted the coup.

Again, staying safely within Official Washington’s “group think,” Obama also lamented “Russia’s aggression toward former Soviet states” and said that “unnerves capitals in Europe.” But he expressed no concern for the Russian alarm over NATO enveloping Russia’s western borders. Obama also took a slap at China.

Obama said, “Regional aggression that goes unchecked — whether in southern Ukraine or the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world — will ultimately impact our allies and could draw in our military. We can’t ignore what happens beyond our boundaries.” (Is Obama really suggesting that the United States might go to war with nuclear-armed Russia and China over Ukraine and the South China Sea?)

The President also slid into familiar hyperbole about Russia’s agreement to accept Crimea back into the Russian federation after a post-coup referendum there found overwhelming support among Crimean voters to break away from the failed Ukrainian state. Instead of noting that popular will and the reality that Russian troops were already in Crimea as part of a basing agreement for Sevastopol Obama conjured up images of an old-style invasion.

“In Ukraine, Russia’s recent actions recall the days when Soviet tanks rolled into Eastern Europe,” Obama said, claiming that this latest “aggression” was countered with U.S. public diplomacy. “This mobilization of world opinion and international institutions served as a counterweight to Russian propaganda and Russian troops on the border and armed militias in ski masks,” he said.

Yet, while using this tough-guy rhetoric, Obama did reject endless warfare and endless occupations, saying:

“Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our
restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences – without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required.

“Tough talk often draws headlines, but war rarely conforms to slogans. As General [Dwight] Eisenhower, someone with hard-earned knowledge on this subject, said at this ceremony in 1947: ‘War is mankind’s most tragic and stupid folly; to seek or advise its deliberate provocation is a black crime against all men.’”

And, in possibly the speech’s best line, Obama added: “Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”

Yet, despite such reasonable observations, Obama kept sliding back into super-patriotic rhetoric, including assertions that sounded at best hypocritical if not ludicrous:

“I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law; it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions. And that’s why I will continue to push to close Gitmo – because American values and legal traditions do not permit the indefinite detention of people beyond our borders. That’s why we’re putting in place new restrictions on how America collects and uses intelligence – because we will have fewer partners and be less effective if a perception takes hold that we’re conducting surveillance against ordinary citizens.

“America does not simply stand for stability or the absence of conflict, no matter what the cost. We stand for the more lasting peace that can only come through opportunity and freedom for people everywhere.”

The JFK Contrast

Many eyes must have been rolling while listening to Obama attempt to disassociate himself from scandalous behavior that had occurred during his five-plus years as president. And his stab at soaring rhetoric fell far short of the mark set by President John F. Kennedy when he gave possibly his greatest speech at American University on June 10, 1963, declaring:

“What kind of peace do I mean and what kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, and the kind that enables men and nations to grow, and to hope, and build a better life for their children, not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace
in our time but peace in all time.”

Kennedy recognized that his appeal for this serious pursuit of peace would be dismissed by the cynics and the warmongers as unrealistic and even dangerous. The Cold War was near its peak when Kennedy spoke. But he was determined to change the frame of the foreign policy debate, away from the endless bravado of militarism:

“I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary, rational end of rational men. I realize the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war, and frequently the words of the pursuers fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task.

“Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings.”

And then, in arguably the most important words that he ever spoke, Kennedy said, “For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.”

In his day, Kennedy also faced powerful war hawks who sought to constrain his vision of an international system that recognized the legitimate interests of other nations and their peoples. But Kennedy still deployed his rhetoric bravely to smash the narrow framework of Cold War reductionism.

By contrast, Obama accepted the tiny frame as shaped by Official Washington’s still powerful neocons; he simply tried to maneuver for a little more elbow room.

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.
Premature US Victory-Dancing on Ukraine

Exclusive: The post-coup election of a pro-Western politician as president of Ukraine and the escalating slaughter of lightly armed anti-coup rebels in the east have created a celebratory mood in Official Washington, but the victory dance may be premature, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Washington’s role in the coup d’etat in Kiev on Feb. 22 has brought the U.S. a Pyrrhic victory, with the West claiming control of Ukraine albeit with a shaky grip that still requires the crushing of anti-coup rebels in the east. But the high-fiving may be short-lived once the full consequences of the putsch become clear.

