

# Obama, the People and the Facts

**Exclusive:** The political crisis facing President Obama and the Democratic Party results from a profound loss of faith in the U.S. government, made worse by Obama's obsessive secrecy. But he could address both problems by opening the books on some key hidden chapters relevant to today, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There is much handwringing among Democrats about the deepening pessimism that pervades the American people as they question the value of governance and even the viability of a democratic Republic. As the rich get richer, the middle class shrinks and foreign wars go on endlessly, many people feel powerless to change things. They don't trust politicians and are not even inspired enough to vote.

In November, this malaise meant the electorate, in effect, ceded control of the House and Senate to the Republicans who find their anti-government themes at least reinforced in this despairing environment. The Democrats have a tougher sell amid the cynicism. To alter the dynamic, they must convince people that the government is on their side and can make a positive difference.

But there is a simple way for President Barack Obama to address this political crisis: He could give an old-fashioned Oval Office speech that shares with the people key facts about what has been going on around the world over the past dozen years or so. He could engage the public not by spinning with clever rhetoric but by telling some unvarnished truths much like Dwight Eisenhower did in his "military-industrial complex" speech or John Kennedy did when saying "we all inhabit this small planet."

Obama could start by releasing the secret section of the 9/11 Report that discusses Saudi financing of the hijackers who attacked the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon outside Washington. Americans have the right to know these facts, especially with Saudi Arabia now pressing the United States to join in overthrowing the government of Syria, a move which could open the gates of Damascus to a victory by al-Qaeda's Nusra Front or the even more extreme Islamic State. Just whose side is Saudi Arabia on?

By giving the American people facts about this erstwhile ally, Obama could let the public better assess whether another "regime change" war in the Middle East is in U.S. national interests or not. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Israeli-Saudi Alliance Slips into View."]

Secondly, Obama could disclose as much of the Senate's torture report as possible, overriding the quibbling complaints of his CIA Director John Brennan.

America's descent into torture and other war crimes is a chapter of U.S. history that the public should know so no sequel will ever be written. There is an old saying that sunlight is the best disinfectant and if anything needs the light of day, it is the dark side where Vice President Dick Cheney and the neoconservatives took the country.

But Obama should go beyond the secrets of the last administration and update the American people on some more recent events. I'm told that U.S. intelligence has changed its assessments of several key incidents that raised tensions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

There was the sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, that Secretary of State John Kerry and other senior officials rushed to blame on the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Kerry urged a punitive military campaign against Syria's military. But many of the pillars of Kerry's argument including the number of sarin-laden missiles and the actual range of the one rocket that was found to carry sarin have since collapsed.

Increasingly, it appears that some extremist Syrian rebels may have carried out the attack as a provocation to force Obama's hand and get him to retaliate against Assad for crossing the "red line" that Obama had drawn earlier on chemical weapons use. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?"]

Though Obama pulled back from a military strike at the last minute and accepted Russian President Vladimir Putin's help to get Assad to surrender all his chemical weapons, the mistaken allegations from Kerry and others have never been retracted and thus contribute to a political climate favorable to attacking Assad's military just as the Saudis, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the neocons and Israel want.

Whatever the current intelligence assessment about the sarin attack, Obama could share it with the American people, taking them into his counsel rather than treating them like suckers whose only purpose is to be manipulated into doing what the powers-that-be have already decided.

### **Ukraine Crisis**

Obama could do the same regarding two violent incidents that plunged the world into another crisis in Ukraine. On Feb. 20, there was mysterious sniper fire around Kiev's Maidan square that killed both police and protesters, thus escalating the violence. U.S. officials and the mainstream U.S. press pinned the sniper shootings on elected President Viktor Yanukovich, setting the stage for the Feb. 22 coup that ousted him.

Since then, ethnic/political violence has torn Ukraine apart and sparked a new Cold War between Russia and the West. But the identity of the snipers has remained a mystery and some evidence has suggested that they were actually working for extremists within the anti-Yanukovych movement, i.e. a provocation. Some investigative journalists have traced some of the sniper fire to buildings controlled by the neo-Nazi Right Sektor.

Accelerating the Ukraine crisis was the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17. The incident prompted another rush to judgment by Secretary Kerry and the U.S. political/media establishment blaming the disaster which killed 298 people on the ethnic Russian rebels and, indirectly, Russia and Putin for supposedly supplying the anti-aircraft missile that brought down the civilian plane.

The MH-17 hysteria got the European Union to sign off on anti-Russian sanctions that began a trade war that has harmed both Russia's and the EU's economies as well as edging the world toward a new and costly Cold War.

Yet, some and maybe all of the initial MH-17 assumptions now appear to have been wrong, with Western intelligence services seemingly unable to confirm that Russia provided the rebels with an anti-aircraft system that could bring down a plane at 33,000 feet. Russia's slow-moving Buk missile batteries are quite large and would be easily detected by American spy satellites and other intelligence capabilities.

According to Der Spiegel, German intelligence has dismissed the idea of the Russians supplying the system, saying the rebels may have captured a missile battery from a Ukrainian military base and shot down the passenger plane by accident. I've been told that some U.S. intelligence analysts now suspect that a rogue element of the Ukrainian government was responsible for the tragedy, not the rebels.

The question of what U.S. intelligence now knows about the MH-17 case is particularly important since Congress may move to pass a highly belligerent resolution that amounts to a declaration of a new Cold War against Russia and calls for sending U.S. military equipment and trainers to Ukraine. One of the justifications is that "Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, a civilian airliner, was destroyed by a Russian-made missile provided by the Russian Federation to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine, resulting in the loss of 298 innocent lives."

[Update: The sense-of-the-House resolution passed on Dec. 4 in a 411-10 vote with only five Democrats and five Republicans voting no.]

