

Blaming Obama for Iraq's Chaos

Exclusive: As Islamic militants gain ground in Iraq, Official Washington's neocons and the mainstream media are blaming President Obama for ending the U.S. military occupation, but they ignore their own role in destabilizing Iraq with the 2003 invasion, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

After Islamic militants captured the major Iraqi city of Mosul on Tuesday, the danger of Official Washington's false narratives again asserted itself, a direct consequence of the failure to enforce any meaningful accountability on the neocons and others who pushed the Iraq War.

The emerging neocon-preferred narrative is that the jihadist victory in the northern city of Mosul and the related mess in neighboring Syria are the fault of President Barack Obama for not continuing the U.S. military occupation of Iraq indefinitely and for not intervening more aggressively in Syria's civil war.

For instance, the New York Times on Wednesday wrote that "the swift capture of large areas of [Mosul] by militants aligned with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria represented a climactic moment on a long trajectory of Iraq's unraveling since the withdrawal of American forces at the end of 2011."

What is perhaps most striking about such accounts, which are appearing across the major U.S. media, is that the narrative doesn't go back to the most obvious starting point: President George W. Bush's illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was that invasion and the ensuing occupation that hurtled Iraq and to an extent Syria into their current chaos.

Bush's invasion, which was justified by bogus claims about Iraq hiding weapons of mass destruction, was in clear violation of international law, lacking the explicit approval of the United Nations Security Council. Yet, even after the WMD falsehoods were exposed and the body counts soared, there was almost no accountability enforced either on the public officials who carried out the aggressive war or on the opinion leaders who rationalized it.

In many cases, the same pundits and pols continue to shape U.S. public opinion today and are dominating the narratives on Iraq and Syria. Thus, there is almost no attention to the fact that before the U.S. overthrow (and subsequent hanging) of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, there was no al-Qaeda threat in Iraq or Syria.

That threat emerged only after the U.S. invasion and the Bush administration's rash decision to disband the Iraqi army. Then, as U.S. forces fought to crush Sunni resistance to Iraq's new U.S.-backed Shiite-dominated government, Iraq became a magnet for Sunni extremists from across the Middle East, a force that coalesced into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Yet, the great divide in the Iraq War narrative came in 2007-08 when the neocons sought to salvage their blood-spattered reputations by inserting the myth of the "successful surge," hailing Bush's decision to escalate the war by dispatching some 30,000 additional U.S. troops. Though the "surge" initially was accompanied by a surge in killing, the gradual reduction in the violence was cited as proof of Bush's heroic wisdom.

Other explanations for the decline in Iraqi violence were ignored, including the fact that some key policies, such as buying-off Sunni tribes in Anbar Province and applying high-tech methods for hunting down al-Qaeda leaders, were initiated *before* the surge although their impact only became clear later. And, the violence also subsided because the Iraqi people finally recognized that a timetable was being set for the removal of all U.S. troops, a process completed in 2011.

However, across Official Washington, the simplistic and self-serving – conventional wisdom was that the "surge" was the sole explanation for the drop in the killings, a myth that had lethal consequences in 2009 when pro-surge hardliners, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Gen. David Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton maneuvered President Obama into adopting a similar "surge" in Afghanistan.

The Unsuccessful Surges

It should now be clear that neither "surge" was successful in altering the strategic arc of those two conflicts. At best, one could say that the military "surges" paid for by about 1,000 U.S. military deaths *each* and many tens of billions of dollars bought time for Bush and his neocon advisers to depart the government before the ultimate failures of their war policies became obvious, a "decent interval" that now has enabled these war architects to reframe the narrative and shift the blame to Obama.

The new narrative, which you can find across the media spectrum, is that Obama is to blame for the unfolding disaster in Iraq because he didn't insist on continuing the U.S. military occupation indefinitely. He's also being blamed for the spread of Islamic militancy in Syria because he resisted demands from Official Washington's opinion leaders for a major U.S. intervention aimed at overthrowing Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad.

Thus, the same U.S. news media that fumes over speculation that Russia may somehow be aiding separatists in eastern Ukraine and sputters about Moscow's violations of international law has been openly lusty for an expanded U.S. military intervention in Syria in clear violation of international law.

Though U.S. assistance to Syrian rebels has so far been limited to light arms and non-lethal supplies, U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey have been the principal supporters of radical Sunni jihadists who have flocked from around the Middle East to wage war against Syria's government, which is run by Assad, an Alawite, an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

Regarding Syria, Official Washington's narrative is that if only Obama had intervened earlier in support of "moderate" rebels or if he had launched a full-scale bombing campaign last summer as he threatened, everything would have worked out just wonderfully Assad would be gone and "moderates" would be governing Syria.