What has made the “victory” so hollow is that the U.S.-backed ouster of elected President Viktor Yanukovych presented Russia’s leaders with what they saw as a last-straw-type deceit by the U.S. and its craven satellites in the European Union. Moscow has responded by making a major pivot East to enhance its informal alliance with China and thus strengthen the economic and strategic positions of both countries as a counterweight to Washington and Brussels.

In my view, this is the most important result of this year’s events in Ukraine, that they have served as a catalyst to more meaningful Russia-China rapprochement which has inched forward over the past several decades but now has solidified. The signing on May 21 of a 30-year, $400 billion natural gas deal between Russia and China is not only a “watershed event” as Russian President Vladimir Putin said but carries rich symbolic significance.

The agreement, along with closer geopolitical cooperation between Beijing and Moscow, is of immense significance and reflects a judgment on the part of Russian leaders that the West’s behavior over the past two decades has forced the unavoidable conclusion that for whatever reason U.S. and European leaders cannot be trusted. Rather, they can be expected to press for strategic advantage through “regime change” and other “dark-side” tactics even in areas where Russia holds the high cards.

This Russian-Chinese rapprochement has been a gradual, cautious process somewhat akin to porcupines mating, given the tense and sometimes hostile relations between the two neighbors dating back centuries and flaring up again when the two were rival communist powers.

Yet, overcoming that very bitter past, Russian President Putin a decade ago
finalized an important agreement on very delicate border issues. He also signed an agreement on future joint development of Russian energy reserves. In October 2004, during a visit to Beijing, Putin claimed that relations between the two countries had reached “unparalleled heights.”

But talk is cheap and progress toward a final energy agreement was intermittent until the Ukraine crisis. When Russia supported Crimea’s post-coup referendum to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, the West responded with threats of “sectoral sanctions” against Russia’s economy, thus injecting new urgency for Moscow to complete the energy agreement with China. The $400 billion gas deal the culmination of ten-plus years of work now has provided powerful substantiation to the Russia-China relationship.

Indeed, you could trace the evolution of this historic détente back to other Western provocations and broken promises. Six months before his 2004 visit to China, Putin watched NATO fold under its wings Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Five years before that, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had become NATO members.

A Major Missed Opportunity

Not only were these Western encroachments toward Russia’s border alarming to Moscow but the moves also represented a breach of trust. Several months before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, President George H. W. Bush had appealed for “a Europe whole and free.” And, in February 1990, his Secretary of State James Baker promised Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would move “not one inch” to the East, if Russia pulled its 24 divisions out of East Germany.

Yet, a triumphant Washington soon spurned this historic opportunity to achieve a broader peace. Instead, U.S. officials took advantage of the Soviet bloc’s implosion in Eastern Europe and later the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. As for that “Europe whole and free” business, it was as if the EU and NATO had put up signs: “Russians Need Not Apply.” Then, exploiting Moscow’s disarray and weakness, President Bill Clinton reneged on Baker’s NATO promise by pushing the military alliance eastward.

Small wonder that Putin and his associates were prospecting for powerful new friends ten years ago first and foremost, China. And, the West kept providing the Kremlin with new incentives as NATO recruiters remained aggressive. NATO heads of state, meeting in Bucharest in April 2008, declared: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”
That led to some very foolish adventurism on the part of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who had been listening to the wrong people in Washington and thought he could play tough with the rebellious regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including attacks on Russian peacekeeping troops. Russian forces gave the Georgians what Moscow normally calls a “resolute rebuff.”

The 2008 declaration of NATO’s intent is still on the books, however. And recent events in Ukraine, as a violent putsch overthrew elected President Yanukovych and installed a pro-Western regime in Kiev, became the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.

During an interview with CNBC on May 23, 2014, President Putin bemoaned the still-pending NATO expansion in the context of Ukraine: “Coup d’État takes place, they refuse to talk to us. So we think the next step Ukraine is going to take, it’s going to become a NATO member. They’ve refused to engage in any dialogue. We’re saying military, NATO military infrastructure is approaching our borders; they say not to worry, it has nothing to do with you. But tomorrow Ukraine might become a NATO member, and the day after tomorrow missile defense units of NATO could be deployed in this country.”

