The War on Poverty at 50

The Right has long cited President Johnson’s War on Poverty as proof that “guv-mint” has no place in providing for “the general Welfare,” that the “free market” must rule as the master of American society. But there are real lessons to be learned from the past half century, writes Alice O’Connor.

By Alice O’Connor

Fifty years after Lyndon B. Johnson made it the centerpiece of his first State of the Union address on Jan. 8, 1964, the War on Poverty remains one of the most embattled, and least understood, of Great Society initiatives.

Yet, it’s an anniversary worth celebrating, despite historical memory distorted by decades of partisan attack, both for the commitments and priorities it reflected, and for the insights it offers into the political challenges of fighting inequality today.

The War on Poverty was still very much in the planning stages when LBJ made his historic pledge, though its broadest outlines were sketched out in the speech and in the 1964 Council of Economic Advisers Report: a fast-growing, full-employment economy; an all-out “assault” on discrimination; investments in education, job training, and health care; and locally organized programs of community action, planned with what would only later be added as a legislative mandate for “maximum feasible participation” of the poor.

Opportunity was the initiative’s keyword, enshrined in the enabling legislation, and the newly-created agency, the Office of Economic Opportunity, that became its administrative home.

Contrary to conservative detractors, the War on Poverty did not create “special privileges” for the poor. Still less was it a vast expansion of “dependency”-inducing cash relief, relying far more on preventative health, nutrition and old-age related expenditures to shore up the federal safety net and on signature programs such as Head Start, Job Corps, and community-based housing and economic development to create opportunities for advance.

More controversially, community action programs encouraged poor people to organize for basic rights that better-off Americans had come to expect as citizens of the world’s most affluent democracy and beneficiaries of the New Deal welfare state: to decent job and educational opportunities, fair labor standards, protections against economic insecurity, legal representation, and access to political participation, starting with the right to vote.
For this the War on Poverty earned the enmity of a wide array of politically-entrenched constituencies, from the Jim Crow South to the big-city liberal North and West. It also drew the ire of many erstwhile supporters, including LBJ himself, who put pressure on OEO administrators to keep a lid on spending and to rein in community action even as he escalated spending on fighting communism in Vietnam.

LBJ’s policies did not end poverty, a fact conservatives, having long since argued that government had no business fighting in the first place, have recently twisted into a narrative of failure used to justify further cuts in the social safety net. But that shouldn’t keep progressives from drawing lessons from its shortcomings as well as its accomplishments in building a campaign against inequality.

One is the importance of fighting the battle at the level of economic policy and structural reform rather than relying on redistributive social welfare policies alone. LBJ’s economists recognized this in their push to move beyond budget-balancing orthodoxy to reduce unemployment (then at 5.5%) to more acceptable (3-4%) full employment targets. But they held back by relying on growth-stimulating tax cuts while downplaying the need for strategies to generate jobs in the nation’s de-industrializing urban and rural communities.

A second is that the problem of poverty cannot be resolved without addressing the deeper inequities of race, class, gender, geography and power, a lesson overshadowed by the myth of a “culture of poverty” that gripped policy elites in the 1960s and continues to thread through popular and academic discourse to this day.

Third is that some of the fiercest battles of the War on Poverty were fought locally, as they continue to be today. This brings us back to the militant politics of massive resistance, which, then as now, played out in struggles over who would control the implementation of anti-poverty policies and resources and, financial incentives notwithstanding, whether they would be implemented at all.

But it also calls up the progressive organizing unleashed by community action, which continues to sustain the legacy of the grassroots War on Poverty in community-based movements for living wages, immigrant rights, and the right to health care today.

And fourth is the need to dethrone the narrative of failure, in ways that go beyond the War on Poverty’s penchant for “maximum feasible public relations” and statistical cost/benefit analysis to recognize not just the capacity, but the political and moral imperative of committing the resources of democratic government to achieving a just and equitable economy.
Israel’s Elusive Search for Security

Israel has made its security the *sin qua non* of negotiations with the Palestinians, including insistence on military control of the Jordan River valley. But these escalating demands ignore questions of Palestinian security and the greater risk to Israel from worldwide opprobrium, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Everyone should be able to agree that any settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians needs to be consistent with genuine security for the people of Israel. The history of strife between Israel and multiple neighbors demands that. The longer history of the Jewish people, and of the persecution and hatred they have endured, demands it.

It is understandable that Israel’s security is a major topic to be considered in evaluating any agreement. We do not know all the details of the security plan developed by General John Allen, but it is appropriate that such a plan be part of U.S. efforts to facilitate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

It thus should be all the more distressing that the subject of Israel’s security gets so badly distorted and exploited in the misleading and manipulative ways that it does. The other day Yuval Steinitz, a right-wing minister in the Israeli government, **rejected the portion of General Allen’s plan** dealing with the Jordan River valley and declared that Israel, for its security, must maintain a presence in the valley forever.

We should not even need the expert judgment of a former head of Mossad, who directly contradicted Steinitz, to realize that Israel faces no security threats from across the Jordan River and that there is no need for an indefinite Israeli military presence there.

Who supposedly poses any such threat? Is King Abdullah of Jordan going to fire up his M60 tanks and try to recapture the West Bank (to which his father, King Hussein, renounced any Jordanian claim some two decades ago)? Will the Iraqi government take time out from fighting jihadis in Anbar province to send an expeditionary force across Jordan to try to conquer Israel? Or might the
Iranians decide one day to send such a force across both Iraq and Jordan to try to do that?

The absurdity of such scenarios underscores the groundless nature of Steinitz’s assertion. And even if a phantasmagorical hostile army someday waded across the Jordan River, the imbalance of forces would be such that the Israel Defense Forces, even without a permanent presence in the valley, would crush the invaders before they had a chance to dry their feet.

As Mitchell Plitnick suggests, assertions such as Steinitz’s aren’t really about Israel’s security; they are part of the Israeli government’s stretching out the unresolved conflict indefinitely so it will never have to give up the West Bank.

It also is distressing to hear American politicians abetting that sort of game. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, actually made this comment last week: “Here’s the one thing that I think dominates the thinking in Israel: that once you withdraw, then the ability to go back is almost impossible. Look at Gaza. What’s the chance of going back into Gaza militarily?”

Hello, senator, have you been following any of the news coming out of that part of the world over the last several years? Israel actually has lots of experience in doing the going-in-militarily-after-withdrawal thing. They have done it in Gaza as well as Lebanon.

Five years ago they did it in an especially big way with Operation Cast Lead, a major invasion and demolition of the Gaza Strip. Now, that sort of operation is not generally recommended as a positive contribution to international security. The Palestinians wouldn’t think so; they saw 1,400 of their citizens get killed by the Israelis in Cast Lead. But Israel certainly did not seem to have any hesitation about what they can and cannot do after a withdrawal from occupied territory.

Graham was not reported as mentioning any of the reasons that unhappy Gazans did things, such as firing rockets into Israel, that got the Israelis riled up. The reasons, besides denial of political self-determination, have to do with Israel’s endeavor to turn the Gaza Strip into a blockaded open-air prison in which life is kept miserable and people are swimming in sewage.

So we don’t know if he envisioned the same sort of arrangement for the West Bank, which, like Steinitz’s demand for permanent Israeli military occupation of the Jordan River valley, would be a deal-killing non-starter, or something more reasonable and feasible, which would make his Gaza point even weaker.

Even beyond such game-playing, too much that is said about Israel’s security exhibits three major flaws. One is to be stuck in a sort of 1948 time warp, with
no apparent cognizance of how much the correlation of forces has changed since then (and even in 1948, the Israelis prevailed). Today Israel is easily the most potent conventional military power in the region, as well as being, since the 1970s, the region’s only nuclear power.

A second is the blatant, but usually unstated, asymmetry in which much is said about Israel’s security but little or nothing about security for the Palestinians. It is a game of pursuing absolute security for one party even if it means absolute insecurity for everyone else.

By any reasonable measure, such as who has been invading whom and who has suffered far more casualties than the other side, the Palestinians have more claim on the attention of the United States and the world regarding security concerns than do the Israelis.

The third flaw is the tendency to treat hostility toward Israel as an unchanging commodity, to be countered forcefully forever, while refusing to recognize the respects in which this hostility is a function of unresolved conflicts and Israeli policies. This is the part that ought to be most distressing to Israelis themselves, because it entails blindness to the real threat to their security and to what underlies it.

That threat has been manifested in such things as rockets from Gaza and suicide bombers in Israeli streets. In the future it will be manifested not in the form of some new Arab legion mustering on the banks of the Jordan but instead in increasing international opprobrium and isolation and in a further distancing from liberal democratic values within Israeli itself.

Anyone concerned about these things ought to support, not impede, what Secretary of State John Kerry is trying to do in resolving the festering Israeli-Palestinian issue.

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.)

NSA Insiders Reveal What Went Wrong

In a memo to President Obama, former National Security Agency insiders explain how NSA leaders botched intelligence collection and analysis before 9/11, covered up the mistakes, and violated the constitutional rights of the American
people, all while wasting billions of dollars and misleading the public.