The fact that none of the U.S. interventions in the Middle East have had such a happy ending doesn't deter this latest "group think" on Syria.

Besides the bloody examples of Iraq and Afghanistan, there is the case of Libya where Obama acceded to the demands of his war hawks, including Secretary Clinton and now-Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power. He committed U.S. air power to remove Muammar Gaddafi (who was later captured and murdered), only to see Libya descend into chaos, violence that has fed Islamic radicalism (including the lethal attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in 2012) and has spread to Mali and other nearby African countries.

Obama's Real Failure

If Obama is to be criticized for his handling of the Middle East, it would make more sense to excoriate him for not making a clean break with the neocon strategies of the Bush years and for not purging the U.S. government of hawks who are too eager to use military force.

Rather than adopt realistic approaches toward achieving political solutions, Obama has often caved in when confronted with pressure from Official Washington's still influential neocons and the mainstream media that follows their lead.

For instance, Obama could accept help from Iran and Russia in achieving a negotiated settlement of the Syrian civil war but that would require him getting down off his high horse about how "Assad must go." This month's Syrian elections despite their shortcomings showed that Assad retains significant public support from the Alawites, Shiites, Christians, secularists, and even some Sunnis.

But a workable peace negotiation also would require Obama to acknowledge that Shiite-ruled Iran has legitimate interests in the region, and he might have to shake hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the current *bete noire* of all the smart people in Washington.

Rather than dealing with the real world where the United States might have to settle for the best of the worst options, there are signs that Obama is again falling in line with the preferred neocon strategy of expanded U.S. military assistance to Syria's supposedly "moderate" opposition, thus widening and prolonging the civil war and resulting in more chaos and death.

The notion that Syria's "moderates" can somehow fight a two-front war against both Assad's army and the Islamists who have been the most effective force against Assad has become the latest wishful thinking of Official Washington's best and brightest, similar to their earlier certainty that the U.S. invading army in Iraq would be greeted with flowers and candies.

As the Washington Post's David Ignatius often a mouthpiece for U.S. intelligence put it on Wednesday, "The administration is finally developing a serious strategy for Syria, which will include a CIA-trained guerrilla army to fight both President Bashar al-Assad and al-Qaeda extremists. In addition, (if skittish Arab allies agree), U.S. Special Operations forces will train Free Syrian Army units to create a stabilization force for liberated areas. If the ambitious plan moves forward, the hope is to train 9,600 fighters by the end of this year."

Similar delusional thinking about a two-front war has been at the forefront of the State Department's deliberations on Syria. Ex-U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert S. Ford wrote on the New York Times' op-ed page on Wednesday, "with partner countries from the Friends of Syria group like France, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, we must ramp up sharply the training and material aid provided to the moderates in the armed opposition."

But it has been Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia that have been most directly implicated in helping al-Qaeda-linked jihadists to flood Syria in the first place. Their thinking was that it would be better to have Sunni extremists controlling Syria than Assad because the Sunni powers and Israel see the spread of Iran's regional influence as their greatest threat. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Israel Sides with Syrian Jihadists."]

There is also the question of whether there remains any real nucleus of "moderate" Syrian rebels who could carry out this two-front war. Last September, 11 leading rebel groups repudiated the U.S.-backed civilian opposition and sided with al-Qaeda-connected Islamists in their demands for a religious state to

replace Assad's more secular regime.

The New York Times reported then that the rebel groups were "distancing themselves from the exile opposition's call for a democratic, civil government to replace Mr. Assad" and urging "all military and civilian groups in Syria to 'unify in a clear Islamic frame.'" [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Syria Rebels Embrace Al-Qaeda.](#)"]

Going back at least to 2003, this more complete and more troubling narrative would better inform the debate that Official Washington should be having about the twin crises in Iraq and Syria, a discussion that should not shy away from the devastating role that the neocons have played in undermining real U.S. interests in the Middle East and around the world.

However, if you rely on the mainstream media, you can look forward to the more truncated narrative, the one that the neocons prefer, the one that starts in 2011 and pins the blame on President Obama.

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](#).

Reshaping the Vietnam Narrative

The Vietnam War was a turning point in U.S. history but not as many people may think. In defeat, the national security state changed the narrative into one that made American soldiers the victims and made anti-war activists into traitors who spat on returning soldiers, as Marjorie Cohn explains.