Putin raised the issue again on May 24, accusing the West of ignoring Russia’s interests in particular, by leaving open the possibility that Ukraine could one day join NATO. “Where is the guarantee that, after the forceful change of power, Ukraine will not tomorrow end up in NATO?” Putin wanted to know.

**Forward-Deployed Missile Defense**

Putin keeps coming back specifically to “missile defense” in NATO countries or waters because he sees it as a strategic (arguably an existential) threat to Russia’s national security. During his marathon press conference on April 17, he was quite direct in articulating Russia’s concerns:

“I’ll use this opportunity to say a few words about our talks on missile defense. This issue is no less, and probably even more important than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this. … We followed certain logic: If we don’t do anything, Ukraine will be drawn into NATO … and NATO ships would dock in Sevastopol. … [Key elements of the latest missile defense system are ship-borne.]

“Regarding the deployment of U.S. missile defense elements, this is not a defensive system, but part of offensive potential deployed far away from home. … At the expert level, everyone understands very well that if these systems are deployed closer to our borders, our ground-based strategic missiles will be
within their striking range.”

On this neuralgic issue of missile defense in Europe, ostensibly aimed at hypothetical future missiles fired by Iran, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has taken a perverse delight in having increased concerns in Moscow that such a system might eventually be used against Russian ICBMs.

In his book Duty, Gates defends himself against accusations from the Right that it was his concern for Russian sensitivities that prompted him to revise the missile defense plan for Europe. The revised system included sea-based missiles that were not only cheaper but also more easily and cheaply produced. (Does anyone see why Putin might have been concerned about NATO ships based in Crimea?)

“I sincerely believed the new program was better, more in accord with the political realities in Europe and more effective against the emerging Iranian threat,” Gates added. “While there certainly were some in the State Department and the White House who believed the third site in Europe was incompatible with the Russian ‘reset,’ we in Defense did not. Making the Russians happy wasn’t exactly on my to-do list.”

Gates proudly noted that the Russians quickly concluded that the revised plan was even worse from their perspective, as it eventually might have capabilities against Russian intercontinental missiles.

As for President Obama, in an exchange picked up by microphones during his meeting with then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in Seoul in March 2012, Obama asked him to tell incoming President Putin to give him some “space” on controversial issues, “particularly missile defense.”

Obama seemed to be suggesting that he might be able to be more understanding of Russian fears later. “After my election I have more flexibility,” Obama added. But it seems a safe bet that Putin and Medvedev are still waiting to see what may eventuate from the “space” they gave Obama.

Since taking over as Secretary of State in February 2013, John Kerry seems to be doing his best to fill Gates’s “tough-guy” role baiting the Russian bear. Kremlin leaders, after watching how close Kerry came to getting the U.S. to start a major war with Syria on evidence he knew was, at best, flimsy, simply cannot afford to dismiss as adolescent chest-pounding Kerry’s nonchalant remarks on the possibility that the troubles in Ukraine could lead to nuclear confrontation.

As much of a loose cannon as Kerry has been, he is, after all, U.S. Secretary of State. In an extraordinary interview with the Wall Street Journal on April 28,
Kerry made clear that the Obama administration and the U.S. military/intelligence establishment are “fully aware” that escalation of the crisis in Ukraine could lead to nuclear war. Are we supposed to say, “wow, great”?

**A Half-Century Perspective**

Though my Sino-Russian lens is 50 years old, I think that the perspective of time can be an advantage. In January 1964, as a CIA analyst, I became responsible for analyzing Soviet policy toward China. The evidence we had mostly, but not solely, public acrimony made it clear to us that the Sino-Soviet dispute was real and was having important impact on world events. We were convinced that reconciliation between the two giants was simply out of the question.

Our assessments were right at the time, but we ultimately were wrong about the irreconcilable differences. It turns out that nothing is immutable, especially in the face of ham-handed U.S. diplomacy.

The process of ending Moscow’s unmitigated hostility toward China began in earnest during Gorbachev’s era, although his predecessors did take some halting steps in that direction. It takes two to tango, and we analysts were surprised when Gorbachev’s Chinese counterparts proved receptive to his overtures and welcomed a mutual agreement to thin out troops along the 7,500-kilometer border.