This intemperate legislation, House Resolution 758, has the earmarks of a new Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which started the Vietnam War based on what turned out to be a rush to judgment over a murky military incident in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam in 1964. But the Ukraine situation is arguably more hazardous since Congress is considering a confrontation on the border of nuclear-armed Russia. If Obama knows better – regarding the circumstances of the Malaysia Airlines shoot-down – it is crucial that he speaks out now.

Whatever the ultimate truth, it's clear that the U.S. government's understandings of the circumstances surrounding the sniper fire at the Maidan and the MH-17 disaster have changed since the first frantic days of those two pivotal incidents. Given the costs and dangers of a new Cold War, President Obama could show respect for the American people by at least updating them on what is now known and correcting earlier false reports.

Simply by admitting some errors in the hasty U.S. finger-pointing, Obama could have a positive effect in cooling down passions and creating political space for a more rational debate.

A stark presidential speech with straightforward information and minimal theatrics also could go a long way toward convincing Americans that they are not being treated like sheep getting herded to the slaughterhouse, that their government trusts them and thus maybe they should trust their government.

Politically, it's even hard to identify the downside for Obama for giving such a speech. By taking the American people into his confidence, Obama would finally fulfill his campaign pledge of maximum "transparency." He would energize his now demoralized progressive "base." And, he could even win support from many conservatives since the Right's libertarian wing has been calling for less government secrecy and more public knowledge about these foreign crises.

Yes, Obama might offend the elitist neoconservatives who have long believed that the American people should be manipulated through propaganda themes, not empowered by honest information. And, some officials in his and his predecessor's administrations surely would prefer to keep their dirty deeds and their hasty misjudgments secret.

No one likes to admit error or face accountability, but it is misfeasance or worse for Obama to conceal government wrongdoing or to maintain false accusations when exculpatory evidence is now available. That is especially true when the erroneous impressions risk taking the United States into another hot war, as is the case with Syria, or into another Cold War, as is the case with Ukraine and Russia.

If Obama can't find the courage to share important facts with the American people – if he can't rise to the occasion as Eisenhower and Kennedy once did – he will only confirm the growing sense that he is just another elitist politician who feigns respect for the public but does the bidding of the rich and powerful.

Even worse, Obama will contribute to a historic loss of faith among the citizenry toward their constitutional government, which asserted in 1787 that national sovereignty was based on "We the People of the United States."

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest 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](#).**

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## The Right's Dubious Claim to Madison

**From the Archive:** Central to the question of whether America's Right is correct that the Constitution mandated a weak central government is the person of James Madison and what he and his then-fellow Federalists were doing at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, wrote Robert Parry in 2013.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on June 23, 2013)

By asserting a connection to America's First Principles, the Tea Party is forcing a reexamination of the early years of the Republic and a reconsideration of what the Framers of the U.S. Constitution intended.

That debate may be useful even if the Tea Party's chief motivation in provoking it is simply a "rebranding" that recognizes that the image of white people waving the "Stars and Bars" and seeking "states' rights" to disenfranchise black and brown people has a negative connotation for many modern Americans.

So, to present a more palatable image, today's Right has dialed back the time machine from 1860 to 1776, trading in the Confederate flag for the Revolutionary War-era Gadsden flag with its coiled snake and "Don't Tread on Me" motto, except with the federal government replacing the British monarchy as the source of "tyranny."

Substantively, however, nothing has changed in this rebranding. There's the same animosity that the Confederates felt toward President Abraham Lincoln and the Union when the South's beloved institution of slavery was threatened. Only now the neo-Confederates are expressing their hatred for President Barack Obama and the federal government for advocating programs like voting rights, immigration reform, food stamps and guaranteed health care that are viewed by the predominantly white Tea Party as disproportionately aiding racial and ethnic minorities.

But instead of referencing the precedent of the Confederacy's secession from the Union in defense of "states' rights" and slavery, the Tea Party and today's Right are asserting that they simply want to restore the original vision of America's Founding, which they insist is not much different from the argument that the Confederates were making in 1860.

To that end, the Right has invested heavily in "scholarship" that seeks to present the Framers as essentially pre-Confederates who believed strongly in "states' rights" and wanted a weak central government. However, that "history," in turn, requires slanting the evidence and kidnapping of one key Founder in particular.

### **Madison as Flip-Flopper**

At the center of today's ideological struggle over the Founding era is James Madison, a chief architect of the U.S. Constitution when he was essentially a protégé of George Washington in the 1780s. But Madison was also a practical politician who drifted in the 1790s and later into the orbit of his central Virginia neighbor, Thomas Jefferson, who led bitter fights against Washington's Federalists and especially Alexander Hamilton.

This ambivalence of Madison as central to Washington's vision of a strong central government yet his later realignment with Jefferson's fierce loyalty to Virginia and its interests makes him a perfect candidate for the Right's rewriting of the narrative surrounding the Constitution. The earlier Madison who sided with Washington on centralizing government power can be blurred with the later Madison who supported Jefferson in defending Virginia's regional interests, particularly its investment in slavery.

In this regard, Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg's *Madison and Jefferson* offers some valuable insights into the history of the era and the political collaboration between these two important Founders. Unlike many histories that glorify Jefferson in particular, this book, published in 2010, provides a fairly objective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the two leaders.

Perhaps the authors' most significant observation is that Jefferson and Madison must be understood as, first and foremost, politicians representing the interests of their constituencies in Virginia where the two men lived nearby each other on plantations worked by African-American slaves, Jefferson at Monticello and Madison at Montpelier.

"It is hard for most to think of Madison and Jefferson and admit that they were Virginians first, Americans second," Burstein and Isenberg note. "But this fact seems beyond dispute. Virginians felt they had to act to protect the interests of the Old Dominion, or else, before long, they would become marginalized by a northern-dominated economy.

"Virginians who thought in terms of the profit to be reaped in land were often reluctant to invest in manufacturing enterprises. The real tragedy is that they chose to speculate in slaves rather than in textile factories and iron works. And so as Virginians tied their fortunes to the land, they failed to extricate themselves from a way of life that was limited in outlook and produced only resistance to economic development."

