

Official Washington's Syrian 'Fantasy'

Exclusive: It is perhaps not news that the U.S. government bases wars on illusions, such as the nonexistent WMD in Iraq, but it is rare when there is a broad consensus before the conflict begins that a war's success rests on a "fantasy" like the chimera of "moderate" Syrian rebels, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

What does it say when the capital of the world's most powerful nation anchors a major decision about war in what every thinking person acknowledges is a "fantasy" even the principal policymaker and a top advocate for foreign interventions?

It might suggest that the U.S. government has completely lost its bearings or that political opportunism now so overwhelms rationality that shortsighted expediency determines life-or-death military strategies. Either way, it is hard to see how the current U.S. policy toward Iraq, Syria and the larger Middle East can serve American national interests or translate into anything but more misery for the people of the region.

Official Washington's most treasured "fantasy" today is the notion that a viable "moderate opposition" exists in Syria or could somehow be created. That wish-upon-a-star belief was the centerpiece of congressional action last month on a \$500 million plan by President Barack Obama to train and arm these "moderate" rebels to combat Islamic State terrorists who have been plundering large swaths of Syria and Iraq – and also take on the Syrian army.

Yet, as recently as August, President Barack Obama publicly declared that trust in these "moderates" was a "fantasy" that was "never in the cards" as a workable strategy. Then, on Wednesday, David Ignatius, national security columnist for the neoconservative Washington Post and a prominent booster of U.S. interventionism, reported from a rebel staging area in Reyhanli, Turkey, the same reality in nearly the same language.

"The problem is that the 'moderate opposition' that the United States is backing is still largely a fantasy," Ignatius wrote, noting that the greatest challenge would be to coordinate "the ragtag brigades of the Free Syrian Army into a coherent force that can fill the vacuum once the extremists are driven out."

Ignatius quoted Syrian rebel commander Hamza al-Shamali, a top recipient of American support including anti-tank missiles, as saying, "At some point, the Syrian street lost trust in the Free Syrian Army," the U.S.-backed rebel force that was the armed wing of the supposedly "moderate opposition" to President

Bashar al-Assad. Ignatius added:

“Shamali explains that many rebel commanders aren’t disciplined, their fighters aren’t well-trained and the loose umbrella organization of the FSA lacks command and control. The extremists of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra have filled the vacuum. Now, he says, ‘the question every Syrian has for the opposition is: Are you going to bring chaos or order?’”

According to Ignatius, Shamali said he rejected a proposal to merge the FSA’s disparate brigades because “we refuse to repeat failed experiments.” He argued that an entirely new “Syrian national army” would be needed to fight both the Islamist radicals and Assad’s military.

But even the sympathetic Ignatius recognized that “the FSA’s biggest problem has been internecine feuding. Over the past two years, I’ve interviewed various people who tried to become leaders, such as: Abdul-Jabbar Akaidi, Salim Idriss and Jamal Maarouf. They all talked about unifying the opposition but none succeeded.

“An Arab intelligence source explains: ‘Until now, the FSA is a kind of mafia. People inside Syria are tired of this mafia. There is no structure. It’s nothing.’ And this from one of the people who have struggled the past three years to organize the resistance.”

In other words, the “moderate” rebels to the degree that they do exist are viewed by many Syrians as part of the problem, not part of any solution.

Favoring Al-Qaeda

Another flaw in Obama’s strategy is that the Syrian “moderates” are much more opposed to Assad’s harsh but secular regime than they are to the Sunni jihadists who have emerged as the most effective fighting force against him.

“If U.S. airstrikes and other support are seen to be hitting Muslim fighters only, and strengthening the despised Assad, this strategy for creating a ‘moderate opposition’ will likely fail,” Ignatius concluded.

That complaint has given new hope to Washington’s influential neoconservatives that they can ultimately redirect Obama’s intervention in Syria from bombing the Islamic State terrorists to a full-scale “regime change” war against Assad, much like the neocons helped convince President George W. Bush to invade Iraq in 2003. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons’ Noses Into the Syrian Tent.”](#)]

In this regard, Obama appears to be the proverbial deer in the headlights. He’s afraid of being called “weak” if he doesn’t go after the Islamic State for its

hyper-violent attacks inside Iraq and its brutal executions of American hostages in Syria. Yet, Obama's also can't escape his earlier tough talk that "Assad must go."

Obama's core contradiction has been that by providing "covert" assistance to Syrian rebels, he has indirectly strengthened the Sunni extremists who have seized the Free Syrian Army's weapons depots and won converts from the "moderate" rebels, some of whom were trained, armed and financed by the CIA. Meanwhile, other U.S. allies, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have been helping more extreme Syrian rebels, including al-Qaeda's Nusra Front.

A year ago, many of the "moderate" rebels publicly repudiated the Syrian political front that the Obama administration had put together and instead endorsed al-Nusra. According to one source with access to Western intelligence information, some "moderate" rebels recruited from Muslim communities in Great Britain and other Western countries have now taken their military skills (and passports) to the Islamic State.

Yet, instead of acknowledging that this strategy of relying on an unreliable "moderate opposition" is indeed a "fantasy," President Obama and a majority in Congress have chosen to pursue this geopolitical unicorn with another \$500 million and much political chest-thumping.