In more recent years, however, the impetus toward rapprochement has been the mutual need to counterbalance the “one remaining superpower in the world.” The more that President George W. Bush and his “neo-conservative” helpers threw their weight around in the Middle East and elsewhere, the more incentive China and Russia saw in moving closer together.

Gone is the “great-power chauvinist” epithet they used to hurl at each other, though it would seem a safe bet that the epithet emerges from time to time in private conversations between Chinese and Russian officials regarding current U.S. policy.

The border agreement signed by Putin in Beijing in October 2004 was important inasmuch as it settled the last of the border disputes, which had led to armed clashes in the Sixties and Seventies especially along the extensive riverine border where islands were claimed by both sides.

The backdrop, though, was China’s claim to 1.5 million square kilometers taken from China under what it called “unequal treaties” dating back to the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. This irredentism, a staple of Chinese anti-Soviet rhetoric in those days, has disappeared.
In the late Sixties, the USSR reinforced its ground forces near China from 13 to 21 divisions. By 1971, the number had grown to 44 divisions, and Chinese leaders began to see a more immediate threat from the USSR than from the U.S. Enter Henry Kissinger, who visited Beijing in 1971 to arrange the precedent-breaking visit by President Richard Nixon the next year.

What followed was some highly imaginative diplomacy orchestrated by Kissinger and Nixon to exploit the mutual fear that China and the USSR held for each other and the imperative each saw to compete for improved ties with Washington.

**Triangular Diplomacy**

The Soviet leaders seemed to sweat this situation the most. Washington’s clever exploitation of the triangular relationship was consequential; it helped facilitate major, verifiable arms control agreements between the U.S. and USSR and even the challenging Four Power Agreement on Berlin. As for Vietnam, the Russians went so far as to blame China for impeding a peaceful solution to the war.

It was one of those rare junctures at which CIA analysts could in good conscience chronicle the effects of the Nixon-Kissinger approach and conclude that it seemed to be having the desired effect vis-à-vis Moscow. We could say so because it clearly was.

In early 1972, between President Nixon’s first summits in Beijing and Moscow, our analytic reports underscored the reality that Sino-Soviet rivalry was, to both sides, a highly debilitating phenomenon. Not only had the two countries forfeited the benefits of cooperation, but each felt compelled to devote huge effort to negate the policies of the other.

A significant dimension had been added to the rivalry as the U.S. moved to cultivate simultaneously better relations with both. The two saw themselves in a crucial race to cultivate good relations with the U.S.

The Soviet and Chinese leaders could not fail to notice how all this had enhanced the U.S. bargaining position. But we analysts regarded them as cemented into an intractable adversarial relationship by a deeply felt set of emotional beliefs, in which national, ideological and racial factors reinforced one another.

Although the two countries recognized the price they were paying, neither could see a way out. The only prospect for improvement, we suggested, was the hope that more sensible leaders would emerge in each country. At the time, we branded that a vain hope and predicted only the most superficial improvements in relations between Moscow and Beijing.
On that last point, we were wrong. Mao Zedong’s and Nikita Khrushchev’s successors proved to have cooler heads, and in 1969 border talks resumed. It took years to chip away at the heavily encrusted mutual mistrust, but by the mid-Eighties we were warning policymakers that we had been wrong; that “normalization” of relations between Moscow and Beijing had already occurred, slowly but surely, despite continued Chinese protestations that such would be impossible unless the Russians capitulated to all China’s conditions.

For their part, the Soviet leaders had become more comfortable operating in the triangular environment and were no longer suffering the debilitating effects of a headlong race with China to develop better relations with Washington.

**The Détente**

Economics now is clearly an important driver from both Moscow’s and Beijing’s point of view, but the sweeping $400 billion natural gas deal, including provision for exploration, construction and extraction is bound to have profound political significance, as well. If memory serves, during the Sixties, annual trade between the USSR and China hovered between $200 million and $400 million. It had grown to $57 billion by 2008 and hit $93 billion in 2013.

Growing military cooperation is of equal importance. China has become Russia’s arms industry’s premier customer, with the Chinese spending billions on weapons, many of them top of the line. For Russia, these sales are an important source of export earnings and keep key segments of its defense industry afloat. Beijing, cut off from arms sales from the West, has come to rely on Russia more and more for sophisticated arms and technology.