Not only was Virginia's agriculture tied to the institution of slavery but after the Constitution banned the importation of slaves in 1808, Virginia developed a new industry, the breeding of slaves for sale to new states forming in the west.

### **The Virginia Dynasty**

In that way, the so-called Virginia Dynasty over the presidency that ran consecutively from Jefferson in 1801 through Madison starting in 1809 and James Monroe ending in 1825 defended the interests of the South's slaveholders in part by constraining the role of the federal government in building the young nation's industrial strength and its financial development.

It had been a fear among Southern politicians from the earliest days of American independence that a strong federal government would eventually eradicate slavery. So, it was a Southern imperative carried forward by the Virginia Dynasty to limit that power even though Madison had been instrumental in centralizing it.

While the Right likes to look at Madison as a constitutional purist who always favored tightly constrained federal powers, a more useful prism for seeing the historical Madison is that he shifted from the patronage of Washington, who despised the idea of state "sovereignty" after experiencing its inefficiency while commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, to the tutelage of the brilliant but mercurial Jefferson, who was wedded to the interests of Virginia.

Whereas Washington working with his protégés Madison and Hamilton had a

national vision of a fast-developing country with states subordinate to the federal government, Jefferson could not move beyond his more parochial concept of Virginia and Southern states maintaining substantial freedom from a federal government that might seek to abolish slavery.

Under Washington's wing in the years immediately after independence while Jefferson was serving as the U.S. representative to France Madison recognized the disaster of the Articles of Confederation, which set the rules for U.S. governance from 1777 to 1787. The Articles made the 13 states "sovereign" and "independent" and deemed the federal government simply a "league of friendship." For instance, Madison shared Washington's interest in placing the development of national commerce under the control of the federal government, but Madison's initial Commerce Clause failed to win the support of the Virginia legislature.

The United States was also flailing in regards to maintaining domestic security with the Shays' Rebellion rocking western Massachusetts in 1786-87 and the federal government too weak to help restore order. Washington feared that Great Britain would exploit the regional and social divisions of the new country and thus threaten its hard-won independence.

"Thirteen sovereignties," Washington wrote, "pulling against each other, and all tugging at the federal head, will soon bring ruin to the whole." [See Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia*.]

### **Madison's Federalism**

Madison was of a similar mind. In 1781, as a member of the Congress under the Articles of Confederation, he introduced a radical amendment that "would have required states that ignored their federal responsibilities or refused to be bound by decisions of Congress to be compelled to do so by use of the army or navy or by the seizure of exported goods," noted Chris DeRose in *Founding Rivals*. However, Madison's plan opposed by the powerful states went nowhere.

Similarly, Madison lamented how the variety of currencies issued by the 13 states and the lack of uniform standards on weights and measures impeded trade. Again, he looked futilely toward finding federal solutions to these state problems.

So, after a decade of growing frustration and mounting crises under the Articles, a convention was called in Philadelphia in 1787 to modify them. Washington and Madison, however, had a bigger idea. They pressed instead to scrap the Articles altogether in favor of a new constitutional structure that would invest broad powers in the central government and remove language on state sovereignty and independence.

Madison told Washington that the states had to be made “subordinately useful,” a sentiment that Washington shared after seeing how states had failed to meet their financial obligations to his troops during the Revolution.

As Washington presided over the convention, it fell to Madison to supply the framework for the new system. Madison’s plan called for a strong central government with clear dominance over the states. Madison’s original plan even contained a provision to give Congress veto power over state decisions.

The broader point of the Constitutional Convention was that the United States must act as one nation, not a squabbling collection of states and regions. James Wilson from Pennsylvania reminded the delegates that “we must remember the language with which we began the Revolution: ‘Virginia is no more, Massachusetts is no more, Pennsylvania is no more. We are now one nation of brethren, we must bury all local interests and distinctions.’”

However, as the contentious convention wore on over the summer, Madison retreated from some of his more extreme positions. “Madison wanted the federal assembly to have a veto over the state assemblies,” wrote David Wootton, author of *The Essential Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers*. “Vetoes, however, are bad politics, and again and again they had to be abandoned in the course of turning drafts into agreed texts.”

But Madison still pushed through a governing structure that bestowed important powers on the central government including the ability to tax, to print money, to control foreign policy, to conduct wars and to regulate interstate commerce.

Madison also came up with a plan for approving the Constitution that bypassed the state assemblies and instead called for special state conventions for ratification. He knew that if the Constitution went before the existing assemblies with the obvious diminution of their powers it wouldn’t stand a chance to win the approval of the necessary nine states.

### **Resistance to the Constitution**

Still, the Constitution prompted fierce opposition from many prominent Americans who recognized how severely it reduced the powers of the states in favor of the central government. These Anti-Federalists decried the broad and sometimes vague language that shifted the country away from a confederation of independent states to a system that made the central government supreme.

What Madison and his cohorts had achieved in Philadelphia was not lost on these Anti-Federalists, including Pennsylvania delegates who had been on the losing side and who then explained their opposition in a lengthy report which declared: “We dissent because the powers vested in Congress by this constitution, must

necessarily annihilate and absorb the legislative, executive, and judicial powers of the several states, and produce from their ruins one consolidated government.

“The new government will not be a confederacy of states, as it ought, but one consolidated government, founded upon the destruction of the several governments of the states. The powers of Congress under the new constitution, are complete and unlimited over the purse and the sword, and are perfectly independent of, and supreme over, the state governments; whose intervention in these great points is entirely destroyed.”

The Pennsylvania dissenters noted that the state sovereignty language from the Articles of Confederation was stripped out of the Constitution and that national sovereignty was implicitly transferred to “We the People of the United States” in the Preamble. They pointed out that the Constitution’s Article Six made federal statutes and treaties “the supreme law of the land.”

“The legislative power vested in Congress is so unlimited in its nature; may be so comprehensive and boundless [in] its exercise, that this alone would be amply sufficient to annihilate the state governments, and swallow them up in the grand vortex of general empire,” the Pennsylvania dissenters declared.