An Alternative Approach

At this late stage, the only practical strategy would be to press the non-extremist Sunni opposition to work out some form of unity government with Assad who retains strong support among Syria's Alawite, Shiite and Christian minorities. By enlisting Russia and Iran, Obama might be able to secure concessions from Assad, including the possibility of a gradual transition to a post-Assad era.

With such a political settlement in hand, the focus could then be on defeating the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Nusra affiliate and restoring some order to Syria. But the problem is that Official Washington's neocons and their "liberal interventionist" allies are so fixated on "regime change" in Syria and are so hostile to Russia and Iran that any pragmatic strategy is effectively ruled out.

Though Obama may be a closet "realist" who would favor such a compromise approach, he has consistently lacked the political courage or the geopolitical foresight to impose this kind of solution on the powers-that-be in Washington. Any suggestion of collaboration with Russia and Iran or acquiescence to continued rule by Assad would touch off a firestorm of outrage in Congress and the mainstream U.S. media.

So, Obama instead has charted a course into what he knows to be a fantasyland, a costly pursuit of the chimerical Syrian “moderates” who once located are supposed to defeat both the Sunni extremists and the army of the secularist Assad. This journey is not simply a march of folly but a meandering into illusion.

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](#).

Ellsberg Sees Vietnam-Like Risks in ISIS War

Daniel Ellsberg, the former Defense Department official who leaked the Pentagon Papers exposing the Vietnam War lies, is alarmed at the many parallels between Vietnam and President Obama's new military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as Barbara Koepfel reports.

By Barbara Koepfel

At a recent talk at the National Press Club in Washington DC, Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers in 1971, says he believes there's not one person in the Pentagon who would agree that President Obama can achieve his aim of destroying ISIS in Iraq and Syria with air strikes, along with training and arming local military forces.

Nor, he says, can the Administration do it even if the U.S. sends ground troops, contrary to Obama's repeated assurances.

Ellsberg described the similarities with Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and the near-certainty of comparable failure. I interviewed him after his talk, and updated the discussion this week, after the U.S. airstrikes inside Syria had begun. In his Press Club talk and with me, he read from some documents, as indicated below, and cited Web-links.

Q. Why are you urging Americans to be warned by what happened in Vietnam, half a century ago?

A. Well, that was my war. That makes me pretty old. And at 83, I am. This means I know what Vietnam means as well as Iraq, unlike most members of Congress. The *New York Times* noted on Sept. 18 that only a third of those voting on authorizing American advisers, arms and trainers for Syrian rebels were in Congress the last time there was a vote on war, which was for Iraq, in 2002. It would be interesting to know what they learned from the earlier vote.

As the Times wrote, "That 2002 vote hung heavily over the six hours of debate on Tuesday and Wednesday. Several veterans of the Iraq War stood against the President's request. Older Democrats recalled with bitterness their vote to back the invasion of Iraq, a vote that ended many careers."

"The last time people took a political vote like this in this House, it was on the Iraq War," Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-California, said, "and many of my colleagues say it was the worst vote they ever took."

One member of the House who voted against the new authorization, Rep. Barbara Lee, D-California,, was the *one* member of Congress who voted against the authorization of military force (AUMF) in Afghanistan in 2001, then, as now, because there was inadequate discussion and too many questions left unanswered. And the next year, with Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, she helped organize 133 votes in the House against the AUMF 2002 on Iraq.

She says the earlier request was "an overly broad authorization which I could not vote for because it was a blank check for perpetual war."

She was right. That authorization is still on the books, and the Obama Administration still cites it (along with the AUMF 2002), 13 years later, as sufficient authority for further escalation in Syria and Iraq. Lee says it should be repealed.

Both times Lee echoed Senators Wayne Morse, D-Oregon, and Ernest Gruening, D-Alaska, the only two members of Congress who voted against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964. Morse warned that it was an unconstitutional, undated blank check for war in Vietnam, and which President Lyndon Johnson used after deceiving other senators that he would not escalate without coming back to Congress.

In 2002, the only two senators who were in office long enough to have been deceived into voting for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Senators Ted Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, and Robert Byrd, D-West Virginia,, said they were ashamed of their 1964 votes and pleaded with colleagues not to make their mistake, which they said they regretted for almost 40 years.

Twenty-one other senators listened, which, incidentally, didn't include

Kennedy's junior colleague from Massachusetts, Vietnam veteran Sen. John Kerry, who had reason to regret his yes vote which helped lose him the presidency just two years later. I believe he will come to regret his present, shameful role with respect to this war for the rest of his life.

I have my own mistake to regret, not being the whistleblower I could have been in the Pentagon in 1964. Like Byrd and Kennedy in 2002, I'm calling on people in comparable positions to save themselves from such remorse, that they didn't do what they could to warn and inform Congress and the public now, before decisive escalations occur.

Q. How do U.S. actions in Vietnam compare with what the U.S. is doing today, with advisers in Iraq and air strikes in Iraq and Syria, to destroy ISIS?