Author Pepe Escobar notes that when Russia’s Star Wars-style, ultra-sophisticated S-500 air defense anti-missile system comes on line in 2018, Beijing is sure to want to purchase some version of it. Meanwhile, Russia is about to sell dozens of state-of-the-art Sukhoi Su-35 jet fighters to the Chinese as Beijing and Moscow move to seal an aviation-industrial partnership.

Those of us analysts immersed in Sino-Soviet relations in the Sixties and Seventies, when the Russians and Chinese appeared likely to persist in their bitter feud forever, used to poke fun at the Sino-Soviet treaty of Feb. 14, 1950, which was defunct well before its 30-year term.

Given the deepening acrimony, the official congratulatory messages recognizing the anniversary of the Valentine’s Day agreement seemed amusingly ironic. Nevertheless, we dutifully scanned the messages for any hint of warmth; year after year we found none.

But there is another treaty now and the relationship it codifies is no joke.
Just as the earlier Sino-Soviet divide was deftly exploited by an earlier generation of U.S. diplomats, clumsy actions by the more recent cast of U.S. “diplomats” have helped close that divide, even if few in Washington are aware of the significant geopolitical change that it symbolizes.

The treaty of friendship and cooperation, signed in Moscow by Presidents Putin and Jiang Zemin on July 16, 2001, may not be as robust as the one in 1950 with its calls for “military and other assistance” in the event one is attacked. But the new treaty does reflect agreement between China and Russia to collaborate in diluting what each sees as U.S. domination of the post-Cold War international order. (And that was before the U.S. invasion of Iraq and before the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine.)

Earthquakes Begin Slowly

Like subterranean geological plates shifting slowly below the surface, changes with immense political repercussions can occur so gradually as to be imperceptible, until the earthquake hits and the old order is shaken or shattered. For a very long time, the consensus in academe, as well as in government, has been that, despite the rapprochement between China and Russia over the past several years, both countries retained greater interest in developing good relations with the U.S. than with each other.

That was certainly the case decades ago. But I doubt that is the case now. Either way, the implications for U.S. foreign policy are immense. Anatol Lieven of King’s College, London, has noted:

“Whether in the Euro-Atlantic or the Asia-Pacific, great power relations are becoming more contentious, with a loose Eurasian coalition emerging to reduce the U.S. domination of global politics. … The consolidation of Russia’s pivot to Asia is an important result of the first phase of the Ukraine crisis, which will continue to reshape the global strategic landscape.

“The U.S. has no other than Victoria Nuland, and Hillary Clinton who installed her as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, to thank for this foolish mess.”

As the folks from the old People’s Daily used to say, this could “come to a no-good end.”

Ray McGovern was chief of the CIA’s Soviet Foreign Policy Branch in the early Seventies, and served at CIA for 27 years. He worked on the President’s Daily Brief under Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan. He now works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington.
One More Casualty of US Wars

Official Washington’s cavalier attitude about war with pundits and pols often puffing out their chests and out-tough-talking the other guy or gal ignores the terrible damage inflicted by war on civilians and soldiers alike, like the case of Cody Young, writes Richard L. Fricker. By Richard L. Fricker

I knew Cody Young only in a peripheral way. He and my son were classmates and skateboard buds. My wife remembers he would come over for a homemade Orange Julius on hot summer days. Thus with great sadness, we learned of his death on May 21 in what Tulsa police are calling a standoff.

How did a young man, 22 years old, who once entertained dreams of being the next Tony Hawk become the target of a police kill shot? My son and many of Cody’s other friends recall him as a non-violent kid with a big kind heart. What happened? War happened! At least that’s part of the story.

The Tulsa Police Department says it responded to reports of someone shooting at parked cars from a second-floor apartment near 11th and Rockford Ave. at about 1 a.m. Nothing in the releases indicates that Young fired specifically at officers or anyone else, only that he had a long gun at the window. Reports vary as to whether the weapon was a rifle or shotgun.

But Cody’s life began to unravel in 2009, just before graduation from Thomas A. Edison High School when he joined the Oklahoma National Guard. Thomas Edison was known as a preparatory school but there was no way it could have prepared Cody for his future.