Some Anti-Federalists charged that the President of the United States would have the powers of a monarch and that the states would be reduced to little more than vassals of the central authority. Others mocked the trust that Madison placed in his schemes of “checks and balances,” that is, having the different branches of government block others from committing any grave abridgement of liberties.

Famed Revolutionary War orator Patrick Henry, one of the leading Anti-Federalists, denounced Madison’s scheme of countervailing powers as “specious imaginary balances, your rope-dancing, chain-rattling, ridiculous ideal checks and contrivances.” Henry and other opponents favored scrapping the new Constitution and calling a second convention.

### **Toward Ratification**

Though the Anti-Federalists were surely hyperbolic in some of their rhetoric, they were substantially correct in identifying the Constitution as a bold assertion of federal power and a major transformation from the previous system of state independence.

For his part, Madison was not only the chief architect of this shift from state to national power, he even favored a clearer preference for federal dominance with his veto idea over actions by state assemblies, the proposal that died in the compromising at Philadelphia. However, Madison and other Federalists faced a

more immediate political challenge in late 1787 and early 1788 securing ratification of the new Constitution in the face of potent opposition from the Anti-Federalists.

Despite Madison's ploy of requiring special ratifying conventions in the various states, the Anti-Federalists appeared to hold the upper hand in key states, such as Virginia and New York. So, to defend the new Constitution, Madison joined with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay in anonymously composing the Federalist Papers, a series of essays which not only sought to explain what the Constitution would do but perhaps more importantly to rebut the accusations of the Anti-Federalists.

Indeed, the Federalist Papers are best understood not as the defining explanation of the Framers' intent since the actual words of the Constitution (contrasted with the Articles of Confederation) and the debates in Philadelphia speak best to that but as an attempt to tamp down the political fury directed at the proposed new system.

Thus, when the Anti-Federalists thundered about the broad new powers granted the central government, Madison and his co-authors countered by playing down how radical the new system was and insisting that the changes were more tinkering with the old system than the total overhaul that they appeared to be.

That is the context which today's Right misses when it cites Madison's comments in Federalist Paper No. 45, entitled "The Alleged Danger From the Powers of the Union to the State Governments Considered," in which Madison, using the pseudonym Publius, sought to minimize what the Constitution would do. He wrote:

"If the new Constitution be examined with accuracy, it will be found that the change which it proposes consists much less in the addition of NEW POWERS to the Union, than in the invigoration of its ORIGINAL POWERS.

"The regulation of commerce, it is true, is a new power; but that seems to be an addition which few oppose, and from which no apprehensions are entertained. The powers relating to war and peace, armies and fleets, treaties and finance, with the other more considerable powers, are all vested in the existing Congress by the Articles of Confederation. The proposed change does not enlarge these powers; it only substitutes a more effectual mode of administering them."

Today's Right trumpets this essay and especially Madison's summation that "the powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite" but the Right ignores what Madison was trying to accomplish with his essay. He was trying to defuse the opposition. After all, if Madison really

thought the Articles only needed some modest reform, why would he have insisted on throwing them out altogether along with their language about state “sovereignty” and “independence”?

### **Power with Teeth**

Nor was it entirely accurate for Madison to suggest that replacing the federal government’s toothless powers in the Articles with powers having real teeth in the Constitution was trivial. Under the Constitution, for instance, the printing of money became the exclusive purview of the federal government, not a minor change. Madison also was a touch disingenuous when he downplayed the importance of the Commerce Clause, which gave the central government control over interstate commerce. Madison understood how important that federal authority was.

To cite Madison as an opponent of an activist federal government, the Right must also ignore Federalist Paper No. 14 in which Madison envisioned major construction projects under the powers granted by the Commerce Clause. “[T]he union will be daily facilitated by new improvements,” Madison wrote. “Roads will everywhere be shortened, and kept in better order; accommodations for travelers will be multiplied and meliorated; an interior navigation on our eastern side will be opened throughout, or nearly throughout the whole extent of the Thirteen States.

“The communication between the western and Atlantic districts, and between different parts of each, will be rendered more and more easy by those numerous canals with which the beneficence of nature has intersected our country, and which art finds it so little difficult to connect and complete.”

What Madison is demonstrating in that essay is a core reality about what he, Washington and Hamilton were seeking. They were pragmatists seeking to build a strong and unified nation.

Yet, despite the prestige of George Washington and the propaganda of the Federalist Papers, Madison encountered intense opposition to ratification at the Virginia convention where fears of a federal abolition of slavery were raised, ironically, by two of the most famous voices for “liberty,” Patrick Henry and George Mason.

Henry and Mason have gone down in popular U.S. history as great espousers of freedom. Before the Revolution, Henry was quoted as declaring, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Mason is hailed as a leading force behind the Bill of Rights. But their notion of “liberty” and “rights” was always selective. Henry and Mason worried about protecting the “freedom” of plantation owners to possess other

human beings as property.

### **The Virginia Convention**

At Virginia's Ratification Convention in June 1788, Henry and Mason raised several arguments against the proposed Constitution, but their hot-button appeal centered on the danger they foresaw regarding the abolition of slavery.

As historians Burstein and Isenberg wrote in *Madison and Jefferson*, Henry and Mason warned the plantation owners at the convention that "slavery, the source of Virginia's tremendous wealth, lay politically unprotected." At the center of this fear was the state's loss of ultimate control over its militia which could be "federalized" by the President as the nation's commander-in-chief under the proposed Constitution.

"Mason repeated what he had said during the Constitutional Convention: that the new government failed to provide for 'domestic safety' if there was no explicit protection for Virginians' slave property," Burstein and Isenberg wrote. "Henry called up the by-now-ingrained fear of slave insurrections the direct result, he believed, of Virginia's loss of authority over its own militia."