A. There are countless parallels. As in Vietnam, the U.S. is heading towards an American ground combat war under a president who assures us, before an election, that it isn't going to happen. And as in Vietnam, his generals claim he can't achieve his goal without boots on the ground.

Gen. Raymond Odierno, the Army Chief of Staff, says you can't defeat ISIS without ground troops. Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified he will recommend U.S. ground forces in Iraq if and when air power alone is not sufficient. That day is certain to come, sooner than later, although not before the November elections.

In fact, I doubt there's a single person in the Pentagon or the CIA who believes Obama can achieve his goals to destroy ISIS in Iraq and Syria with air strikes and advisers alone.

High-level officers can't contradict the President publicly, without resigning or being fired. But retired officials can, and have. A former Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Conway, put it succinctly: The President's current strategy "doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell" of succeeding. I'm sure Odierno and Dempsey give it the same odds.

It may be that people in the Pentagon are telling the President and each other that the U.S. can defeat ISIS if you let us do a bigger war, including sizeable numbers of American ground troops. If so, I believe they're wrong, just as the JCS were in Vietnam and the first Iraq War.

On the other hand, they may not believe that. Either way, here's where truly honest testimony to Congress is critical. And that's not likely to happen unless it's triggered by leaks from inside whistleblowers of internal, classified analyses, estimates and projections of the sort that should have occurred but didn't before the escalation in Vietnam or earlier in Iraq.

In any case, as Barbara Lee said, the consequences even of Obama's recent first steps will be to further expand our involvement in a sectarian war, without Congress considering the implications of the larger war that's coming.

Q. When generals, like Odierno, say ground troops will be needed, whose ground troops do they mean?

A. "Ideally," General Dempsey has said, they would be Iraqi, Kurdish or Syrian. But he's also said that half the Iraq army isn't competent to partner with the U.S. against ISIS. And, the other half has to be partially rebuilt and retrained. How long will that take, since the last 12 years of U.S. training failed so dramatically?

Regarding Syria, Dempsey says there will need to be 12,000 to 15,000 Syrian ground troops, properly trained by the U.S., to take back territory from ISIS. But the President just asked, and Congress authorized, U.S. training for only 5,000 Syrian troops, which is supposed to take six months to a year or more. Who but the U.S. is going to fill that gap?

Obama's former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, dismissed these fantasies. He insists the U.S. will not succeed against ISIS "strictly from the air, or strictly depending on the Iraqi forces, or the Peshmerga [the Kurds], or the Sunni tribes acting on their own." He adds "some small number of American advisers, trainers, Special Forces and forward spotters, forward air controllers, are going to have to be in harm's way."

Q. Doesn't that contradict President Obama's assurances of "no American boots on the ground"?

A. Yes. That is almost certain to happen. And a question we should ask, based on what we know about Vietnam is "When General Dempsey recommends, and the President agrees, that U.S. advisers, trainers and air spotters should leave their bases and accompany Iraqi troops in combat getting in harm's way will we be told that's happening? If so, when?"

I vividly recall reading a memo in the Pentagon on April 6, 1965, from McGeorge Bundy, Johnson's national security adviser, that the President had authorized a change in mission for the Marines at Danang. They'd been sent there, the first American combat units in Vietnam, ostensibly to defend the base from which we were conducting air operations.

Supposedly, they were politically harmless, just "advisers", which didn't involve large U.S. casualties and get us committed the way ground combat units do. Like what we're doing now, in Iraq and Syria. But in 1965, LBJ had secretly decided as early as April 1 to allow them to leave the base for offensive

patrols in the field, precisely the kinds of actions I'd been trained to lead as a rifle company platoon leader and company commander in the Marines.

The memo said, as I noted in my 1972 book, *Papers on the War*, "The President desires that premature publicity be avoided by all possible precautions. The actions themselves should be taken as rapidly as practicable but in ways that should minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy. The President desires that these movements and changes in combat mission should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy."

I remember writing a memo to my boss, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, that "This is dangerous. You can't keep that secret. There are reporters over there. They'll know what the Marines are doing and we'll be shown to be concealing it. You know, we're actually changing the nature of the war. We're going to be taking over the war from the South Vietnamese. I don't think you can keep that secret very long."

I was wrong. That was April. And by July, about 100,000 troops were over there, doing offensive operations. But until then, there was no word or leak about this.

So on July 28, when President Johnson finally announced we were sending 50,000 more troops, it was actually 100,000, but he lied and said 50,000 to hide where this was heading, a reporter asked, "Mr. President, does the fact you are sending additional forces to Vietnam imply any change in the existing policy of relying mainly on the South Vietnamese to carry out offensive operations and using American forces to guard installations and to act as an emergency backup?"

Johnson answered, "It does not imply any change in policy whatever. It does not imply change of objective."

And that was true! This was the end of July. He didn't *just* change the policy. He changed it four months earlier. He just hadn't announced it.

To bring us to the present, instead of saying "relying mainly on the South Vietnamese," insert Syrians, Iraqis and Kurds. When those first steps are taken towards making this mainly an American war steps Obama and his generals and Gates already hint at should we expect to hear about that from the White House? Why? Because Obama is more transparent, less secretive than Johnson, Nixon or George W. Bush? He isn't.