January 7, 2014

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Former NSA Senior Executives/Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Input for Your Decisions on NSA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Official Washington from Senate Intelligence Committee chair Dianne Feinstein to NSA Director Keith Alexander to former Vice President Dick Cheney to former FBI Director Robert Mueller has been speaking from the same set of NSA talking points acquired recently via a Freedom of Information request. It is an artful list, much of it designed to mislead. Take this one, for example:

— NSA AND ITS PARTNERS MUST MAKE SURE WE CONNECT THE DOTS SO THAT THE NATION IS NEVER ATTACKED AGAIN LIKE IT WAS ON 9/11

At a hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee on October 2, Senator Feinstein showed her hand when she said: “I will do everything I can to prevent this [NSA’s bulk] program from being canceled.” Declaring that 9/11 “can never be allowed to happen in the United States of America again,” Feinstein claimed that intelligence officials did not have enough information to prevent the terrorist attacks.

Mr. President, we trust you are aware that the lack-of-enough-intelligence argument is dead wrong. Feinstein’s next dubious premise that bulk collection is needed to prevent another 9/11 is unproven and highly unlikely (not to mention its implications for the privacy protections of the Fourth Amendment).

Given the closed circle surrounding you, we are allowing for the possibility that the smell from these rotting red herrings has not yet reached you even though your own Review Group has found, for example, that NSA’s bulk collection has thwarted exactly zero terrorist plots.

The sadder reality, Mr. President, is that NSA itself had enough information to prevent 9/11, but chose to sit on it rather than share it with the FBI or CIA. We know; we were there. We were witness to the many bureaucratic indignities that made NSA at least as culpable for pre-9/11 failures as are other U.S. intelligence agencies.

We prepared this Memorandum in an effort to ensure that you have a fuller
picture as you grapple with what to do about NSA. What follows is just the tip of an iceberg of essential background information much of it hidden until now that goes to the core of serious issues now front and center.

The drafting process sparked lively discussion of the relative merits of your Review Group’s recommendations. We have developed very specific comments on those recommendations. We look forward to an opportunity to bring them to your attention.

Introduction

We write you with a sense of urgency looking toward your upcoming decisions regarding the activities of the National Security Agency. We the undersigned (William Binney, Thomas Drake, Edward Loomis, and Kirk Wiebe) worked with NSA for a total of 144 years, most of them at senior levels. Our mission required the highest technical skills to keep the country safe from foreign enemies, while protecting the privacy rights of U.S. citizens under the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

For us, the 21st Century arrived with serious management and technical shortcomings at NSA in meeting the huge challenges posed by the digital and Internet age and the huge problems accompanying the transition from a Cold War footing over 40 years to an increasingly complex world with many asymmetric threats.

NSA management’s reaction in this environment not only opened the door to the attacks of 9/11 but led to violation of what had been the “First Commandment” at NSA; namely, “Thou Shalt Not Eavesdrop on Americans Without a Court Warrant.” Under the circumstances, three of us (Binney, Loomis, and Wiebe) left; Drake had just come on board in hopes of playing a constructive role in addressing the challenges at NSA.

We all share an acute sense of regret for NSA’s demonstrable culpability for what happened on 9/11, and for those of us working there before the terrorist attacks a remorse for not having been able to stop them. We tried; but it is hard to escape a nagging regret that, somehow, we should have tried harder.

We were there; we know what happened. And we know how what happened has been successfully covered up until now. Calamities like this tend to happen again if there is no accountability for what happened before. You need the unvarnished truth. The flood of revelations now in the public domain frees us to address facts and events formerly hidden behind a convenient, cover-up classification regime. We feel bound by the solemn oath we took to support and defend the
Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, to make truths known to you that you may find as unconscionable as we do.

Why do we still care? Because we have consciences; because the oath we took has no expiration date; because we know as few others do how critically important it is for our country to have a well functioning, Constitution-abiding National Security Agency; and because we know how that ship can be steered back on course at that important place of work by improving its ability to find terrorists and other criminals in massive amounts of data, while protecting the right to privacy and citizen sovereignty.

Getting in the Door

It comes to us as no surprise that there is strong resistance on the part of the Establishment when it comes to giving us a hearing a shunning of the very people who know what happened and how to take steps to prevent it from happening again.

Our predicament calls to mind that of our colleague veteran intelligence professionals, who were ignored by Official Washington and an obsequious media, when we knew that fraudulent (not mistaken) intelligence was being used to “justify” the launching of an aggressive war on Iraq 11 years ago. Establishment Washington barred the doors in 2002-2003. Just five years later our own clearances were taken away.

Now, once again the voices of seasoned intelligence professionals are being muted, in favor of a closed group of officials with huge incentive to cover up their failure to keep America safe and their playing fast and loose with the Fourth Amendment.

Mr. President, we have given up hope that your palace guard will let us in. Our chances of reaching you seem far better via this Memorandum, the 28th of its kind issued since early 2003, prepared at the behest of the Steering Group of our Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS). If this gets past your inbox protectors, we encourage you to pay more heed to it than your predecessor did to VIPS’ warnings in the months before the attack on Iraq.

In one limited sense, we are better off than our colleagues 11 years ago. This time, mainstream media have been unable to ignore the documentary evidence of rank dishonesty on the part of senior NSA and other intelligence officials. This time the media has come to us, seeking our views. This time we can comment rather freely on matters that until now were hidden under TOP SECRET stamps.

On December 26, for example, The Wall Street Journal published a lengthy front-page article, quoting NSA’s former Senior Technical Director William Binney (undersigned) and former chief of NSA’s SIGINT Automation Research Center Edward
Loomis (undersigned) warning that NSA is drowning in useless data lacking adequate privacy provisions, to the point where it cannot conduct effective terrorist-related surveillance and analysis.

A recently disclosed internal NSA briefing document corroborates the drowning, with the embarrassing admission, in bureaucratize, that NSA collection has been “outpacing” NSA’s ability to ingest, process, and store data let alone analyze the take.

54 Now Down to Zero ‘Thwarts’

It is not difficult to connect NSA’s collect-everything approach with one principal finding of the Review Group you appointed to look into NSA programs; namely, that exactly zero terrorist plots have been prevented by NSA’s bulk trawling for telephone call records. One Review Group member, your former Chicago law professor colleague, Geoffrey Stone, has confessed to being “absolutely” surprised at the group’s finding of zero. Clearly, the statements of top NSA officials left Stone wholly unprepared for the truth.

Reacting to the Review Group’s report, a member of Congress involved in intelligence issues told a reporter, “That was the ballgame ... It flies in the face of everything they have tossed at us.”

While this finding of the Review Group is a further blow to Keith “54-terrorist-plots-thwarted” Alexander’s credibility, it is no surprise to us. More important, it goes to the heart of whether NSA’s bulk collection is more hindrance than help in preventing terrorist attacks. We suggest, with all due respect, that you give us an opportunity to brief you, before you find yourself repeating undocumented claims like “lives have been saved,” and demonstrably false claims that no abuses have occurred.

What passes for a process for collection and analysis at NSA appears to be highly inefficient and ineffective. How else does one explain missing the bombers of Boston, Times Square, and the underwear bomber over Detroit?

In short, we would like to talk to you about things you might otherwise have no way of knowing, given that our information reflects so poorly on top NSA management past and present. You and the country are ill served by the reluctance of your national security advisers to give a hearing to former intelligence insiders like us. Your advisers may be too inexperienced to realize that circling the wagons is not going to work this time. This time the truth will out.

Clapper & Alexander
Surely you have asked National Intelligence Director James Clapper flat-out why, in formal testimony to the Senate on March 12, 2013 he answered “No, Sir” to Senator Ron Wyden’s question, “Does the NSA collect any type of data on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?”

Surely you know that Senate Intelligence Committee chair Dianne Feinstein persists in covering for Clapper, telling ABC three months after Clapper’s falsehood that “there is no more direct or honest person than Jim Clapper.” And now Director Clapper’s lawyer, Mr. Litt, is trying to convince readers of the New York Times that Clapper did not lie.

Surely you intuit that something is askew when NSA Director Keith Alexander testifies to Congress that NSA’s bulk collection has “thwarted” 54 terrorist plots and later, under questioning, is forced to reduce that number to one, which cannot itself withstand close scrutiny. And surely you understand why former NSA Director and CIA Director Michael Hayden protests too much and too often on Fox News and CNN, and why he and House Intelligence Committee Mike Rogers publicly suggest that whistleblower Edward Snowden be put on your Kill List.

Does a blind loyalty prevail in your White House to the point where, 40 years after Watergate, there is not a single John Dean to warn you of a “cancer on the presidency?” Have none of your lawyers reminded you that “electronic surveillance of private citizens ... subversive of constitutional government” was one of the three Articles of Impeachment against President Richard Nixon approved by a bipartisan 28 to 10 vote of the House Judiciary Committee on July 27, 1974?

Let us be clear. Candor dictates that we state up front that the more skeptical among us suspect that you are not as isolated from the truth about NSA activities as it might seem. That notwithstanding, for purposes of this Memorandum we choose to adopt a broader view and assume you would welcome help from former insiders who chose to leave rather than become complicit in NSA abuses.