Henry floated conspiracy theories about possible subterfuges that the federal government might employ to deny Virginians and other Southerners the "liberty" to own African-Americans. Describing this fear-mongering, Burstein and Isenberg wrote:

"Congress, if it wished, could draft every slave into the military and liberate them at the end of their service. If troop quotas were determined by population, and Virginia had over 200,000 slaves, Congress might say: 'Every black man must fight.' For that matter, a northern-controlled Congress might tax slavery out of existence. Mason and Henry both ignored the fact that the Constitution protected slavery on the strength of the three-fifths clause, the fugitive slave clause, and the slave trade clause. Their rationale was that none of this mattered if the North should have its way."

At Philadelphia in 1787, the drafters of the Constitution had already capitulated to the South's insistence on its brutal institution of human enslavement. That surrender became the line of defense that Madison cited as he sought to finesse the arguments of Mason and Henry.

Burstein and Isenberg wrote, "Madison rose to reject their conspiratorial view. He argued that the central government had no power to order emancipation, and that Congress would never 'alienate the affections five-thirteenths of the Union' by stripping southerners of their property. 'Such an idea never entered into any American breast,' he said indignantly, 'nor do I believe it ever will.'

“Madison was doing his best to make Henry and Mason sound like fear-mongers. Yet Mason struck a chord in his insistence that northerners could never understand slavery; and Henry roused the crowd with his refusal to trust ‘any man on earth’ with his rights. Virginians were hearing that their sovereignty was in jeopardy.”

Despite the success of Mason and Henry to play on the fears of plantation owners, the broader arguments stressing the advantages of Union carried the day, albeit narrowly. Virginia ultimately approved ratification by 89 to 79.

### **Return of Jefferson**

With the return of Jefferson from France in 1789, the political physics of the young Republic began to change. Though Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, had offered little input into the development of the Constitution, he immediately grew concerned over how the Federalists around Washington and Hamilton sought to implement it, with ambitious projects for national development.

Jefferson, who served as Washington’s Secretary of State, and Hamilton, who was Treasury Secretary, represented the two poles of how the nation should proceed and their clashes were personal as well as ideological. The two men gave impetus to the emergence of “factions,” what Washington had feared as a great threat to the Republic.

Soon the lines were drawn between Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans and Hamilton’s (and Washington’s) Federalists. In the middle was Madison who shocked Hamilton and Washington by essentially abandoning their side of the argument and aligning himself with Jefferson. In the Federalist view, the gravitational pull of Virginian politics had yanked Madison out of Washington’s orbit and moved him into Jefferson’s.

Madison, who had previously recognized the logical disconnect between the liberties of a Republic and the existence of slavery, soon fell silent on the issue. As Burstein and Isenberg note, 1791 was the last time Madison criticized slavery publicly: “That was when Madison prepared notes for a *National Gazette* essay, never published, in which he asserted that slavery and republicanism were incompatible.”

In effect, Jefferson began acting on the logic of the Henry-Mason argument, that a strong central government would eventually doom slavery. Thus, Jefferson opposed the Federalist project to deploy the empowered central government under the Constitution to build the nation, ideas like Hamilton’s national bank and even Madison’s road construction.

Jefferson proved to be an adept, even ruthless, politician as he secretly financed newspaper attacks on his Federalist rivals, such as John Adams, who succeeded Washington as the second president in 1797. Jefferson pushed Adams aside in 1801 to become the third president.

In doing so, Jefferson presented his ideology as an insistence that the Constitution be strictly interpreted to keep federal authority within its "enumerated powers." Politically, he portrayed his movement as one defending simple "farmers," but his true base of political support was the Southern slaveholding aristocracy.

### **Jefferson's Racism**

Jefferson's racism, which included pseudo-science of skull measurements to prove the inferiority of African-Americans in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, colored his administration's foreign policy, too. He sided with French Emperor Napoleon's scheme to crush the slave uprising in Haiti, a movement for black freedom that Jefferson feared would spread northward.

Ironically, the defeat of Napoleon's army in Haiti forced the Emperor to forego the second phase of his plan, to expand his empire into the center of the North American continent. Instead, he offered to sell it to Jefferson in a deal negotiated by Secretary of State Madison. In buying the Louisiana territories, Jefferson and Madison ignored the principle of the Constitution's "enumerated powers" which didn't say anything about buying land that doubled the size of the country.

Similarly, as the fourth president, Madison's stumbling performance in the War of 1812 changed his mind about the value of a national bank as a necessity for financing an effective military force.

Yet, while showing flexibility on their governing principles while in office, Jefferson and Madison hardened in defense of Virginia's industry of slavery. Though both recognized the principled case against slavery, their political and financial interests overcame any moral qualms that they may have had.

After their presidencies, Jefferson and Madison remained loyal to their neighbors, the slaveholders of Virginia who as a group had discovered a lucrative new industry, breeding slaves for sale to the new states emerging in the west. Jefferson himself saw the financial benefit of having fertile female slaves.

"I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm," Jefferson remarked. "What she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption."

While recognizing the economic value of slavery, Jefferson suggested that the ultimate resolution of slavery would be to expatriate black Americans out of the country. One of Jefferson's ideas was to take away the children born to black slaves in the U.S. and ship them to Haiti. In that way, Jefferson posited that both slavery and America's black population could be phased out.

### **Slaveholders as Victims**

Jefferson and Madison also insisted on framing the slavery issue as one in which the white Southerners who owned slaves were the real victims. In 1820, Jefferson wrote a letter expressing his alarm over the bitter battle surrounding the admission of Missouri as a slave state. "As it is, we have the wolf by the ear and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go," Jefferson wrote. The imagery sought sympathy for the Southern slaveholders as the ones caught in a dangerous predicament, tenuously holding onto a ravenous wolf.

After returning to his Virginia plantation, Madison expressed his own sympathy for the slave-owning South in a play that he wrote, entitled "Jonathan Bull and Mary Bull." The plot involved the wife Mary having one black arm, which husband Jonathan had accepted at the time of their marriage but later found offensive. He demanded that Mary either have her skin peeled off or her arm cut off.