During the Vietnam build-up was when I could have alerted the American people about what was happening, and I didn't. That's why I'm calling on insiders who know that we're being misled to do better.

However, the big issue now is not the combat role for advisers, intelligence and support units, Special Forces and air spotters. Rather, given the air war, it's in the cards they will be in harm's way probably before the end of the year, perhaps even *before* the election. The real issue will be the deployment of tens if not hundreds of thousands of U.S. ground troops.

And whether they total 1,600 troops on the ground, what we already have in Iraq, or 16,000 (what LBJ had in Vietnam before the start of the air war and the major ground escalation in 1965), that "small force of Americans" Gates describes won't be remotely enough to "destroy" ISIS. Both Gates and the generals know it will take a lot more. But even if the number soared to 550,000, as in Vietnam in 1968, or even a million, I believe they still won't eliminate ISIS permanently. They'll be back.

Q. Does Obama realize the generals are sure to ask him for tens of thousands or more combat troops?

A. I don't know. I suspect they've told him that, secretly. Just as Johnson knew his generals would ask for that in Vietnam, while he was still promising the electorate "no wider war" in 1964, and saying he wouldn't send American boys to do what Vietnamese boys should be doing.

Does Obama foresee right now that he's likely to grant that request? Is he, then, just kidding when he promises, over and over, that we'll defeat ISIS without his sending American combat units? Or does he think he can and will keep his military under control despite frustrating them and saddling them, as they see it, with stalemate and failure?

That's what Johnson sought to do, and to some extent did, though the war got much larger than he'd promised or even initially wanted. He gave the Chiefs just enough of what they wanted, in troop levels and bombings, to keep them from resigning, though never close to what they said was essential to succeed. He didn't really believe that meeting their full demands would make the difference, and he feared war with China. And he was right on both counts. But still, he didn't want to be accused of "losing" a region for want of "doing nothing."

He avoided that accusation, but at the cost of a lot of lives: 58,000 American and several million Vietnamese.

I suspect that same concern is driving Obama right now. I see him doing what he has to do to keep from being accused of doing "nothing." But does he really mean to stop at that? Or could he, even if he wanted to?

Gates recommends that President Obama scale down his present objective of "destroying" ISIS, which Gates describes as "very ambitious," which I translate

to mean *unattainable*.

That's almost sure to happen. But even with lesser aims, like containment, or, as Gates suggests, driving ISIS out of Iraq, with embedded advisers and Special Forces alone, even with forward air spotters, this won't be enough. When Gates says it will, he's either lying about what he believes or he's a fool. And I don't think he's a fool.

I think the Joint Chiefs will recommend to Obama that he bring large numbers of American ground combat units to Iraq in the coming months. One difference from Vietnam is that in those days, when Johnson lied, saying he gave the generals everything they'd asked for and that there was no conflict between the civilians and military in the administration (as the Pentagon Papers were to reveal, year after year), the military kept their mouths shut. They hoped he would come around to their point of view eventually, and they didn't want to preclude that by contradicting him and getting fired.

Now, many of them think that was a mistake, even a "dereliction of duty." This time, the generals will do their *own* leaking about what they asked (as happened in 2009, when Obama confronted "top secret" recommendations for a surge in Afghanistan). Will the President, as he now implies, reject their recommendation every time they make it? I think he should, but I doubt that he will, any more than LBJ did.

The public doubts it too. The latest polls show that 72 percent of the public expects him to deploy ground combat units in Iraq, contrary to his assurances. I think the generals are of the same mind. It might be almost irrelevant, the way things work, what the President himself thinks about that, privately, at this moment.

Q. Where is Congress and its powers to declare war on this? Will the Administration keep it informed about its military actions and ask for a formal vote?

A. On the day Congress voted on the Administration's request to authorize sending advisers, arms and trainers for Syrian rebel troops, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-California, said, in supporting it, the bill "is not to be confused with any authorization to go further." She said, "I will not vote for combat troops to be engaged in war."

But will she ever be *asked* by the Administration to vote on that? Every indication is that the White House believes the President can expand this war with the authority Congress granted the Executive in earlier bills, before the U.S. invaded Afghanistan or Iraq, and feels no need to come back to Congress.

Once again, that's reminiscent of Vietnam. Both the House and Senate approved the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in August 1964, which authorized President Johnson to use military force without a formal declaration of war. He said he needed it to retaliate against a North Vietnamese attack on our destroyers, which, in fact, didn't happen.

At that time, Sen. William Fulbright, D-Arkansas, assured the Senate that the Administration did not intend to expand the Vietnam War without returning to Congress. But he was duped by the White House, which never again appealed to Congress for consent, and used the Tonkin Gulf Resolution as an open-ended declaration of war.

This time, the White House hasn't even *bothered* to assure Congress, however deceptively, that it concedes the need for further authorization. To the contrary, it is asserting that the 2002 authorization of military force which was based on the Bush Administration's lies about WMDs, as blatantly as was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution is sufficient for anything the President wants to do in the Middle East, along with the even earlier AUMF of 2001.