What we tell you in this Memorandum is merely the tip of the iceberg. We are ready if you are for an honest conversation. That NSA’s bulk collection is more hindrance than help in preventing terrorist attacks should be clear by now despite the false claims and dissembling.

What we shall now attempt to explain to you is how corruption born of lust for billions of dollars, and the power that comes with that scotched implementation of an inexpensive and demonstrably superior in-house technical program the prototype of which was up and running before 2001. Not only did it hold
considerable promise, it also honored the privacy protections guaranteed American citizens under the Fourth Amendment.

**Fourth Amendment-Compliant Technology That Worked**

No one currently working for NSA Director Alexander is likely to tell you this, so please hear it from us. In the years before 9/11, a group of NSA mathematicians and computer technology experts led by Binney, Loomis, and Wiebe devised a process called THINTHREAD for collection and rapid analysis of billions of electronic records relating to targets of intelligence interest, with automatic encryption of information about U.S. persons, per the standard of FISA and the Fourth Amendment.

Data on U.S. citizens could be decrypted only if a judge approved it after a finding that there was probable cause to believe that the target was connected with terrorism or other crimes. It was also considerably cheaper, easier, and more secure to store such data in encrypted format rather than allow that raw information to remain vulnerable to unauthorized parties in unencrypted form, as NSA chose to do. A fuller understanding of THINTHREAD’s capabilities is necessary to appreciate the implications of what came next.

THINTHREAD, you see, was a fundamental beginning to breaking the endemic problem of stovepipes that is, standalone collection systems with standalone databases. There was such a maze of databases, with special security compartmentation, that it was impossible for an analyst to “see” more than a few pages, so to speak, about a target, much less a whole chapter, let alone the whole available book. Information was fragmented by design, in order to placate functionaries blindly placing tight security above virtually all other considerations even, in this case, the analyst’s need to know.

Thus, THINTHREAD was developed precisely to unite data associated with terrorists/criminals from all databases. An analyst was able to do one simple query on participants on a targeted activity and get access to all related content be it from computer, phone, or pager.

Now, Mr. President, perhaps you have been in Washington long enough not to be surprised by what happened next to THINTHREAD. Most of us have been around a lot longer than you, but even we found it shocking and, as we will show below, ultimately devastating in its implications.

In short, since THINTHREAD was developed in-house at NSA, it cost about $3 million to build and to make operational at three sites. Members of Congress, however, had political incentive (the imperative to appear to be doing something against terrorism) and financial interest (no need to spell that out) in
throwing billions at NSA.

In the end, NSA Director Michael Hayden rejected THINTHREAD in favor of a contractor program called TRAILBLAZER, upon which billions of dollars were ultimately squandered and which never became operational. NSA SIGINT (signals intelligence) Director Maureen Baginski announced the Requiem for THINTHREAD to William Binney and Edward Loomis in a private meeting on August 20, 2001, three weeks before 9/11.

Some Programs Don’t Cost Enough

This is how it went down: In 2000, as THINTHREAD was beginning to show promise, the head of the NSA Transformation Office (NTO) asked the creators of THINTHREAD (Loomis, Binney, and Wiebe) what they could do with $1.2 billion. We told him that, with that amount of funding, we could upgrade every one of our field installations that had access to foreign Internet sources, as well as upgrade collection equipment to access greater bandwidths available on fiber. But for the equipment, maintenance, and other costs for THINTHREAD, we only needed about $300 million.

Director Hayden reacted swiftly on learning of this. He removed the NTO chief, replacing him with a senior vice president of Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), which became one of the leading contractors for a replacement project called TRAILBLAZER. TRAILBLAZER was originally budgeted for $3.8 billion, but after burning away most of that money, it had to be jettisoned in 2006.

No functioning components had been produced, much less delivered; Gen. Hayden had been forced to confess to the Senate Intelligence Committee that TRAILBLAZER was vastly over budget as well as well behind schedule. And our (Binney/Loomis/Wiebe) complaint to the Department of Defense Inspector General had generated a highly critical report on TRAILBLAZER, which was also a factor in its termination. SAIC, though, continued to serve as one of NSA’s major prime development contractors and remains so to this day.

Hayden had announced TRAILBLAZER to great fanfare in the spring of 2000, as he began to show more preference for opening the door wider to the private sector. A year before, NSA’s New Enterprise Team, which included some of the undersigned, had begun to learn of contractor complaints over getting only maintenance contracts, while the most interesting work was being conducted in-house.

That fall, an NSA Red Team predicted that TRAILBLAZER would fail unless major changes were made to the program. Hayden, however, ignored the Red Team report,
and none of the Red Team recommendations saw the light of day.

This particularly unconscionable (Hayden-SAIC-Congress) corruption is a case study in how the drive for big money and the power can squander big taxpayer bucks, chip away at our constitutional protections and, more important, as we shall explain below play a crucial role in the worst intelligence failure since Pearl Harbor 9/11.

You will hear the usual denials. With all due respect, we think caution is indicated in thinking about taking them at face value. We would encourage you to get ahead of the curve this time.

The financial fiasco could not be kept from Congress or the Pentagon. Recognizing NSA’s inability to manage multi-billion dollar programs, NSA’s “Milestone Decision Authority” that is, the responsibility for planning, acquiring, and implementing major intelligence capabilities was revoked and responsibility was transferred to the Under Secretary for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics at the Department of Defense.

**After 9/11, Most of Us Out**

The financial and managerial corruption was bad enough. To our horror, after 9/11 we came to realize that the abuses occurring during the years before 2001 had gravely damaged NSA’s capability to thwart attacks like 9/11. Wiebe, Binney, and Loomis retired. Thomas Drake (also undersigned), who joined NSA on August 26, 2001, as a senior executive after many years as an NSA contractor, stayed on in an attempt to right the ship.

All of us very soon learned that we didn’t know the half of it that is, of the misfeasance and malfeasance leading directly to NSA’s substantial contribution to the intelligence failure that day.

Again, we are prepared to brief you on the whole nine yards, so to speak. For now, we have decided to supplement the above with observations from our former colleague, Thomas Drake, who, as a contractor, had been thoroughly briefed on NSA programs, including THINTHREAD, before he joined the ranks of NSA as a senior executive. Thomas Drake writes:

“My first day on the job at NSA was 9/11. I was immediately charged as the lead NSA executive to find and deploy the best technology at NSA for the fight against terrorism. One of the programs I recommended to be resurrected for immediate operational implementation was THINTHREAD. I ran into a stone wall.

“As I pursued what I was tasked to do, I was surprised and deeply troubled to discover that, with a secret go-ahead from the White House, NSA had unchained
itself from the protections of the Fourth Amendment and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978. The vast power of NSA had been unleashed secretly on US citizens through a massive bulk surveillance program called STELLARWIND, a program completely unknown to most if not all of those working at the SIGINT Automatic Research Center. In the weeks after 9/11, 40 to 50 servers began arriving followed quickly by a whole new set of technical people who on September 26, 2001, turned STELLARWIND loose on all of us.

“Even after the developers of THINTHREAD left NSA in October 2001, I kept trying to get it authorized to go operational in vain. However, I was able to acquire enough funding to complete a THINTHREAD Content Evaluation of NSA databases that contained huge amounts of collected data.

Pre-9/11 Intelligence

“That’s where I found the pre- and post-9/11 intelligence from NSA monitoring of some of the hijackers as they planned the attacks of 9/11 had not been shared outside NSA. This includes critical pre-9/11 intelligence on al-Qaeda, even though it had been worked on by NSA analysts. I learned, for example, that in early 2001 NSA had produced a critical long-term analytic report unraveling the entire heart of al-Qaeda and associated movements. That report also was not disseminated outside of NSA.

“Make no mistake. That data and the analytic report could have, should have prevented 9/11.

“Top NSA management knew that. They knew that I knew that. I was immediately shut down. In spring 2002, the remnants of THINTHREAD were unceremoniously put on the shelf in NSA’s ‘Indiana Jones’ data warehouse, never to be seen again.

Cover-up


“As indicated above, the highly embarrassing answer was that NSA knew a great deal, but had not shared what it knew outside of NSA.

“After a couple of weeks Baginski rejected my draft team Statement for the Record report and removed me from the task. When I asked her why, she said there was a ‘data integrity problem’ (not further explained) with my draft Statement
for the Record. I had come upon additional damaging revelations. For example, NSA had the content of telephone calls between AA-77 hijacker Khalid al-Mihdhar in San Diego, CA, and the known al-Qaeda safe house switchboard in Yemen well before 9/11, and had not disseminated that information beyond NSA.

“In short, when confronted with the prospect of fessing up, NSA chose instead to obstruct the 9/11 congressional investigation, play dumb, and keep the truth buried, including the fact that it knew about all inbound and outbound calls to the safe house switchboard in Yemen. NSA’s senior leaders took me off the task because they realized belatedly, for some reason that I would not take part in covering up the truth about how much NSA knew but did not share.