By Marjorie Cohn

We came dangerously close to nuclear war when the United States was fighting in Vietnam, Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg told a reunion of the Stanford Anti-Vietnam War Movement in May 2014. He said that in 1965, the Joint Chiefs assured President Lyndon B. Johnson that the war could be won, but it would take at least 500,000 to one million troops.

The Joint Chiefs recommended hitting targets up to the Chinese border. Ellsberg

suspects their real aim was to provoke China into responding. If the Chinese came in, the Joint Chiefs took for granted we would cross into China and use nuclear weapons to demolish the communists.

Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower also recommended to Johnson that we use nuclear weapons in both North and South Vietnam. Indeed, during the 1964 presidential campaign, Republican nominee Barry Goldwater argued for nuclear attacks as well.

Johnson feared that the Joint Chiefs would resign and go public if Johnson didn't follow at least some of their recommendation and he needed some Republican support for the "Great Society" and the "War on Poverty." Fortunately, Johnson resisted their most extreme proposals, even though the Joint Chiefs regarded them as essential to success.

Ellsberg cannot conclude that the antiwar movement shortened the war, but he says the movement put a lid on the war. If the President had done what the Joint Chiefs recommended, the movement would have grown even larger, but so would the war, much larger than it ever became.

'The Most Dangerous Man in America'

Ellsberg, a former U.S. military analyst and Marine in Vietnam, worked at the RAND Corporation and the Pentagon. He risked decades in prison to release 7,000 top-secret documents to the *New York Times* and other newspapers in 1971. The Pentagon Papers showed how five presidents consistently lied to the American people about the Vietnam War that was killing thousands of Americans and millions of Indochinese.

Ellsberg's courageous act led directly to the Watergate scandal, Nixon's resignation, and helped to end the Vietnam War. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, called Ellsberg "the most dangerous man in America," who "had to be stopped at all costs." But Ellsberg wasn't stopped.

Facing 115 years in prison on espionage and conspiracy charges, he fought back. The case against him was dismissed due to egregious misconduct by the Nixon administration. Ellsberg's story was portrayed in the Oscar-nominated film, "The Most Dangerous Man in America." Edward Snowden told Ellsberg that film strengthened his intention to release the National Security Agency documents.

The April Third Movement

On April 3, 1969, 700 Stanford students voted to occupy the Applied Electronics Laboratory (AEL), where classified (secret) research on electronic warfare (radar-jamming) was being conducted at Stanford. That spawned the April Third

Movement (A3M), which holds reunions every five to ten years. The sit-in at AEL, supported by a majority of Stanford students, lasted nine days, replete with a printing press in the basement to produce materials linking Stanford trustees to defense contractors.

Stanford moved the objectionable research off campus, but the A3M continued with sit-ins, teach-ins, and confrontations with police in the Stanford Industrial Park. Many activists from that era continue to do progressive work, drawing on their experiences during the A3M.

This year, we discussed the political economy of climate change, and the relationship between the counterculture of the 1960's and the development of Silicon Valley. Highlights of the weekend included three keynote addresses Ellsberg's; one delivered by Stanford political science Professor Terry Karl; and a talk by Rutgers Professor of English and American Studies, H. Bruce Franklin.

Terry Karl is a Stanford professor who has published widely on political economy of development, oil politics, Latin America and Africa, and human rights. She also testifies as an expert witness in trials against Latin American dictators and military officers who tortured, disappeared and killed civilians in the 1970's and 1980's, when their governments were supported by the United States. Karl's testimonies have helped to establish guilt and accountability for the murders of El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero, the rape and murders of four American churchwomen, and other prominent cases.

Karl quoted President George H. W. Bush, who announced proudly after the first Gulf War in 1991, "The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula." Nevertheless, Karl observed, we have been involved in "permanent war" since Vietnam, in part because there had been no accountability, abroad or at home, for each of our past wars.

The U.S. global military presence around the world, according to Karl, is not there for defense, but rather to maintain the United States "at the top." No defense can be based on having soldiers in 150 countries.

Beginning with Vietnam, we stopped paying taxes for the wars we fight, Karl said. The Korean War was financed with taxes, but the Vietnam War was paid for through inflation. This helped to produce the recession that was the basis for the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Wars in Central America, Iraq and Afghanistan have been "paid for" through debt.

In this respect, permanent war not only threatens our democracy, Karl pointed out, but also our economic future. In one example, Karl noted that the United

States fights wars to secure oil and gas; yet the largest consumer of oil in the world is the Department of Defense because of those very wars.