For that same reason, Rep. Lee is now demanding a real vote on the war before it expands further. She's saying: "Don't do this again." Of the recent authorization, she said "I am reminded of the failure to have a thorough debate in the wake of 9/11, that act of atrocity, that act of terrorism, which frightened people into a very hasty and premature delegation of their powers; now we have two beheadings on television to do that and call for a revenge act "

Of this recent request, though it's much more limited than the Tonkin Gulf Resolution or the two AUMFs, she said, "The consequences of this vote, whether it's written in the amendment or not, will be a further expansion of a war currently taking place and our further involvement in a sectarian war," again "without adequate debate or any vote in Congress having to do with the larger issues here of the war."

She's right. We should be telling Nancy Pelosi to follow her counsel, and to use every constitutional power to force that vote, and precede it with adequate debate.

Q. So many ask, isn't it better to do something against ISIS – these murderers, fanatics – than do nothing? How do you answer that?

A. ISIS is not the only murderous, fanatic group in that region but they may well be the most extreme so far, and most successful. But that's a reason for not doing *something* that actually strengthens them in their rivalry with others. But that's exactly what we *are* doing, with our airpower.

Even before the Syrian airstrikes, FBI Director James Comey testified on Sept. 17 that ISIS' "widespread use of social media and growing online support intensified following the commencement of U.S. air strikes in Iraq."

Another news report, in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, states, 'The Islamic State jihadist organization has recruited more than 6,000 new fighters since America began targeting the group with air strikes last month, according to the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. At least 1,300 of the new recruits are said to be foreigners, who have joined IS from outside the swathes of Syria and Iraq that it controls."

Do we think ISIS hasn't noticed this? We have to ask, why does ISIS want to show off its public beheadings of Americans on international television? Our ally Saudi Arabia doesn't televise its beheadings, 19 in August, one for sorcery, nor do our favored rebels, the Free Syrian Army.

But ISIS chose exactly now to boast them to the world. Why? Because they need and welcome U.S. air strikes and the flood of recruits they bring, despite the losses ISIS has to expect. Getting the U.S. to publicize ISIS as the number one American enemy, while U.S. airstrikes are killing Muslim civilians along with ISIS troops and leaders, stamps ISIS as leading the fight against the U.S. and its allied Arab regimes that ISIS believes are infidels.

I watched this happen in Vietnam. Each time we bombed a village in South Vietnam, the young men who survived the attack joined the Viet Cong. In fact, the VC would fire on American planes from a village precisely for that reason. They could count on the retaliatory bombing, and the recruits. I wrote a report for the RAND Corporation about that when I came back, with the title, "Revolutionary Judo."

History repeated itself in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Matthew Hoh the Marine and then senior State Department official who served in both countries and who resigned his post saw exactly the same thing.

As I noted before, by doing this *something*, we're strengthening ISIS and making things worse. But that's nothing new. Indeed, all the military actions and expenditures of the last 13 years in the Middle East have led to creating, strengthening and expanding ISIS and other militant groups. It's time to stop.

As Sen. Joe Manchin III, D-West Virginia, said to his colleagues, "Our past experience, after 13 years, everything that we have tried to do has not proven to be at all beneficial. So what makes you think it's going to be different this time? What makes you think we can ask a group of Islamists to agree with Americans to fight another group of Islamists, as barbaric as they may be?"

With the air strikes in Syria, we are radicalizing moderates who then join ISIS, as the *New York Times* has noted. It has also allowed Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, who led the fight against ISIS until now, to stop his air strikes against it and concentrate on the *moderate* rebels we support who oppose both Assad and ISIS. Why is he doing this? Because the U.S. is attacking ISIS, doing his work for him. Then, if he can take moderates off the board, he calculates the U.S. will have to accept him as the only effective ally against ISIS.

Q. What *can* we do that would be useful?

A. Since ISIS won't be stopped with military actions alone, not ours or those of groups that join us, including Iraqis and Syrians, and are in fact counter-productive, we should have learned that if there's ever to be an answer, it has to be largely diplomatic.

In particular, this could mean changing our close relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Mideast allies whose citizens and regimes have long been financing and supplying ISIS and other radical groups at the same time they provide pilots whose attacks also help strengthen ISIS. If we ceased tolerating that ideological and financial support for extremists, this would be a major step to containing and eroding ISIS. But I doubt this will happen.

Serious diplomacy would also mean changing our relationship with Russia and Iran, exploring through direct negotiations the positive contributions they could make to stabilize the region, rather than, as at present, demonizing them.

This, too, isn't likely. But if we don't face what we need to do to escape the madness we suffered and inflicted in Vietnam and Iraq, we will be mired in war in the Middle East for decades.

Q. There are posters of you around Washington DC urging those with inside information about the Pentagon's plans, to leak it. The headline is: "Don't Do What I Did." What do you hope will happen?

A. In 1964 and 1965, the lack of whistleblowers caused Vietnam to happen. I was in the Pentagon then and didn't come forward with what I knew. So I helped Vietnam happen. I very much regret that I didn't provide information when it would have done the most good, when Congress was voting on this and when the escalation was occurring. In 2002 and 2003, the lack of a Manning or Snowden with high-level access caused Iraq.