“When the 9/11 Commission hearings began, Director Hayden chortled at executive staff meetings over the fact that the FBI and CIA were feeling the heat for not having prevented 9/11. This was particularly difficult for me to sit through, for I was aware that NSA had been able to cover up its own culpability by keeping investigators, committees, and commissions away from the truth.

“I subsequently blew the whistle on the TRAILBLAZER fiasco, STELLARWIND, NSA’s hoarding of critical pre- and post-9/11 intelligence, and its cover-up. I shared this information via proper channels with the Joint Congressional Inquiry on 9/11 and the Defense Department Inspector General to no avail.

Preventing 9/11

“Against this background, it is difficult to listen to the manufactured claim so frequently heard these days to the effect that, had bulk collection been operational before 9/11, it would have prevented the 9/11 attacks. The mantra is convenient for those defending NSA overreach; it is also bogus.

“It masks the reality that, as indicated above, NSA had already collected highly significant intelligence on the hijackers themselves but did not disseminate it outside of NSA before the attacks. At best, the claim about bulk collection is one part wishful thinking and nine parts red herring.

“Not only does it exaggerate the efficacy of a collection method with zero demonstrated successes to date, but it also blows smoke in the eyes of those genuinely interested in knowing what role NSA played, or failed to play, in the months and weeks before 9/11. Worse still, this specious claim amounts to a cruel hoax on the thousands who died on 9/11, and the hundreds of thousands who died when Bush/Cheney used the attacks as a pretext to invade Iraq.”

Former Vice President Dick Cheney is widely reported to have been principally responsible for suborning then-NSA Director Michael Hayden into violating what had formerly been the “First Commandment” at NSA “Thou Shalt Not Eavesdrop on
Americans Without a Court Warrant.” So it is no surprise to see Cheney come out of the woodwork and renew his contribution toward giving dishonesty a bad name.

On December 29, Cheney picked up where Senator Feinstein and former FBI Director Robert Mueller left off in promoting the disingenuous claim that had NSA’s bulk collection been in place before 9/11, the attacks that day would probably have been prevented. Adding to his unenviable record for credibility on Sunday talk shows, Cheney told Fox News Sunday:

“As everybody who’s been associated with the program has said, if we had this before 9/11, when there were two terrorists in San Diego two hijackers had been able to use that program, that capability, against that target, we might well have been able to prevent 9/11.”

Cheney was basking in the glow of Judge William Pauley’s ruling two days earlier that NSA’s bulk collection is legal, in contrast to Judge Richard Leon’s ruling on December 16 that it was “almost certainly” unconstitutional. Pauley simply bought into the NSA/Feinstein/Mueller mantra, hook, line and sinker. The mantra cannot bear close scrutiny, however, no matter how many leading lights of Establishment Washington sing it.

Former FBI Director Robert Mueller had prepared the ground for Cheney, when Mueller gave factually incorrect testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee on June 13, 2013. Mueller said that we “could not know who was calling into that particular safe house [in Yemen]. We came to find out afterwards that the person who had called into that safe house was al-Mihdhar, who was in the United States in San Diego.”

Mueller was stretching the truth well beyond the breaking point in saying “we could not know.” His intent became abundantly clear as he proceeded to put his mouth around the Big Whopper: “If we had had this program [bulk collection of telephone records] in place at that time, we would have been able to identify that particular telephone number in San Diego.” Here was the FBI director kicking dust into the eyes of gullible Senators, in order to defend an NSA program of dubious effectiveness and even more dubious constitutionality.

More recently, the “outside” insider reportedly leading your Review Group, former CIA Deputy Director Mike Morell, recited the mantra in a December 19 op-ed in the Washington Post. Morell claimed that “had the program been in place more than a decade ago, it would likely have prevented 9/11.”

**Khalid al-Mihdhar**

The poster boy for this PR ploy is Khalid al-Mihdhar one of the hijackers of AA-77, who had been communicating from San Diego with people in a known al-Qaeda
terrorist safe house in Yemen. Al-Mihdhar had been on the radar of U.S. intelligence at least since 1999, when NSA picked up communications from a “terrorist facility” implicating him. In early 2000 he lived in San Diego, California, with fellow hijacker Nawaf al-Hazmi.

NSA knew the telephone number of the safe house in Yemen at least by 1996 and was, of course, keeping track of calls to it from the U.S. Would Mueller, Morell and Cheney have us believe NSA doesn’t know about caller ID? As William Binney has explained, automated systems take over when such calls are made and as long as you have one valid number you can obtain the other. Was it a case of gross ineptitude on NSA’s part; or was NSA deliberately withholding information linking al-Mihdhar to the known al-Qaeda base in Yemen?

Richard Clarke, who was White House counterterrorism czar from 1998 through 2001, has told ProPublica that NSA had both the ability and the legal authority to trace calls from Mihdhar to Yemen. Clarke is correct. The targeting had been done; the numbers were known. The necessary authorities already existed.

No warrant would have been required, had Director Hayden simply made use of the authorities available to him via Executive Order 12333, Part II, Section 2.C, by which he could have obtained approval from the Attorney General to target all communications with the safe house in Yemen regardless of origination or destination. It remains unclear as to why this was not done, especially in light of the recent revelation that Hayden did exercise that authority AFTER 9/11 in approving STELLARWIND.

Michael Leiter, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center from 2007 to 2011, later acknowledged publicly that while monitoring the al-Qaeda switchboard safe house in Yemen (run by al-Mihdhar’s in-laws), NSA intercepted and transcribed seven calls from al-Mihdhar to the al-Qaeda switchboard. Leiter claimed that NSA didn’t figure out that the calls were coming from the U.S. Was Leiter never told that NSA knew about the switchboard and the calls from the U.S., but failed to share the intelligence with others?

We have been focusing on NSA but would be remiss were we not to add that there were plenty of opportunities to alert the intelligence community to al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi and their whereabouts before 9/11.

For its part, the CIA had plenty of intelligence about al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi but withheld critical pieces of it from dissemination outside CIA. This was firmly established in a Justice Department Inspector General report. The DOJ IG report added that, despite an attempt by a FBI detailee working at the CIA to share critical intelligence on the two hijackers, “that information was not released by the CIA to the FBI. We were unable to determine why this did not
Richard Clarke was also deprived of the information. During an interview on August 11, 2011, he publicly accused former CIA Director George Tenet of personally barring the dissemination of intelligence on al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi to him (Clarke) as well as to the FBI. Clarke suggested that CIA operations officers were planning to recruit the two terrorists to work for the CIA, and once the FBI learned they were on U.S. soil the CIA would lose jurisdiction and control.

Bottom Line

It should now be clear, for those who can handle the truth, that the problems at NSA run deep in terms of effectiveness, integrity and respect for the Constitution. By withholding information and exploiting secrecy, NSA’s leaders past and present have pulled off an unparalleled coup in concealing the sad reality that NSA could have prevented 9/11 and didn’t. And Schadenfreude chortling by leaders at the top regarding the demonstrated bureaucratic advantages and success of such dishonesty has a tendency to be heard down through the ranks, corrupting even dedicated workers.

As you ponder more recent abuses, we hope you will address the deficiencies of NSA management past and present those who have been in charge of tens of thousands of patriotic workers doing their best in an agency whose mission is critical to our national security. And we suggest that you might wish to avoid repeating the dodgy rhetoric aimed at “proving” to us all that tragedies like 9/11 cannot be prevented unless we collect every bit and byte of signals intelligence we can.

We are in a position to know that collecting everything makes very little sense from a technical point of view. And, as citizens, we are offended by the callous disregard of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution we all swore a solemn oath to support and defend against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

Signed/

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis; Co-founder of the SIGINT Automation Research Center.

Thomas Drake, former Defense Intelligence Senior Executive Service, NSA

Edward Loomis, former Chief, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA

J. Kirk Wiebe, former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA

PREPARED UNDER AUSPICES OF AD HOC STEERING GROUP, VETERAN INTELLIGENCE
Israel’s Ethical Challenges

A bitter irony of modern Israel is that the Jewish people have historically been at the forefront of tolerance, reason and egalitarianism but now have leaders who demand a Jewish religious state accompanied by the repression of Palestinian Muslims, a dilemma addressed by Winslow Myers.

By Winslow Myers

While Secretary of State John Kerry admirably shuttles around like the Energizer Bunny in search of Middle East peace, is there anything new to say about the intractable tension between Israelis on the one hand and predominantly Muslim peoples, especially the Palestinians, on the other?

One layer of the unspoken is Israel’s implicit status as a nuclear power. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama draw red lines in the sand concerning the threat of Iranian nukes, but say little about the only viable long-term solution: a negotiated and verified nuclear-free zone in the Eastern Mediterranean, even better, a planet-wide nuclear-free zone. Nuclear war anywhere on earth has become more unthinkable as it has become more possible.

Also rarely spoken, lest howls of anti-Semitism ensue, is an uncomfortable question: why do we frown upon the lack of separation of church and state in many Muslim countries, while Israel gets a pass in privileging a particular constellation of religion and ethnicity?