In Madison's script, Jonathan Bull becomes obnoxious and insistent even though his remedy is cruel and even life-threatening. "I can no longer consort with one marked with such a deformity as the blot on your person," Jonathan tells Mary, who is "so stunned by the language she heard that it was some time before she could speak at all."

Madison's play clumsily made the belligerent and cruel Jonathan represent the North and the sympathetic and threatened Mary the South. As historians Burstein and Isenberg note, "Madison's refusal to acknowledge the North's right to speak out against southern slavery is matched by his feminization of the South, vulnerable if not wholly innocent and routinely subjected to unwarranted pressure."

In other words, Madison considered the South's white slaveholders the real victims here, and the North's abolitionists were unfeeling monsters.

Late in his life, Jefferson was confronted on the moral and intellectual contradiction between his soaring "all men are created equal" rhetoric and his prosaic defense of slavery. The French patriot, the Marquis de Lafayette, who had fought at Washington's side against the British and who became an advocate for emancipation in 1788, challenged his old friend Jefferson during a tour of the country that Lafayette had helped forge.

In 1820, Lafayette “pressed Jefferson to become again the activist [for liberty] he had been when they first met.” Lafayette told Jefferson that “I find, in the Negro Slavery, a Great draw Back Upon My Enjoyments” from the success of American independence, as Burstein and Isenberg note.

But Lafayette’s pain over the continuation and even expansion of slavery in the United States did not move Jefferson to reconsider his position. Unlike Washington and some other Founders whose wills freed their slaves, Jefferson (who died in 1826) and Madison (who died in 1836) did not grant any blanket freedom. Madison freed none of his slaves; Jefferson only freed a few related to the Hemings family of which his purported mistress, Sally Hemings, was a member.

### **Heading to War**

Jefferson and Madison (at least the later incarnation of Madison as Jefferson’s ally) also helped put the nation on the path to the Civil War by lending support to the “nullification” movement in which Southern states insisted that they could reject (or nullify) federal law, the opposite position from the one Madison took in the Constitutional Convention when he favored giving Congress the power to veto state laws.

In the early 1830s, Southern politicians sought “nullification” of a federal tariff on manufactured goods, but were stopped by President Andrew Jackson who threatened to deploy troops to South Carolina to enforce the Constitution.

In December 1832, Jackson denounced the “nullifiers” and declared “the power to annul a law of the United States, assumed by one State, incompatible with the existence of the Union, contradicted expressly by the letter of the Constitution, unauthorized by its spirit, inconsistent with every principle on which it was founded, and destructive of the great object for which it was formed.”

Jackson also rejected as “treason” the notion that states could secede if they wished, noting that the Constitution “forms a *government* not a league,” a reference to a line in the Articles of Confederation that had termed the fledgling United States a “league of friendship” among the states, not a national government.

Jackson’s nullification crisis was resolved nonviolently, but the South continued to resist any application of federal authority, even when the government sought to provide disaster relief, out of fear that such efforts could become a legal precedent for abolishing slavery.

Finally, in 1860, with the election of Abraham Lincoln from the new anti-slavery Republican Party, Southern states seceded from the Union and formed the

Confederacy which explicitly authorized the institution of slavery in perpetuity. It took the Union's victory in the Civil War to free the slaves and to make African-Americans full citizens of the United States. However, the defeated South still balked at equal rights for blacks and invoked "states' rights" to defend segregation during the Jim Crow era.

White Southerners amassed enough political clout, especially within the Democratic Party the successor to Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party to fend off civil rights for blacks. The battle over states' rights was joined again in the 1950s when the federal government finally committed itself to enforcing the principle of "equal protection under the law" as prescribed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Many white Southerners were furious that their system of segregation was being dismantled by federal authority. Southern rightists and many libertarians insisted that federal laws prohibiting denial of voting rights for blacks and outlawing segregation in public places were unconstitutional. But federal courts ruled that Congress was within its rights in banning such discrimination within the states.

### **The Modern Right**

The anger of Southern whites was taken out primarily on the Democratic Party, which had led the fight for civil rights. Opportunistic Republicans, such as Richard Nixon, fashioned a "Southern strategy" that deployed racial code words to appeal to Southern whites. Soon, the region flipped from solidly Democratic to predominantly Republican as it is today.

Southern white anger was also reflected in the prevalence of the Confederate battle flag on pickup trucks and in store windows. But direct appeals to racism became politically unpalatable in modern America, so today's Right began its rebranding. From a movement that resented federal intervention on behalf of blacks and other minorities, the Right became a movement that decried federal intervention as a violation of fundamental American "liberties."

Still, the rebranding was only cosmetic. Today's Tea Party wants much the same thing and is motivated by many of the same fears as the generations of pre-Confederates, Confederates, post-Confederates and neo-Confederates. They all want to maintain white supremacy, and they resent the federal government's insistence that blacks (and brown) people be treated as full citizens.

Thus, you see the Tea Party's aggressive support for state laws restricting voting rights (especially for minorities) and the Tea Party's furious opposition to immigration reform that would give millions of Hispanics a pathway to

citizenship. Plus, it was the election of the first African-American president that created the impetus for the Tea Party's emergence in the first place, amid calls from whites to "take our country back" and slurs about Barack Obama being born in Kenya.

But the overriding historical question raised by the Tea Party's insistence that it represents the founding ideals of the United States is whether the nation embraces the intent of Washington (and the earlier incarnation of Madison) for a strong central government seeking the public good or the resistance to the Constitution that was pushed by slave-owning Virginians, such as Jefferson (and the later incarnation of Madison).

The former interpretation sought to deploy the federal government on behalf of fulfilling the goals of the Constitution's Preamble, including the need to "promote the general welfare." The latter interpretation saw an activist federal government as a death knell to slavery.