Actually, in 1964, many in the Pentagon could have put out the information the public and Congress needed to know. Not random documents. Just one drawer of selected documents showing that President Johnson was deceiving people and leading them into a hopeless war that his own Joint Chiefs believed could never

be won at the level he was willing to do it. (The heart of the Pentagon Papers took up about one drawer of a top secret safe in my office at RAND, or earlier in my office in the Pentagon).

I'm sure that comparable documents exist in safes in Washington and Arlington and McLean, Virginia, right now. I'm just as sure that dozens if not hundreds of insiders could provide the information in those documents from their own safes to Congress and the public, if they're willing to take the risks.

In 1971, after I put out the Pentagon Papers, Sen. Morse told me that if I had given him the documents from my Pentagon safe while he was on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1964, "The Tonkin Gulf Resolution would never have come out of Committee. And if they bypassed the committee and sent it to the floor, the resolution would never have passed."

That put a lot of weight on my shoulders, not unfairly. I'm urging insiders now to do better than I did then, and now is the time.

Q. What do you and ExposeFacts.org aim to do?

A. To encourage whistle-blowing that will lead people to press their congressional representatives, this month, while they're in their home districts campaigning for votes, to demand hearings, debates and a vote in an effort to block continued and escalated U.S. military involvement in Middle East conflicts.

Just a year ago, constituents did almost exactly that, button-holing representatives at home in their districts to demand "No war on Syria!" The effect on Congress was electrifying, perhaps unprecedented.

It confronted a President who was committed to an attack at the end of August, because of gas attacks in Syria whose perpetrators are still a murky and controversial topic, and who had just remembered that he was head of the "world's oldest republic" with a duty to get consent from Congress to go to war. Indeed, he could have lost the vote in both Houses. That caused him to make a sharp turn and embrace a Russian proposal to eliminate Assad's gas menace by peaceful, negotiated means.

We need something like that now. Unlikely as it is, after the ISIS gains, the public beheadings, and, not mentioned by the President before our air attacks but quickly labeled a critical target, the emergence of the dreaded "Khorasan."

On Khorasan we need serious investigative reporting, fueled by whistleblowing. Could the "classified" leaks about Khorasan just before and after the Syrian airstrikes, a group allegedly more of an imminent danger to the U.S. than ISIS,

be designed to manipulate the media and public? Could they be a fraud, just as the all-too-successful fraudulent, authorized classified leaks in 2002 about Saddam Hussein's supposed nuclear cylinders? Did these recent Khorasan leaks provide a self-defense motive for U.S. air attacks on Syria?

They sound eerily like the alleged Aug. 4, 1964 "attack" on our destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf, 50 years ago this August, an attack that never happened, which gave us the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and 11 years of war. Is there really solid evidence, as Administration officials have claimed and others leaked, of "an advanced state of planning" for imminent attacks on U.S. airliners, by a group called Khorasan or by any other? Or might it have been a hoax like that floated by the Bush Administration as Dick Cheney picked up various forgeries and fantasies, to justify our aggression against Iraq 12 years ago?

Could this administration really be re-playing the Bush and Johnson script that closely? And the media applauding the performance just as credulously?

Glenn Greenwald and Murtazsa Hussain make a strong case for this with Khorasan. This cries out for leaked or congressionally-demanded documents.

As the posters put up by ExposeFacts.org say, and one is quite near the Iraq embassy, "Don't wait until a new war has started. Don't wait until thousands more have died before you tell the truth with documents that reveal lies or crimes or internal projections of costs and dangers. You might save a war's worth of lives."

State Department, Pentagon, CIA, NSA or White House staff who follow that advice will risk unjust prosecution under the Espionage Act, as I did. Unjust because the Espionage Act was designed to deter or punish spies, not whistleblowers. It was never intended to be used against disclosures to the American public, and never used that way until my own prosecution, which was the first in American history for a leak.

Legal scholars argued then that it was an unconstitutional violation of the First Amendment to use the Espionage Act against whistleblowers. It's unjust because it doesn't allow defendants to tell the jury and public about their motives. [See Melville B. Nimmer, "National Security Issues v. Free Speech: The Issues Left Undecided in the Ellsberg Case," *Stanford Law Review* (vol. 26, No. 2, January 1974, 311-333).]

Treating sources of leaks, classified or not, like spies, is exactly what's happened under President Obama, who has brought more Espionage Act indictments for leaking than any other president, in fact, more than all of them together. And he's leaving that precedent to his successors.

The risk whistleblowers take is very great. That's why I think they should remain anonymous, if possible. ExposeFact.org, which sponsored the Washington press conference and encourages whistleblowers, proposes to facilitate their anonymity by the use of encryption.

There will always be a risk of identification, and if classified information is involved (even if it's evidence of Executive Branch crimes or other malfeasance), there will likely be prosecutions. Until Congress rescinds the wording of certain clauses in the Espionage Act and passes laws to defend the public interest, or as Harvard Law Professor Yochai Benkler proposes to call it, a "public accountability defense," they will probably be convicted. They could suffer years in prison, perhaps a life sentence, as I faced (a possible 115 years) but escaped on grounds of governmental criminal misconduct. Chelsea Manning faced the risks and now is serving 35 years. [See Benkler's recent article, "A Public Accountability Defense for National Security Leakers and Whistleblowers," *Harvard Law and Policy Review*, Vol. 8, Summer 2014.]