The historical rationale for the birth of the Jewish state could not be more reasonable. In the context of Jewish history over thousands of years climaxing in the Holocaust, no one could argue with Jewish fears of extinction and their need for a secure homeland.

Though all parties in the region ought to know from long experience how futile war, terror, obstruction and discriminatory harshness are as tools to suppress
the universal impulse toward justice, each keeps trying one or another unworkable method, making the success of Mr. Kerry's quixotic mission all the more crucial.

The present Israeli government derives its identity in large measure from fear of what it is against, and so it has encouraged injustices like the settlements that it would never tolerate were it a victim of similar treatment.

Obviously this is not to say that the anti-Semites of the Arab world are innocent. And it is unfair to compare the civil rights Israel has afforded non-Jews with the civil rights much of the Muslim world affords women and non-believers. Israel does not order the execution of those who abandon Judaism.

However much it may wish to be even-handed, it sees its own Muslim population growing. If this population enjoyed full citizenship Israeli could eventually become a de facto Muslim state. So it waters down Muslim civil rights to preserve its identity.

As we express our hope that Arab countries (and even the U.S. itself) evolve toward a more inclusive and tolerant politics, it is worth asking if the maintenance of Israel as a Jewish state become counter-productive to its own long-term security? It is not that Zionism is racism, in the crude Arab formulation, but that Zionism has been transcended by the notion of a state relatively untethered to any one religion.

If the identity of Israel were re-established on the basis of equal rights for all ethnicities, ancient fears might begin to dissolve from within. The corrosive “us-and-them” dynamic could be undermined in a way that left Jews safer, just as Jews, while a minority in the United States, are surely as safe there, if not more so, as they are in Israel.

For Israel to become a fully secular state, the international community would have to guarantee the security of Jews, whether inside or outside Israel, a task that for understandable reasons Israel has always zealously reserved for itself. Abdication of self-determined security is, to say the least, unlikely. Tragically however, maintaining a Jewish state will increasingly tie its citizens in knots as they are forced to choose between Jewish identity and full democracy. Jews and Palestinians for the most part do not know each other as people, and the predictable theatrics of their leaders do nothing to help reconciliation.

The entry point into a shared future beyond war is the face-to-face engagement of ordinary citizens at the heart level. It is people moving one by one from unfamiliarity, ignorance and fear, toward familiarity, empathy and enough trust
to allow the heart to message the brain that it’s safe to get creative together.

The moral basis of the secular state, the tolerance and compassion that flows from the acknowledgement of universal rights, is ironically a major premise of the Jewish ethical tradition. An unbeliever once asked Rabbi Hillel if he could sum up the Torah while standing on one foot. The simple answer was “What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the rest is but commentary.”

One of the many gifts world civilization owes the Jews is this confidence in an ethical universality that transcends specific sects and ethnicities. If I identify as a Jew but also as citizen of secular democracy, I am better able to interact with Palestinians according to our common identity as humans.

Finding ourselves in this shared human context, we will stand a measurably better chance of resolving our differences. To the extent that Jews allow themselves that larger identification with the “other,” they may not only come closer to fulfilling the ethical promise of their heritage, but also may find the security that has eluded them since the founding of the Jewish state.

How poignant that after thousands of years of their culture contributing so much to the world, this idea should still feel so risky. Godspeed, Mr. Kerry.

Winslow Myers, author of Living Beyond War: A Citizen’s Guide, writes on global issues for PeaceVoice and serves on the Advisory Board of the War Prevention Initiative.

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The ‘Surge’ Myth’s Deadly Result

From the Archive: Central to the neocons’ narrative on the current Mideast crisis as Islamic terrorists seize territory in Iraq and Syria is that George W. Bush’s “successful surge” in Iraq in 2007 had achieved “victory at last,” but was squandered by President Obama. But that’s a self-serving myth, as Robert Parry wrote in 2012.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on March 17, 2012)

As the Afghan War grinds toward another U.S. military defeat on the heels of the forced departure from Iraq Official Washington remains in denial about these failed neocon strategies, still preferring to embrace happy myths about “successful surges” and ignoring the actual outcomes.
I encountered this cognitive dissonance in one Saturday morning in March 2012 when I was flipping the TV channels and landed on MSNBC’s “Up with Chris Hayes,” with substitute host, the Washington Post’s Ezra Klein. There was a panel of bright and attractive pundits again praising President George W. Bush’s Iraq War “surge.”

One had to wonder: Did these seemingly smart people not notice that the U.S. military was sent packing from Iraq at the end of 2011, less than three months earlier? Do they not know that the giant U.S. Embassy, once meant to be a command center for imperial domination of the Middle East, sits mostly idle? Were they oblivious to the fact that Iraq, still a shattered society afflicted by terrible sectarian violence, leans closer to Iranian foreign policy than America’s because of Bush’s invasion?

No doubt, the myth about Bush’s “successful surge” has been deeply implanted in the conventional wisdom of Washington. But the truth is that it was only “successful” in that it delayed the ultimate American defeat until Bush and his neocon cohorts had vacated the White House and the blame could be shifted to President Barack Obama.

Other than sparing “war president” Bush the humiliation of having to admit defeat, the dispatching of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in early 2007 did little more than get nearly 1,000 additional Americans killed almost one-quarter of the war’s total U.S. deaths along with what certainly was a much higher number of Iraqis.

For example, WikiLeaks’s “Collateral Murder” video depicted one fairly typical scene during the “surge” in which U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters news staffers, walking down a street in Baghdad. The attack helicopters then wounded two children in a van which stopped to take survivors to a hospital.

**Why the ‘Success’?**

A more serious analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the “surge” and were implemented by the commanding generals in 2006, George Casey and John Abizaid, who wanted as small a U.S. “footprint” as possible, to tamp down Iraqi nationalism.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid deployed a highly classified operation to eliminate key al-Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward al-Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the
so-called “Awakening” in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the de facto ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves, thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the “surge” or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military’s occupation indeed was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki insisted on and got a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush.

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that fawned over Bush’s early war judgments, concluded that the “surge” was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence.

In his book, The War Within, Woodward wrote, “In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge.”

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of al-Qaeda extremists in Anbar province and the surprise decision of al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

However, in Washington, where the neocons remain very influential and where no one wants to be viewed as not giving credit to “the troops” the myth grew that Bush’s “surge” had brought the violence under control. Gen. David Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as the military genius who achieved “victory at last” in Iraq (as Newsweek declared).

Oddly, the inconvenient reality that the United States was unceremoniously ushered out of Iraq in 2011 has not dented this cherished conventional wisdom about the “successful surge.” To the degree the forced withdrawal is noted at all, it is in neocon op-eds accusing Obama of turning a hard-earned victory into
a self-inflicted defeat.

Still Relevant

This point about whether the Iraq “surge” should be viewed historically as a failure is not simply an academic matter, nor is it strictly a human tragedy for all the young lives destroyed and the families devastated. The “surge” myth continues to shape policy.

It was Official Washington’s certitude about the “successful surge” in Iraq and the supposed brilliance of Gen. Petraeus that framed the debate in 2009 about the struggling Afghan War, with Obama bowing to advice from Bush’s holdover Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as well as Petraeus, that a similarly sized “surge” was needed in Afghanistan.

Despite resistance from Vice President Joe Biden (who favored a more targeted counter-terrorism approach) and despite Obama’s insistence on an exit strategy (which Gates and the commanders slow-rolled), the Afghan War hawks got pretty much what they wanted in terms of troops and resources for a stepped-up counterinsurgency war.

Three years later, as U.S. fatalities in Afghanistan approached 2,000, it was a painful fact that about two-thirds of those killed had died since Obama’s “surges” began. [The current U.S. death toll in Afghanistan tops 2,300.]

The long Afghan War and the troop frustrations from multiple deployments also have contributed to atrocities against Afghans, including the massacre of nine children and seven other civilians by an allegedly deranged Army sergeant.

The arc of the Afghan War appears, too, to be following the course of the Iraq War, as Obama and his Defense Department have accelerated timetables for a U.S. drawdown through 2012 and 2013 with the U.S. combat role supposedly coming to an end in 2014. The conflict in Afghanistan looks to be on a bumpy glide path to another U.S. military defeat.

However, to the degree that neocons do recognize the outcome of the two wars as mostly disasters, the blame will be placed on Obama, who will be said to have not only betrayed Bush’s “successful surge” in Iraq but failed to pull off his own in Afghanistan.

For years [until resigning as CIA director in late 2012 over a sex scandal], Petraeus remained an icon of Official Washington, held in esteem much the way that Gen. Colin Powell was until his deceptive Iraq War speech to the United Nations in 2003 was revealed to be a pack of lies. Retired Defense Secretary Gates, another hero of Bush’s Iraq “surge,” also retains his status as a modern-
day Washington “wise man.”

Both Petraeus and Gates will undoubtedly be consulted by future presidents, whether Republican or Democratic. And, the pundits whether on MSNBC or Fox News will stick with their beloved “group think” regarding the “successful surge” in Iraq, ignoring the wasted lives, the squandered treasure and the outcome.