Cody was nine when Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda attacked New York City’s Trade Center and the Pentagon. A decade later, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were still going strong and it would be naive to think that he didn’t know there was a good chance he would wind up in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But young men are prone to see themselves as immortal, impervious to injury and death. This sense of immortality is joined at the hip by a desire for adventure, or just doing something different to get out of town. So, Cody traded in his skateboard for weapons of war. He became a soldier in the Oklahoma National Guard, the Thunderbirds, whose motto is “Always Ready, Always There.” The “there” in this case was Afghanistan.
The Oklahoma Thunderbirds have a proud combat tradition, fighting in many engagements in many wars. During World War Two, they were said to be the first guard unit into Europe and last unit out. Afghanistan would have its own deadly consequences.

As chronicled in Phillip O’Connor piece, “The Deadliest Day” about a patrol on Sept. 9, 2011, “The firefight lasts maybe 15 seconds. When it is over, Oklahoma and its 7,500-member Army National Guard are left to face the state’s bloodiest day in combat since Korea. Three soldiers are dead and two seriously wounded.”

Before Cody and the Thunderbirds returned home 14 men had died and scores were injured. One soldier cited by O’Connor affirmed what anyone who has been to war knows, “Everybody wants to see combat, until they see it.”

Cody, like many others in his deployment, saw a lot. According to family and friends, Cody returned changed, he was distant. He told his mother “something was wrong.” That something was Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), a war disease whose symptoms vary: flashbacks, disassociation, depression often self-medicated with drugs or alcohol, and, worst of all, nightmares and flashbacks.

During a flashback, you are in the present and the past simultaneously, unsure which is real. You don’t know how you got to this moment; a song, an aroma, a sound, a conversation, a movie? Anything can trigger it and you’re left with very little control. In your mind, you’re in combat. Someone must guide you out or it continues until you wear out or pass out.

The nightmares arrive unannounced, until someone wakes you because they hear you screaming, or they run their course and you wake up shaken and confused. Then the long night begins, fighting sleep fearing the nightmare will return.

According to Cody’s mother, he had all the classic PTSD symptoms. He had sought help, but almost nothing was working. Cody, according to reports, spent his last night watching a war movie with a friend. Then something happened.

Only Cody knew what triggered his taking up a weapon and firing at parked cars out the window. Did Cody try to tell the assembled police responders what it was? The police say he was “mumbling” something but they couldn’t understand what he was saying. In a sense, Cody had been trying to say something since he returned from Afghanistan.

At some point, according to Tulsa police accounts, Cody raised his weapon. Only Cody knew where he thought he was or what he was seeing. We do know there were a lot of police around. We do know they brought in one of their armored vehicles. The police simply followed protocol, but did being surrounded and confronted by an armored vehicle have any meaning to Cody or was he in another reality?
Cody can’t tell us now. Seventeen-year veteran officer Gene Hogan ended Cody’s life with a single rifle shot. Nine days earlier, Hogan had led the fifth annual Jared Shoemaker Memorial Walk, named for a U.S. Marine and Tulsa police officer killed during a deployment to Iraq in 2006.

To date it is not known if Hogan was given a specific kill order or if the Tulsa Police Department leaves that decision up to individual officers. Presumably, there will be some type of TPD after-action report.

According to Stacy Bannerman, author of “When the War Came Home: The Inside Story of Reservists and the Families They Leave Behind,” writing for Truthout.Org on May 26, “National Guardsmen have been found to have rates of PTSD as much as three times higher than active duty troops after combat.” She continued, “The vast differentials in mental health outcomes between reserve and active duty are primarily due to: the lack of post-deployment unit support; markedly poorer post-deployment mental health services and follow-up; and the rapidity with which citizen soldiers return to civilian life after combat.”

Remarking on Cody’s death, she said it was “not isolated.”

Locally, H. Caldwell “Callie” O’Keefe, VFW Post 577 chaplain and U.S. Marine veteran of Vietnam, said, “The needs of these veterans are not being addressed by the VA [Veterans Administration]; there needs to be a lot more therapy.”