A heavy prospect. Worth considering only for the grimmest of circumstances. But we face them now, when a war's worth of lives might yet be saved by courageous, patriotic truth-telling.

John Kerry, as a young, just-returned Vietnam veteran, was admired by many as an outstanding whistleblower, with his unsparing account of U.S. war crimes in testimony on April 22, 1971, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. That's when he famously asked, "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

As things are now heading, he will not have to ask that of an American soldier in Iraq or Syria while Secretary of State. Nor will President Obama The last American combat death there is not now remotely possible within the next two, four or even eight years.

The Pentagon is reported to be planning for a campaign of 36 months, but I don't think Obama's and Kerry's successors will be any more ready over the next decade to admit a mistake.

The final American casualty, or last deaths inflicted in the Middle East by Americans, will not come about unless the American people tell Congress and the Executive what Lt. John Kerry said to the Senate in 1971, speaking for the newly-formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War: "We want this to stop."

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Standing Up for Lessons of Dissent

There is a general belief that Americans don't care much about history, preferring to bask in self-reverential "exceptionalism" with U.S. behavior beyond criticism. But students outside Denver are taking to the streets to protest right-wing efforts to strip dissent from the history curriculum, writes Peter Dreier.

By Peter Dreier

In Colorado, just west of Denver, Jefferson County high school students are protesting their school board's attempt to rewrite the American history curriculum. In their resistance, they are doing all Americans a favor by reminding us of the importance of dissent and protest in our nation's history.

The students are reacting to a proposal by the Jefferson County school board – Colorado's second largest school district with about 85,000 students – to change the way history is taught in the schools.

Last November, three new board members were elected to the school board, forming a conservative majority. One of them, Julie Williams, has led the charge to revise the Advanced Placement U.S. history curriculum to promote patriotism, respect for authority, and free enterprise and to guard against educational materials that "encourage or condone civil disorder."

Williams said she believes that the current Advanced Placement curriculum in American history places an excessive emphasis on "race, gender, class, ethnicity, grievance and American-bashing."

With the support of many teachers and parents, the Colorado students have engaged in a protest of their own to teach the school board a lesson. It began on Monday, Sept. 22, when about 100 students walked out at Evergreen High School, one of 17 high schools in the suburban district outside Denver.

Since then the protests have gained momentum, fueled by social media and student-to-student contact. As the *New York Times* reported, they "streamed out of school and along busy thoroughfares, waving signs and championing the value of learning about the fractious and tumultuous chapters of American history."

By last week, the number of students involved in the protest had mushroomed. On Thursday, according to the *Denver Post*, more than 1,000 students walked out of class behind a new unified slogan – "It's our history; don't make it mystery."

History of Protest

Back in 1900, people were considered impractical idealists, utopian dreamers or dangerous socialists for advocating women's suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the right of workers to form unions, a progressive income tax, a federal minimum wage, old-age insurance, dismantling of Jim Crow laws, the eight-hour workday, and government-subsidized health care. Now we take these ideas for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

As Americans, we stand on the shoulders of earlier generations of reformers, radicals and idealists who challenged the status quo of their day. They helped change America by organizing movements, pushing for radical reforms, popularizing progressive ideas, and spurring others to action.

To understand American society, we need to know about the accomplishments of people like Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, Eugene Debs, Robert La Follette, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. DuBois, Frances Perkins, Lewis Hine, A.J. Muste, Alice Paul, A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Day, Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Fiorello LaGuardia, Myles Horton, Rachel Carson, Walter Reuther, Thurgood Marshall, Bayard Rustin, Woody Guthrie, Cesar Chavez, Barry Commoner, Ella Baker, Jackie Robinson, Bella Abzug, Pete Seeger, Martin Luther King, Harvey Milk, Ralph Nader, Gloria Steinem, John Lewis and Billie Jean King.

If some of these names aren't quite household names, that reflects our failure as a society to recognize and teach our students about some of the major dissenters, rebels and reformers who have shaped our nation's history.

Even today, grassroots movements have continued to push and pull America in a positive direction, often against difficult odds. Today's battles over the minimum wage, Wall Street reform, immigrant rights, climate change, voting rights, gun control, and same-sex marriage build on the foundation of previous generations of dissenters.

Each generation of Americans faces a different set of economic, political, and social conditions. There are no easy formulas for challenging injustice and promoting democracy. But unless we know this history, we will have little understanding of how far we have come, how we got here, and what still needs to change to make America (and the rest of the world) more livable, humane and democratic.

The Jefferson County School Board's attempt to ignore or downplay the long tradition of dissent, protest and conflict that has always shaped American society is hardly unique. In the early 1990s, Lynne Cheney, who headed the National Endowment for the Humanities during the first Bush Administration (and

is the wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney), attacked the teaching of American history for presenting a "grim and gloomy" account of America's past.

After that, conservatives on local school boards around the country escalated their efforts and continue them today. It is part of the backlash against the increasing examination by historians of the roles of women, African-Americans, Latinos, native Americans, dissenters, and movements in American history.