Karl also observed that we have not “won” all of these unpaid wars if measured against their original objectives. The United States fought in Vietnam to prevent communist reunification of the country; yet that is exactly what happened.

The Reagan administration decided to “draw the line” in El Salvador to prevent FMLN rebels from coming to power; yet the FMLN is the government today. And the Reagan administration supported the *contras* in Nicaragua to prevent the Sandinistas from governing that country; the Sandinistas are now in control. She predicted we would see similar “victories” in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cultural Memory of the Vietnam War”

H. Bruce Franklin was the first tenured professor to be fired by Stanford University, and the first to be fired by a major university since the 1950’s. Franklin, who was a Marxist and an active member of A3M, was terminated because of things he said at an anti-war rally, statements that, according to the ACLU, amounted to protected First Amendment speech.

Franklin, a renowned expert on Herman Melville, history and culture, has taught at Rutgers University since 1975. He has written or edited 19 books and hundreds of articles, including books about the Vietnam War. Before becoming an activist, Franklin spent three years in the U.S. Air Force, “flying,” he said, “in operations of espionage and provocation against the Soviet Union and participating in launches for full-scale thermonuclear war.”

Franklin told the reunion about myths the U.S. government has promulgated since the Vietnam War. “One widespread cultural fantasy about the Vietnam War blames the antiwar movement for losing the war, forcing the military to ‘fight with one arm tied behind its back’,” Franklin said. “But this stands reality on its head.”

Franklin cited the American people’s considerable opposition to the war. “Like the rest of the movement at home,” he noted, “the A3M was inspired and empowered by our outrage against both the war and all those necessary lies about the war coming from our government and the media, as well as the deceitful participation of institutions that were part of our daily life, such as Stanford University.”

The war finally ended, Franklin thought, because of the antiwar movement, particularly opposition to the war within the military.

The other two myths Franklin debunked are first, that the real heroes are the

American prisoners of war (POWs) still imprisoned in Vietnam; and second, that many veterans of the Vietnam War were spat upon by antiwar protestors when they returned home. The black and white POW/MIA (missing in action) flag has flown over the White House, U.S. post offices and government buildings, the New York Stock Exchange, and appears on the right sleeve of the official robe of the Ku Klux Klan, according to Franklin.

“The flag now came to symbolize our culture’s dominant view of America as the heroic warrior victimized by ‘Vietnam’ but then reemerging as Rambo unbound,” he said. After talking to several Japanese scholars he met on a trip to Japan, Franklin realized he had missed the “most essential and revealing aspect” of the POW/MIA myth.

The scholars told him, “When militarism was dominant in Japan, the last person who would have been used as an icon of militarism was the POW. What did he do that was heroic? He didn’t fight to the death. He surrendered.”

Franklin told the reunion: “Both the POW and the spat-upon vet become incarnations of America, especially American manhood, as victim of ‘Vietnam,’ which is not a people or a nation but something terrible that happened to us.”

He also said that there is absolutely no evidence that any Vietnam vet was spat upon by an antiwar protester. “These two myths turned ‘Vietnam’ into the cultural basis of the forever war,” Franklin said. He quoted George H. W. Bush who proclaimed in 1991 (at the end of the Persian Gulf ground war), “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”

Legacy of the Vietnam War

But, as Karl and Franklin observed, we are now engaged in a “permanent war” or “forever war.” Indeed, the U.S. government has waged two major wars and several other military interventions in the years since Vietnam. And in his recent statement on U.S. foreign policy, President Barack Obama said: “The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it when our people are threatened; when our livelihoods are at stake; when the security of our allies is in danger.”

Obama never mentioned the United Nations Charter, which forbids “unilateral” intervention – the use or threat of military force unless carried out in self-defense or with the consent of the Security Council.

The U.S. military, Karl noted, teaches that the Vietnam War was a success. And, indeed, during the next 11 years, leading up to the 50th anniversary of that war, the U.S. government will continue to mount a false narrative of that war. [See <http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/>].

Fortunately, Veterans for Peace has launched a counter-commemoration movement, to explain the true legacy of Vietnam. [See <http://www.vietnamfulldisclosure.org/>]. It is only through an accurate understanding of our history that we can struggle against our government's use of military force as the first, instead of the last, line of defense.

Marjorie Cohn, a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law and former president of the National Lawyers Guild, was active in A3M and graduated from Stanford University in 1970. Her next book, *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral and Geopolitical Issues*, will be published this fall.