Caldwell’s remarks echo concerns that Defense Department and VA doctors have been encouraged to downgrade PTSD findings to lower levels, such as “personality disorder.” Caldwell said, “If they call it personality disorder they (DoD and VA) don’t have to pay as much.”

In 2013, the Army completed a study of PTSD diagnoses at Madigan Army Medical Center which was prompted by the discovery of a memo released by the Seattle Times quoting a Center psychiatrist telling colleagues, a soldier who retires with a post-traumatic-stress-disorder diagnosis could eventually receive $1.5 million in government payments.

The memo claims, “He (the psychiatrist) stated that we have to be good stewards of the tax payers dollars, and we have to ensure that we are just not ‘rubber stamping’ a soldier with the diagnoses of PTSD.” Such findings, it was claimed, could cause the Army and VA to go broke. The Army has resisted media efforts to release the complete study.

“People,” Caldwell said, “who have seen combat are getting fucked-up. The public has no idea how prevalent PTSD is and if they did it would scare them to death, as if they’d had to go there themselves.”
The VA has been under fire recently because of long delays in veterans getting treatment. There have been calls for Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki’s resignation. Sen. Richard Burr, R-North Carolina, ranking Republican on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, publicly chided veterans groups for not joining in calling for Shinseki to go. The groups responded to the senator, calling his attack a “cheap shot,” among other things.

In the end, Cody Young was a young man who served his country with honor and in the process came home a walking casualty. To those who knew him, it doesn’t really matter if he was killed by the Taliban or the Tulsa police; he will be missed by his family and friends no matter who ended his life.

We must ask what Cody has taught us about sending our young men and women into the meat grinder of war as well as understanding their needs when they return. The sad fates of Cody and the thousands of other veterans who have returned home to die of gun violence are not the stories that parades celebrate; they don’t make society feel good.

Looking back, it never occurred to me that the skateboard kid with the Orange Julius would, in a few short years, become, like me, a veteran who served at about the same age, me in the Vietnam theater and him in Afghanistan. If I realized what he was going through, I would have tried to know him better. In war, we all become casualties.

Cody’s name will not be on a marble wall, but he should be remembered by the people and the country that he served. I like to think that somewhere in the dimensions of the cosmos, Cody is skating half-pipes with no memory of what brought him to that place.


A Reminder About Comments

From Editor Robert Parry: At Consortiumnews, we welcome substantive comments about our articles, but comments should avoid abusive language toward other commenters or our writers, racial or religious slurs, and allegations that are unsupported by facts.

If we notice violations of this comment policy, we will take down such comments. If readers spot such violations, they can bring them to our attention at
Repeat offenders will be placed on a watch list requiring case-by-case approval of their comments.

Obviously, our preference is for commenters to show self-restraint and to make their observations in a respectful and thoughtful way. We have plenty of work to do without having to police the comment section.

Also, because of annoying SPAM, we have installed a SPAM filter that sometimes catches legitimate comments. We try to check the filter during the day to recover these comments, but please do not be upset if occasionally one of your comments suffers this fate.

Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.

Pope Francis Prays at Two Israeli Walls

Pope Francis tried to bring a moral perspective to Israel’s subjugation of the Palestinians, including scenes of him praying at a separation wall in Palestine as well as at the famous West Wall in Jerusalem, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The trip by Pope Francis to the Holy Land, billed in advance as solely religious, made some eye-catching intrusions into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Comments minimizing the significance of this aspect of the trip were quick to follow.

Palestinian figure Hanan Ashrawi seemed to go out of her way to pooh-pooh the coming prayer meeting at the Vatican in which Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will join Francis; Ashrawi accused the pope, probably inaccurately, of not realizing that Peres in his mostly ceremonial position wields little power.

Skepticism about how much any leader of the Roman Catholic Church can accomplish follows in the tradition of Stalin questioning how many divisions the pope has. The pope still doesn’t have any divisions, and neither does Peres and of course neither does Abbas.
Francis’s foray into Israeli-Palestinian matters nonetheless was encouraging, for several reasons. One is that for a credible and prominent world figure to do this reduces the chance that the Israeli government can, as Jacob Heilbrunn puts it, “derogate the Palestinian issue to the back burner of international relations.”