Today's Tea Party may wish to pretend that its overwhelmingly white membership dressing up in Revolutionary War costumes separates it from the image of angry white segregationists wearing white sheets, waving the Stars and Bars and spitting on black children on their way to school. But the Tea Party's opinion of the Constitution and the interpretation that embraced slavery, secession and segregation are one and the same.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest 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](#).**

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## Americans Losing Faith in Democracy

Except perhaps on the well-funded Right with its potent Fox News/talk radio media machine, Americans feel increasingly powerless to influence policies either to address their economic plight or to curtail the nation's overseas military adventures, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Kurt Campbell, who was assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific

affairs until last year, had an interesting op-ed the other day that relates the growing inequality of income within the United States to a lowering of the international standing of the United States and of its ability to sustain international engagement abroad.

Partly the connection involves a depletion of U.S. soft power. Much of that power has rested on the image of a durable American middle class, which has long been attractive to millions in stratified societies overseas but in more recent times has been tarnished as that middle class has suffered from stagnant or declining income while watching the one percent fly ever higher and farther away.

Another part of the connection, writes Campbell, is that “as a growing segment of the population strains just to get by, it will increasingly view foreign policy ... as a kind of luxury ripe for cuts and a reduction in ambition.”

For the American public, lack of active support for an active foreign policy is not only a matter of competition for scarce resources. It also involves a sense of empowerment, or a lack thereof. The public will care less and be less informed about foreign policy to the extent that it does not believe it has a say that really matters in determining that policy.

A sense of empowerment can be very effective in getting people active and engaged. That is a large part of what was going on in Tahrir Square in Cairo over three years ago. Ordinary citizens not only protested but cleaned up the trash because for the first time, albeit only temporarily, as it turned out, they had reason to believe that what they were saying had a real effect on setting the direction of Egypt.

Michael J. Glennon, writing in *The National Interest*, does raise the problem of a missing sense of empowerment and correctly relates it to a broader detachment of most of the American public from foreign policy, as reflected among other things in the woeful public ignorance about foreign affairs.

Glennon badly errs, however, in blaming the whole situation on a supposedly unaccountable national security state, which he calls the “Trumanite network,” named after the era when most of the apparatuses Glennon doesn’t like assumed their present form. He distinguishes this from the “Madisonian” system that includes the familiar constitutional institutions of an elected legislature and chief executive.

Glennon declares that the entire Madisonian system has lost so much power to the Trumanite network that he likens it to the monarch and House of Lords in Britain having lost power to the cabinet, prime minister, and House of Commons.

This description bears very little resemblance to what anyone who has worked at the interface of these parts of the U.S. political and policy-making system would recognize. Even those who have not worked there can reflect on where the impetus for the most important developments related to U.S. national security policy have come from.

Presumably the Trumanite network wasn't much in favor, for example, of government shutdowns that have been the work of extortionists in the legislative part of the Madisonian system. Nor would the military and security agencies have favored sequestration budget cuts, which were legislative efforts to avoid more damage from the same extortionists.

Or think about the single biggest U.S. foreign policy initiative of at least the last couple of decades: the Iraq War. It was the work of a willful group that had captured enough of the Madisonian system to embark on their project despite the better judgment of much of what is the Trumanite national security apparatus.

Part of the problem with Glennon's analysis is that he throws a big assortment of otherwise unrelated incidents and policies together, the only common thread of which is that they somehow each involve some part of the military, intelligence or security bureaucracies (and that Glennon doesn't happen to like them).

There is no sense of the very different issues involved in, say, a procedural altercation between an intelligence agency and an oversight committee in the course of performing oversight, and indefinite detention of militants that the military has scraped up on some distant battlefield. Nor is there much attention to the specific ways in which the Trumanites really *are* accountable to political people in the Madisonian system.

One would never have guessed from the article, for example, that major changes occurred four decades ago that brought not only intelligence activities but the entire covert action arena under legislative oversight and political control that were previously deficient. Also missing is how much of what Glennon (and many others today) consider to be excessive or abusive was firmly rooted in earlier, mostly in the immediate post-9/11 period, attitudes and priorities broadly shared by the American people and their political leaders.

The priorities did not originate with national security agencies and departments, which instead have tried to implement the missions they have been assigned by the people and political leaders. If you or Glennon or I disagree with the position that majorities on Congressional oversight committees have taken at times over the past few years on issues such as interrogation

techniques or bulk collection of telephonic data, that's politics; it is not a usurpation of politics by the agencies being overseen.

At times Glennon describes the Trumanite network as so broad that one starts to lose any sense of where the lines that distinguish it from the Madisonian system lie. He pitches his argument initially as if it were about part of the federal bureaucracy but then criticizes postures that lie far beyond that bureaucracy.

He quotes, for example, Madeleine Albright's question to Colin Powell about what the point is of having a superb military if we can't use it, and identifies the attitude expressed in the question with the Trumanites. But it was Powell, the career military officer, who presumably was the party in this conversation who was more on the Trumanite side of Glennon's Trumanite/Madisonian line.

Glennon is critical, and has good reason to be critical, of people who "define security primarily in military terms and tend to consider military options before political, diplomatic or law-enforcement alternatives," but that attitude is not centered in the national security bureaucracy. The attitude is promoted mainly by neoconservatives, with a major assist from liberal interventionists, who seek and often get support for their positions within the Madisonian system.

As far as military interventions are concerned, it certainly is true that the professional military tends to prefer more resources and bigger forces to accomplish decisively whatever mission is assigned to it, that's part of the Powell Doctrine. But it does not have the sort of preference Glennon asserts when it comes to getting assigned such a mission in the first place.

That's another part of the Powell Doctrine: take military action only if it has clear support from the American people. And it's not just Powell. Military members and veterans of the military are less inclined to support U.S. military interventions than are civilians who never served in the military.

Chicken hawks, and many people of similar ilk who not only favor starting wars but also insist that counterterrorism is a "war," with all of the implications that are supposed to flow from that label regarding matters such as handling of detainees, are not part of any network centered in the national security bureaucracy.