But such battles go back even further than Cheney's campaign. In the 1979 book, *America Revised*, Frances Fitzgerald examined how the teaching of American history has been the subject of an ongoing debate going back to the 1800s, fueled by political differences over the nature of American identity. Conservatives have traditionally sought to emphasize consensus over conflict in the development of U.S. history textbooks and curriculum.

As the College Board observed in a statement issued on Friday, the Jefferson County students "recognize that the social order can – and sometimes must – be disrupted in the pursuit of liberty and justice. Civil disorder and social strife are at the patriotic heart of American history – from the Boston Tea Party to the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement. And these events and ideas are essential within the study of a college-level, AP U.S. History course."

It would be fitting and appropriate for the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association to give these students an award at their next meetings for their commitment to the teaching of American history. Perhaps one or both of these organizations could invite some of the students to give a presentation about their protest campaign as part of a plenary session on the teaching of AP American history. It would surely be the most well-attended session at either conference.

Such a gesture by one or both of the leading organizations of historians would inspire high school students elsewhere to challenge arbitrary authority and put the two organizations on record in opposition to the efforts by school boards to distort the teaching of history for overtly political purposes.

Peter Dreier is the Dr. E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics, and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department, at Occidental College. His most recent book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012)

A Poison Pill for the Iran-Nuke Deal

Many in Congress continue to march in lockstep with the dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu who wants endless hostility toward Iran even if that torpedoed a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear program. That includes a pointless demand for a past confession, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Some of the most recent efforts to derail a nuclear agreement with Iran have been focusing on what has come to be called "possible military dimensions" (PMD), a term that refers to any work Iran has performed in the past on designing nuclear weapons.

One of the latest such efforts is a letter that the leaders of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Edward Royce and Eliot Engel, have circulated for signature by their congressional colleagues. The letter essentially says that all questions about PMD need to be cleared up before we can reach any agreement to restrict Iran's nuclear program.

The government of Iran will not issue during the next couple of months a public confession about past research or design work on nuclear weapons. This simply won't happen. So for the United States or its negotiating partners to make clearing up of all questions about PMD a prerequisite to signing an agreement would be a deal-killer. Most of those pushing the PMD issue hardest probably recognize it would be a deal-killer, which is why they are pushing it.

The Royce-Engel letter attempts to relate past behavior to future requirements in enforcing an agreement by asserting there must be a "baseline" of information about the past to assess Iran's current and future nuclear activity. That assertion lacks logic. Baseline information is important in many things, where what matters is the amount and direction of change in a continuing process, such as what is measured by achievement test scores in education, or by blood tests tracking the level of an antigen produced by the human body.

But under an agreement with Iran *no* work on nuclear weapons would be allowed. It's not a matter of comparing the pace of current activity with the pace of past activity. *Any* such activity would be a clear violation of Iran's obligations under the agreement, as well as its existing obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

The single biggest reason, from the standpoint of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon, for completing the agreement under negotiation is to extend and expand the inspection arrangements, already, under the preliminary agreement,

unprecedented in their scope and intensity, including full adherence to the Additional Protocol governing inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

That is what is needed to be confident that the Iranian nuclear program remains peaceful, not some 'fessing up about something done in the distant past. Besides, if the Iranians really wanted to cheat, they would be stupid simply to pick up or duplicate what they had done in the past (and which they already knew Western governments and intelligence services were on to).

The distant past is getting steadily more distant, and even more irrelevant to present concerns. The publicly expressed judgment of the U.S. intelligence community on this subject is that Iran did work on the design of nuclear weapons but that it ceased such work in 2003, now more than a decade ago.

The basic choice in handling the PMD issue in the negotiations now in progress is between attempting to get a confession about behavior that ended more than a decade ago and getting an agreement that provides the best possible assurance that there will be no Iranian nuclear weapon in the future. The advantage of choosing the latter option should be obvious enough when the choice is phrased that way.

It should be even more obvious when considering that in terms of actual results, the realistic alternatives are, on one hand, being hard-line on the PMD issue and getting *neither* the confession nor an agreement, and on the other hand, getting an agreement that restricts and monitors Iran's nuclear program to an extent that years of pressure and hard-lining on our side never were able to achieve.

In the history of nuclear nonproliferation efforts, the failures, including one conspicuous case of not acknowledging either past *or* current activity, have been offset by successes that have included several cases, ranging from Sweden to South Korea, in which states with nuclear weapons programs moved away from them and decided instead to commit themselves to a nuclear-weapons-free future. Isn't that what we supposedly want from Iran today?

Those earlier cases did not involve past confessions but instead a straightforward commitment to keeping national nuclear programs peaceful in the present and future. In a speech on the floor of the Senate in January, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, referred to such earlier cases in stating, "I believe countries can change. This capacity to change also applies to the pursuit of nuclear weapons."

The question before us, said the senator, is whether Iran is "willing to change

its past behavior." It is change from past behavior, not a public confession about past behavior, that matters.

It is the "job of diplomacy," said Feinstein, "to push for that change." It is the job of analysts and pundits to realize that agreements need to be assessed according to how they shape future behavior, not just make some statement about the past.

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.)