The United States will not be venturing very far into this issue anytime soon, after Secretary of State John Kerry’s admirably energetic but ultimately futile efforts on the subject. More fundamentally, the United States still wears the self-imposed political shackles that prevent it from functioning effectively on this issue as anything other than Israel’s lawyer.

The U.S. role still will be critical if the Palestinian issue is ever to be resolved, but perhaps it will take more initiative by someone outside the United States to counteract the power and damaging effect of the shackles.

Another reason is that Francis has demonstrated a flair, and certainly has done so on this trip, for focusing attention sharply on an issue while still performing the balancing acts required of any statesman. The most potent image by far from the visit was the Pope’s stop at a section of the Israeli-constructed separation wall, with Francis bringing his head to the wall and praying.

Here was the counterpart, in wall-for-a-wall balance, to the more familiar image of the distinguished visitor at Jerusalem’s Western Wall. One wall is an ancient artifact that is one of the leading symbols of Israel’s claim to all of Jerusalem; the other is an ugly modern contrivance that not only symbolizes Israel’s unilateral slicing up of the West Bank but has practical consequences, negative and severe, on the Arab population that lives there.

A couple of millennia from now, who will be praying at the latter wall, and in remembrance of what? Whether it was Francis himself or someone else in his entourage who thought up this photo op, it was brilliant.

That the Pope is a man of religion may constitute another advantage, in trying to make religion less of a source of division related to this conflict than it is now. Israel’s clinging to land rather than peace has several motives, including economic ones, but a religiously based notion of divine right to the land is important for a major part of the current government’s right-wing constituency.

Perhaps the most prominent leader of Christianity, another of the great monotheistic religions that arose in the Middle East and for which, like Judaism, the Holy Land is the number one place of importance to the faithful, is
especially well equipped to teach that no one religious claim can be the basis for determining the outcome of a dispute between two people over the same land. He is probably even better equipped to do that than someone of the Islamic faith, for whom the Noble Sanctuary of Jerusalem also is important but is more of a number three behind Mecca and Medina.

The most important reason, however, to be encouraged by Francis’s involvement stems from his larger set of priorities, and assiduously cultivated image, as the pope of the poor. Championing the cause of the downtrodden is clearly where Francis intends to make his mark.

As such, his involvement in Israeli-Palestinian matters implicitly, even without the pontiff explicitly articulating this point, helps to frame the issue correctly as what it has been for a long time: a highly asymmetrical encounter in which security and power and control are almost all on one side, and the downtrodden are on the other side.

This is not some kind of fair fight in which each side has significant material assets to bring to bear. The Israelis, as the occupiers, can end the occupation whenever they want. The Palestinians, as the occupied, have almost nothing going for them other than sympathy for the downtrodden and appeals to a sense of justice, which is why the Israeli government frantically resists any move that might give the Palestinians a wider forum for such appeals.

Along with the great asymmetry of security and military power and control there is a comparable asymmetry of wealth and well-being. The system, constructed and controlled by Israel, that determines how the occupied territories operate functions to the economic advantage of Israelis and to the marked economic disadvantage of Palestinian Arabs. This involves matters ranging from water resources to transportation arteries and the separation wall, which divides many Palestinians from their livelihoods and is just one of countless impediments to Palestinian business erected by the occupation authorities.

There also are numerous less visible impediments, involving permit denials, restrictions on trade, and financial controls. Most recently Israel is using its control over currency to undermine Palestinian banking, with, as is the case with any banking system, negative ripple effects on other commerce that depends on the banks.

It should be no surprise that in the face of all these impediments the economic gulf between Israel and the Palestinians under occupation is huge and has been getting larger. GDP per capita in Israel is nearly 20 times that of the West Bank. It is 40 times that of the Gaza Strip, where a suffocating blockade and periodic military assault have made the squalor even worse.
For the pope of the poor, the plight of the Palestinians is a natural fit for his larger mission. Perhaps Francis can get enough people in the world thinking about this issue correctly, not in terms of diplomatic dances about who is recognizing whom but instead as the plight of an oppressed and downtrodden population, that even discourse in the United States, political shackles and all, would be affected.

If so, the effect would be congruent with the other, more hard-nosed, reasons the United States should not allow this conflict to be consigned to the back burner.

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.)