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.

The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War

From the Archive: As al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists gain ground in Iraq and Syria, U.S. neocons are eager to focus attention on President Obama’s “failure” to militarily dominate the Mideast; otherwise, Americans might recall how this mess got started, as Robert Parry wrote on the Iraq War’s tenth anniversary.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on March 20, 2013)

A decade after President George W. Bush ordered the unprovoked invasion of Iraq, one of the enduring mysteries has been why. There was the rationale sold to a frightened American people in 2002-2003 that Saddam Hussein was plotting to attack them with WMDs but no one in power really believed that.

There have been other more plausible explanations: George Bush the Younger wanted to avenge a perceived slight to George Bush the Elder, while also outdoing his father as a “war president”; Vice President Dick Cheney had his eye on Iraq’s oil wealth; and the Republican Party saw an opportunity to create its “permanent majority” behind a glorious victory in the Middle East.

Though George W. Bush’s defenders vigorously denied being motivated by such crass thinking, those rationales do seem closer to the truth. However, there was another driving force behind the desire to conquer Iraq: the neoconservative belief that the conquest would be a first step toward installing compliant pro-U.S. regimes throughout the Middle East and letting Israel dictate final peace terms to its neighbors.
That rationale has often been dressed up as “democratizing” the Middle East, but the idea was more a form of “neocolonialism,” in which American proconsuls would make sure that a favored leader, like the Iraqi National Congress’ Ahmed Chalabi, would control each country and align the nations’ positions with the interests of the United States and Israel.

Some analysts have traced this idea back to the neocon Project for the New American Century in the late 1990s, which advocated for “regime change” in Iraq. But the idea’s origins go back to the early 1990s and to two seminal events.

The first game-changing moment came in 1990-91 when President George H.W. Bush showed off the unprecedented advancements in U.S. military technology. Almost from the moment that Iraq’s Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqi dictator began signaling his willingness to withdraw after having taught the arrogant al-Sabah ruling family in Kuwait a lesson in power politics.

But the Bush-41 administration wasn’t willing to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the Kuwait invasion. Instead of letting Hussein arrange an orderly withdrawal, Bush-41 began baiting him with insults and blocking any face-saving way for a retreat.

Peace feelers from Hussein and later from Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev were rebuffed as Bush-41 waited his chance to demonstrate the stunning military realities of his New World Order. Even the U.S. field commander, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, favored Gorbachev’s plan for letting Iraqi forces pull back, but Bush-41 was determined to have a ground war.

So, Gorbachev’s plan was bypassed and the ground war commenced with the slaughter of Iraqi troops, many of them draftees who were mowed down and incinerated as they fled back toward Iraq. After 100 hours, Bush-41 ordered a halt to the massacre. He then revealed a key part of his motivation by declaring: “We’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.” [For details, see Robert Parry’s Secrecy & Privilege.]

Neocons Celebrate

Official Washington took note of the new realities and the renewed public enthusiasm for war. In a post-war edition, Newsweek devoted a full page to up-and-down arrows in its “Conventional Wisdom Watch.” Bush got a big up arrow with the snappy comment: “Master of all he surveys. Look at my polls, ye Democrats, and despair.”

For his last-minute stab at a negotiated Iraqi withdrawal, Gorbachev got a down arrow: “Give back your Nobel, Comrade Backstabber. P.S. Your tanks stink.” Vietnam also got a down arrow: “Where’s that? You mean there was a war there
too? Who cares?”

Neocon pundits, already dominating Washington’s chattering class, could barely contain their glee with the only caveat that Bush-41 had ended the Iraqi turkey shoot too soon and should have taken the carnage all the way to Baghdad.

The American people also rallied to the lopsided victory, celebrating with ticker-tape parades and cheering fireworks in honor of the conquering heroes. The victory-parade extravaganza stretched on for months, as hundreds of thousands jammed Washington for what was called “the mother of all parades.”

Americans bought Desert Storm T-shirts by the caseloads; kids were allowed to climb on tanks and other military hardware; the celebration concluded with what was called “the mother of all fireworks displays.” The next day, the Washington Post captured the mood with a headline: “Love Affair on the Mall: People and War Machines.”

The national bonding extended to the Washington press corps, which happily shed its professional burden of objectivity to join the national celebration. At the annual Gridiron Club dinner, where senior government officials and top journalists get to rub shoulders in a fun-filled evening, the men and women of the news media applauded wildly everything military.

The highlight of the evening was a special tribute to “the troops,” with a reading of a soldier’s letter home and then a violinist playing the haunting strains of Jay Ungar’s “Ashoken Farewell.” Special lyrics honoring Desert Storm were put to the music and the journalists in the Gridiron singers joined in the chorus: “Through the fog of distant war/Shines the strength of their devotion/To honor, to duty,/To sweet liberty.”

Among the celebrants at the dinner was Defense Secretary Cheney, who took note of how the Washington press corps was genuflecting before a popular war. Referring to the tribute, Cheney noted in some amazement, “You would not ordinarily expect that kind of unrestrained comment by the press.”

A month later at the White House Correspondents Dinner, the U.S. news media and celebrity guests cheered lustily when General Schwarzkopf was introduced. “It was like a Hollywood opening,” commented one journalist referring to the spotlights swirling around the field commander.

Neocon pundit Charles Krauthammer lectured the few dissidents who found the press corps’ groveling before the President and the military unsettling. “Loosen up, guys,” Krauthammer wrote. “Raise a glass, tip a hat, wave a pom-pom to the heroes of Desert Storm. If that makes you feel you’re living in Sparta, have another glass.”
American Hegemony

Like other observers, the neocons had seen how advanced U.S. technology had changed the nature of warfare. “Smart bombs” zeroed in on helpless targets; electronic sabotage disrupted enemy command and control; exquisitely equipped American troops outclassed the Iraqi military chugging around in Soviet-built tanks. War was made to look easy and fun with very light U.S. casualties.

The collapse of the Soviet Union later in 1991 represented the removal of the last obstacle to U.S. hegemony. The remaining question for the neocons was how to get and keep control of the levers of American power. However, those levers slipped out of their grasp with Bush-41’s favoritism toward his “realist” foreign policy advisers and then Bill Clinton’s election in 1992.

But the neocons still held many cards in the early 1990s, having gained credentials from their work in the Reagan administration and having built alliances with other hard-liners such as Bush-41’s Defense Secretary Cheney. The neocons also had grabbed important space on the opinion pages of key newspapers, like the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, and influential chairs inside major foreign-policy think tanks.

The second game-changing event took place amid the neocon infatuation with Israel’s Likud leaders. In the mid-1990s, prominent American neocons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, went to work for the campaign of Benjamin Netanyahu and tossed aside old ideas about a negotiated peace settlement with Israel’s Arab neighbors.

Rather than suffer the frustrations of negotiating a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem or dealing with the annoyance of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the neocons on Netanyahu’s team decided it was time for a bold new direction, which they outlined in a 1996 strategy paper, called “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.”

The paper advanced the idea that only “regime change” in hostile Muslim countries could achieve the necessary “clean break” from the diplomatic standoffs that had followed inconclusive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Under this “clean break,” Israel would no longer seek peace through compromise, but rather through confrontation, including the violent removal of leaders such as Saddam Hussein who were supportive of Israel’s close-in enemies.

The plan called Hussein’s ouster “an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right,” but also one that would destabilize the Assad dynasty in Syria and thus topple the power dominoes into Lebanon, where Hezbollah might soon find itself without its key Syrian ally. Iran also could find itself in the cross-
hairs of “regime change.”

American Assistance

But what the “clean break” needed was the military might of the United States, since some of the targets like Iraq were too far away and too powerful to be defeated even by Israel’s highly efficient military. The cost in Israeli lives and to Israel’s economy from such overreach would have been staggering.

In 1998, the U.S. neocon brain trust pushed the “clean break” plan another step forward with the creation of the Project for the New American Century, which lobbied President Clinton to undertake the violent overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

However, Clinton would only go so far, maintaining a harsh embargo on Iraq and enforcing a “no-fly zone” which involved U.S. aircraft conducting periodic bombing raids. Still, with Clinton or his heir apparent, Al Gore, in the White House, a full-scale invasion of Iraq appeared out of the question.

The first key political obstacle was removed when the neocons helped engineer George W. Bush’s ascension to the presidency in Election 2000. However, the path was not fully cleared until al-Qaeda terrorists attacked New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, leaving behind a political climate across America favoring war and revenge.

Of course, Bush-43 had to first attack Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda maintained its principal base, but he then quickly pivoted to the neocons’ desired target, Iraq. Besides being home to the already demonized Saddam Hussein, Iraq had other strategic advantages. It was not as heavily populated as some of its neighbors yet it was positioned squarely between Iran and Syria, two other top targets.

In those heady days of 2002-2003, a neocon joke posed the question of what to do after ousting Saddam Hussein in Iraq whether to next go east to Iran or west to Syria. The punch-line was: “Real men go to Tehran.”