What chicken hawks have been able to do brings us back to the issue of empowerment and how an unempowered public may tune out foreign policy. There is indeed a problem here, but it is not a problem because some shadowy deep state, an American version of an Algerian *pouvoir* or an Arab *mukhabarat*, has managed to make U.S. political institutions as feeble as a modern British monarch.

It is a problem because such developments as extreme partisan tactics, perfected

gerrymandering, and unrestricted campaign bankrolling have made those political institutions less responsive than they could or should be, on foreign as well as domestic policy.

Regarding that offensive war begun in Iraq, for example, consider the situation of an American voter in 2000 who didn't much care for Al Gore and the Democrats but also had no desire for the United States to get involved in anything like the Iraq War. That voter would have had no basis for predicting, even if he could have predicted something like the 9/11 terrorist attack, that a vote for George W. Bush would become a vote for such a war.

The Madisonian system was captured not by a Trumanite network but by a neocon cabal. Tom Friedman, sitting in Washington shortly after the beginning of the war, observed without exaggeration, "I could give you the names of 25 people (all of whom are at this moment within a five-block radius of this office) who, if you had exiled them to a desert island a year and a half ago, the Iraq War would not have happened."

There also is the matter, of course, of Gore having won the popular vote in 2000. Twelve years later, Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives won 1.37 million more votes than Republican candidates, but the Democrats won only 201 seats compared to the Republicans' 234. And every two years, voters in only a very small percentage of districts nationwide are given a genuinely competitive choice of candidates for what is supposed to be the people's House.

The Arab Spring erupted largely because many people in the countries concerned felt they had no stake in either an economic system that passed them by or a political system in which they effectively had little or no voice in the direction of their country. Many Americans are facing something similar with a pattern of economic growth that leaves them behind and an often dysfunctional political system that gives them little sense of having a role in setting policy.

Americans are not likely to stage their own Tahrir Square. But it is unsurprising if they become increasingly disengaged from foreign policy and if, as Campbell anticipates, this becomes a source of weakness for the United States internationally.

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# Learning the Lessons of Peace

Isaiah, one of the great Jewish prophets, was an advocate of peace whose words inspired Jesus's non-violent teachings centuries later and continue to resonate to the present day, writes Rev. Howard Bess.

By Rev. Howard Bess

African-Americans have given us a great gift of songs that we call "spirituals." One of the greatest is "Down by the Riverside," which paints a picture of a new Christian believer walking down to a river to be baptized. The song begins "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside."

The song's refrain ends with the words "and study war no more," words drawn from Isaiah 2:4, part of the great anti-war writings in the Old Testament.

In the Eighth Century BC, the prophet Isaiah was weary of the wars of the nation of Judah, with the Israelite nation split in two through a fight for control of the throne of David. The leadership of the nation of Judah (the southern portion of ancient Israel) believed peace (shalom) could be established through power of shield and sword, but Isaiah argued that peace would come when people took the ways of the Lord seriously. According to Isaiah, the process must begin with the laying aside of sword and shield, and forever forsaking the absurdity of war.

A "school" of Isaiah developed around this prophet that lasted at least 200 years. His followers maintained his anti-violence, anti-war stance. Centuries later, Jesus from Nazareth embraced the thinking of the Isaiah school as an anti-war, anti-violence prophet.

These Bible truths surged into my thinking over the last few weeks of the 2014 political campaign. Both Sen. Mark Begich and now Sen.-elect Dan Sullivan vowed that they would "fight for Alaska." Other candidates shouted the same message: "I will fight for you."

But I reject the offer. My response is to say "No thanks; I do not need or desire someone fighting for me." I make this response as a believing and practicing Christian.

We are still involved in searching for the facts of the life of the Jesus of history. However, some issues are clear. Jesus was born and raised in the village of Nazareth in Galilee, an area populated by poor, disenfranchised Jews. They were powerless and angry.

Reza Aslan's book *Zealot* does a great job of describing the political, social,

economic and religious context in which Jesus grew up. Galilee was the seed-bed of the Zealot movement. In the days of Jesus's ministry, the Zealot movement was not unified and self-appointed leaders abounded, although it eventually became organized and unified. Yet, one thing characterized the entire movement. It advocated the violent overthrow of Roman occupiers, the oppressive rich and those who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. Many Zealots carried concealed knives.

Was Jesus a Zealot or was he a prophet in the Isaiah tradition of no swords or shields? Aslan concludes that Jesus was a Zealot at heart and did not back away from the Zealot commitment to violence. Many other scholars are taking the opposite view, insisting that Jesus ministered in the context of the Zealot movement, shared the same concerns and wanted justice for all, but Jesus advocated a different path. He taught love, kindness and justice as the way to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

I believe that Jesus was a political, social, economic and religious activist with non-violent commitments, which I think is the better reading of the material that we now have. Seeing Jesus as a devout Jew in the Isaiah tradition of non-violence makes sense to me and it is consistent with the best of modern scholarship.

How does all this translate into American politics in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century? First, if Jesus was in fact as active in the political world as it now appears, no serious follower of Jesus can avoid involvement in the public arena. The idea of keeping your religion out of the political world is not an option.

One of the pleasures of living in Alaska is the ease with which a person can become acquainted with political office holders. I have a first-name relationship with ex-governors, U. S. senators, members of the state legislature, heads of state departments, mayors and city councilmen. I have expressed my opinions to them on a variety of subjects; I have contributed to political campaigns; however, I have never asked for a favor for myself.

After the November election here in Alaska, I decided to ask every political figure that I know to stop using the word "fight" to describe their public service. I will make the request to help rid our society of fighting public officials. I want to be represented; I want my public officials to advocate, serve, work, even argue on behalf of justice, generosity, grace and peace.

I have decided to lay down my sword and shield and clean up my political vocabulary. I am going to ask every political person I know to do the same and to study war no more. We need good government, but we have no need for fighting representatives. This is the Jesus way.

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