But first Iraq had to be vanquished, and this other agenda—restructuring the Middle East to make it safe for U.S. and Israeli interests had to be played down, partly because average Americans might be skeptical and because expert Americans might have warned about the dangers from U.S. imperial overreach.

So, Bush-43, Vice President Cheney and their neocon advisers pushed the “hot button” of the American people, still frightened by the horrors of 9/11. The bogus case was made that Saddam Hussein had stockpiles of WMD that he was ready to give to al-Qaeda so the terrorists could inflict even greater devastation on the U.S. homeland.
Stampeding America

The neocons, some of whom grew up in families of left-wing Trotskyites, viewed themselves as a kind of a “vanguard” party using “agit-prop” to maneuver the American “proletariat.” The WMD scare was seen as the best way to stampede the American herd. Then, the neocon thinking went, the military victory in Iraq would consolidate war support and permit implementation of the next phases toward “regime change” in Iran and Syria.

The plan seemed to be working early, as the U.S. military overwhelmed the beleaguered Iraqi army and captured Baghdad in three weeks. Bush-43 celebrated by landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln in a flight suit and delivering a speech beneath a banner reading “Mission Accomplished.”

However, the plan began to go awry when neocon pro-consul Paul Bremer in pursuit of a neocon model regime got rid of Iraq’s governing infrastructure, dismantled much of the social safety net and disbanded the army. Then, the neocon-favored leader, exile Ahmed Chalabi, turned out to be a non-starter with the Iraqi people.

An armed resistance emerged, using low-tech weapons such as “improvised explosive devices.” Soon, not only were thousands of American soldiers dying but ancient sectarian rivalries between Shiites and Sunnis began tearing Iraq apart. The scenes of chaotic violence were horrific.

Rather than gaining in popularity with the American people, the war began to lose support, leading to Democratic gains in 2006. The neocons salvaged some of their status in 2007 by pushing the fiction of the “successful surge,” which supposedly had turned impending defeat into victory, but the truth was that the “surge” only delayed the inevitable failure of the U.S. enterprise.

With George W. Bush’s departure in 2009 and the arrival of Barack Obama, the neocons retreated, too. Neocon influence waned within the Executive Branch, though neocons still maintained strongholds at Washington think tanks and on editorial pages of national news outlets like the Washington Post.

New developments in the region also created new neocon hopes for their old agenda. The Arab Spring of 2011 led to civil unrest in Syria where the Assad dynasty based in non-Sunni religious sects was challenged by a Sunni-led insurgency which included some democratic reformers as well as radical jihadists.

Meanwhile, in Iran, international opposition to its nuclear program prompted harsh economic sanctions. Though President Obama viewed the sanctions as leverage to compel Iran to accept limits on its nuclear program, some neocons
were salivating over how to hijack the sanctions on behalf of “regime change.”

However, in November 2012, Obama’s defeat of neocon favorite Mitt Romney and the departure of neocon ally, CIA Director David Petraeus, were sharp blows to the neocon plans of reclaiming the reins of U.S. foreign policy.

The neocons were left to see how they could leverage their continued influence over Washington’s opinion circles and hope for advantageous developments abroad to steer Obama toward more confrontational approaches with Iran and Syria.

For the neocons, it also remains crucial that average Americans don’t think too much about the why behind the disastrous Iraq War.

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.

Forgetting Why Al-Qaeda Spread

Exclusive: Al-Qaeda extremism is resurgent across the Middle East with its affiliates seizing territory in western Iraq and in neighboring Syria. But the neocons are whitewashing their role in spreading this extremism via George W. Bush’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President George W. Bush and Official Washington’s neocons are gifts that keep on giving, at least to America’s terrorist enemies. The Shiite-Sunni sectarian conflict that Bush and his neocon advisers stirred up by invading Iraq in 2003 has now engulfed the entire region and has given al-Qaeda and its affiliates footholds in countries where they hadn’t existed before the Iraq War.

But the Washington Post’s neocon editorial page, which served as the bullhorn for the Iraq War’s advocates, has figured out who’s to blame for the deepening mess in the Middle East: President Barack Obama for not continuing the U.S. military occupation of Iraq and not intervening more aggressively in Syria to help overthrow President Bashar al-Assad.
The Post’s version of history as expressed in a lead editorial on Sunday follows the neocon narrative that begins in 2007 with President Bush’s supposed “victory” in Iraq, which President Obama then allegedly squandered by completing the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011. According to this neocon narrative, Bush’s “surge” had defeated al-Qaeda forces in Iraq before the feckless Obama threw all that hard-won success away.

Left out of the Post’s narrative is the fact that al-Qaeda didn’t exist in Iraq (or in many other places outside of a few remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan) until Bush with the enthusiastic support of the Post’s editorial page invaded Iraq in 2003 and destroyed the delicate balance between Sunni and Shiite sectarian interests across the Middle East. Before and during the war, the Post also helped spread a lot of lies to the American people.

To rile up the American public still traumatized by the 9/11 attacks, Bush and the neocons had pretended that al-Qaeda was in league with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein who was planning to give the terrorists some of his vast stores of WMD. Thanks to the complicity of the Post and other major U.S. news outlets, the public heard almost no dissent to this false narrative. Not only was the secular Hussein a fierce enemy of al-Qaeda’s brand of Sunni extremism but he had long ago destroyed his WMD stockpiles.

But Bush and the neocons got their invasion of Iraq nonetheless. They ousted Hussein, a Sunni, and replaced him with another authoritarian regime led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite. The sectarian power shift in Baghdad and the U.S. military occupation transformed the Sunni-dominated territories of western Iraq into fertile ground for al-Qaeda, which also understood that keeping American forces tied down in Iraq would keep attention away from the surviving al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, holed up in Pakistan.

Through Bush’s last five years in office amid intense anti-Americanism over the Guantanamo Bay prison and exacerbated by the U.S. invasion of Iraq al-Qaeda affiliates began popping up in other Sunni countries, including Yemen and Libya, while retaining a foothold in Iraq despite many Sunni tribes joining in the fight against the extremists in 2006.

Much like how Saudi national Osama bin Laden got his start in the 1980s in Afghanistan, this spreading Sunni extremism was largely financed by Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf sheikdoms. (The section of the 9/11 Commission’s report about Saudi assistance to al-Qaeda remains classified to this day.)

In recent years, Saudi Arabia again saw the value of supporting militant Sunni factions as a way to counter the growing influence of Shiite-ruled Iran, which had developed close ties with the Maliki government in Iraq and thus had
extended the Shiite Crescent from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut, Lebanon.

**The Saudi-Israel Tandem**

The Saudis also began a **behind-the-scenes collaboration** with Israel despite historic animosities between the two countries. Increasingly, Saudi Arabia and Israel shared a strategic outlook that saw Iran as their principal enemy and favored covert means for shattering the Shiite Crescent, including Saudi assistance to Sunni jihadist forces seeking to overthrow Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad, who is an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam.

Last September, Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren embraced Saudi Arabia’s violent strategy in Syria when he announced that Israel would prefer to see the Saudi-backed jihadists prevail in Syria over the continuation of the Iran-backed Assad regime.

“The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,” Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an *interview*. “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” He said this was the case even if the other “bad guys” were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

So, one could view the mess in the Middle East through the prism of Bush’s rash invasion of Iraq and the neocons’ reckless meddling that had destabilized the region. But the Post’s editors chose to start their narrative’s clock much later, all the better to absolve themselves and shift the blame to Obama for not toeing the neocon line and engaging in more military interventions over the past five years.

In the editorial on Sunday, entitled “A slow-motion conflagration,” the Post’s editors wrote that “Across the region, al-Qaeda is surging. At the time of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the Sunni jihadist movement had been all but extinguished, thanks to the collaboration of U.S. and Iraqi forces. Now it controls a wide swath of territory in eastern Syria that adjoins Iraq’s Anbar province, where Fallujah and Ramadi are located.

“In Lebanon, too, an al-Qaeda-linked force called the Abdullah Azzam Brigades is believed responsible for multiple attacks, including twin bombings outside the Iranian embassy in November. According to a study by an Israeli think tank released Thursday, the vast majority of the 6,000 to 7,000 militants to infiltrate the area have joined al-Qaeda-linked groups, including more than 1,000 from Western countries.
“For Mr. Obama, the presence of al-Qaeda has been a reason to withhold U.S. aid to rebels fighting the Assad regime and to reject more forceful measures to bring the war to an end. That policy has left his administration without a strategy for preventing the terrorists from consolidating a safe haven in Syria and extending their influence to Lebanon and Iraq, where the gains painfully won by U.S. troops are being reversed.

“The administration has supplied some arms and intelligence to Iraqi government forces fighting al-Qaeda, but that is little more than a palliative. Sooner or later the United States will have to face the threat to its vital interests emerging across the Levant.”

In other words, the Post’s editors reflecting Official Washington’s continuing neocon hubris don’t see any need for self-criticism over the invasion of Iraq or for doubts about the wisdom of other U.S. interventions. The editorial contained not a single word about how the Post and the neocons helped light the match which touched off this “slow-motion conflagration.”

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How Saudi-Israeli Tandem Goads Obama

The Saudi-Israeli tandem may superficially still be “unfriendly” but the two countries are peddling in the same direction when it comes to dragging the U.S. into Mideast conflicts against Iran and Syria. But is that in the U.S. interest, asks Independent Institute’s Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

One of the most influential Saudi Arabian princes, Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief who clearly reflects the Saudi royal government’s view, recently criticized President Barack Obama for weakness in the Middle East. The Israeli government is similarly disenchanted with Obama’s regional performance.

Prince Turki’s comments are just the most recent installment of these governments trying to goad the United States into dubious actions in the region
that would not be in U.S. interests. According to Prince Turki:

“We’ve seen several red lines put forward by the President, which went along and became pinkish as time grew, and eventually ended up completely white. When that kind of assurance comes from a leader of a country like the United States, we expect him to stand by it. There is an issue of confidence.”

He added that when a country has strong allies, “you should be able to give them the assurance that what you say is going to be what you do.”

The Saudis have been unnerved by Obama’s understandable and wise decision to avoid deep U.S. involvement in the Syrian civil war. The Saudis were angry that Obama didn’t strike the al-Assad regime militarily after it was accused of using chemical weapons on its own people. Yet military strikes on Syrian chemical weapons facilities could very well have released chemicals on the Syrian civilians the attacks were ostensibly designed to protect.

In fact, the Saudis, who have a horrendous human rights record of their own, likely don’t care, one way or the other, about harming Syrian civilians. In fact, despite their outsized reputation, chemical weapons usually account for only one percent of the people who die in the wars in which they have been used.

The Saudis, leaders of the Sunni Islamic bloc in the Middle East, want the United States to attack Syria to weaken the Shi’ite Syrian-Iranian axis, their arch rivals. That is why they also want the United States to bomb Iran over its nuclear program. Such a strike is less about the Iranian nuclear program and more about weakening a Shi’ite country that is more powerful than Syria.

Any U.S. air strike on Iranian nuclear facilities likely would not take out all of them, some of which are deeply buried and maybe even unknown to U.S. intelligence, and would probably motivate Iran to make the decision to rapidly obtain a nuclear weapon, a choice U.S. intelligence believes that Iran has not made.

Although the Sunni Arab bloc and Israel are unfriendly to each other, they both share an interest in weakening the Shi’ite Syria-Iran axis. And they both want the United States to do their dirty work for them. Pointless bombing, merely to weaken Syria or Iran for Saudi Arabia and Israel, would not serve U.S. national interests, let alone that the American people are exhausted with terrorism-inducing U.S. military entanglements in a Middle East that is in perpetual conflict.

So Obama has rightly avoided getting sucked deeper than he already is into the potential Syrian quagmire, the U.S. has provided some limited lethal and non-lethal assistance to the Syrian rebels, by cooperating with Russia to compel
Assad to get rid of his chemical weapons stockpiles. What is amazing is that essentially Prince Turki is criticizing Obama for not bombing Assad anyway, even after the Syrian dictator capitulated in this unlikely manner.

Reflecting the Israeli view, the New York Times, quoted former Israeli ambassador to the United States, Itamar Rabinovich, as saying that because Obama had refrained from attacking Syria, neither Israel nor Iran believed any longer that he might strike Iran over its nuclear program. However, even if this is true, Iran has nevertheless come to the negotiating table and reached an interim agreement to freeze its nuclear program and even roll back at least one part of it.

Even military theorists know that if you can get your opponent to do what you want, or most thereof, without the use of force, then you should avoid using it. In the cases of both Syria and Iran, the Saudis and Israelis don’t really like the progress Obama has made by negotiation, because it ruins their not-so-hidden agenda of inciting the United States to attack, and thus weaken, their regional rivals.

Thus, U.S. military action against either Syria or Iran may be in the interest of Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it is not the interest of the United States or its people, who may be subjected to further blowback retaliatory acts of terrorism.

Ivan Eland is Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at The Independent Institute. Dr. Eland has spent 15 years working for Congress on national security issues, including stints as an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Principal Defense Analyst at the Congressional Budget Office. His books include The Empire Has No Clothes: U.S. Foreign Policy Exposed, and Putting “Defense” Back into U.S. Defense Policy.

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**Bush’s Anti-American Legacy**

As Iraq becomes a hotbed for al-Qaeda terrorism, President George W. Bush’s legacy grows even dimmer. But one could argue that he did succeed in stirring democratic impulses in the region, albeit mostly of an anti-American variety, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The multifaceted push by the George W. Bush administration to inject more “democracy” into the Middle East, a set of policies sometimes grouped under the
label of the “Freedom Agenda”, has generated much debate about its effectiveness that even several years of added perspective have not resolved.

The advent of the Arab Spring three years ago led defenders of Bush’s policies to claim this phenomenon as a positive consequence of those policies, while critics could still point to some glaring negative consequences.

An impediment to temperate discussion of this issue is how the biggest initiative not just of the Freedom of Agenda but of Bush’s entire presidency, the attempt, known as the Iraq War, to inject “democracy” into the Middle East through the barrel of a gun, was such a blunder and debacle that it overshadows what Bush got right about the political ordering of the region.

What he got right was more the diagnosis than the cure. The Middle East was, and still is, the Arab Spring notwithstanding, more of a democratic desert than most other regions. And the paucity of channels in the Middle East for peacefully pursuing political objectives and acting on grievances can affect the United States, especially by providing a more fertile breeding ground for violent extremism.

In the current issue of *Political Science Quarterly* Bruce Gilley has an interesting article that takes a balanced look at the results of the Freedom Agenda. Gilley notes that many of the claims both for and against the proposition that Bush’s policies successfully had a democratizing effect are expressed in “partisan, confused, and often contradictory language.”

One conclusion of his own more rigorous analysis is that the Bush policies could be said to have stimulated democratization in the Middle East in large part through Middle Easterners reacting negatively to the policies themselves. “The Freedom Agenda rhetoric,” Gilley writes, “tended to elicit anger, resentment, and distrust across the Middle East.”

Arab public opinion polls in 2006 and 2008 showed only 25 percent of respondents believing that the United States was sincere about promoting democracy in the region, with 65 percent disbelieving that. The rejection by the United States of the results of a free Palestinian election, which Hamas won, no doubt had a lot to do with that polling result.

The Iraq War was a negative, not a positive, model for people in the region. In other polling of Arabs, also in 2006 and 2008, only two percent of respondents thought Iraq was better off as a result of the war while 81 percent believed it was worse off.

Gilley says that these negative reactions had two visible effects. One was “to undermine the legitimacy of domestic democracy activists, who were disparaged as
agents of an imperialistic United States.” But the other effect, and this is one of the ways in which the Bush policies could be said to have stimulated democratization, was the unintended one of creating “new political space for socialist, Islamist, and government/military reform advocates who sought to counter the Bush rhetoric with a new democratic rhetoric of their own.” Gilley cites as an example the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood announcing its own reform initiative in 2004, with demands for democratic freedoms and an end to emergency law.

This reaction involved a fusion of pro-democracy sentiment with an anti-U.S. and anti-Western variety of nationalism. In more recent Arab Spring days, this has been seen, for example, in Iraqi citizens deriding the Saudi regime as “slaves of America and Israel” for dispatching Saudi troops to suppress unrest in Bahrain.

This fusion brings us back to the hoary dichotomy of democratic values versus hard-nosed U.S. interests, but with a different twist. The dichotomy may be real not so much because of pro-U.S. sentiments of dictators, but instead because of anti-U.S. sentiments of democrats.

And that leads to the question of whether the sort of democratization that the Freedom Agenda wrought is such a good thing for the United States after all. Democracy per se is important for U.S. interests, including for those reasons having to do with propensity toward violent extremism, but anything that makes people more anti-American is also important for those interests, and for many of the same reasons.

Perhaps an appropriate summary of the Freedom Agenda’s consequences is that the Bush administration delivered some of the goods as far as democratization is concerned, but in the process damaged the goods in a way that made them less useful to the United States.

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.)

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Egypt Heads from Bad to Worse

The Obama administration has grown more tolerant of the Egyptian military coup that ousted elected President Morsi and is now cracking down on his Muslim
Brotherhood, repression favored by the Saudi-Israeli alliance, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

This past week the confrontation between Egypt’s ruling regime and the country’s Muslim Brotherhood intensified. In an act that should make people familiar with this ongoing struggle shake their heads, the “military-backed government” in Cairo declared Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist organization.”

In case anyone is inclined to get the sides mixed up, it is the Muslim Brotherhood that is defending democracy in this confrontation, and the media’s use of the euphemism “military-backed government” is to be understood as whitewash for military dictatorship.

The truth is that the Muslim Brothers have behaved in a civil fashion. Indeed, they have shown great restraint in the face of the violent, sometimes terrorist-style provocations of the Egyptian military and police. Always advocating nonviolent demonstrations against the military coup that brought down Egypt’s first honestly elected government in modern times, the Brothers and their supporters have been met with murderous official violence that has killed, wounded and jailed thousands.

Thus, when the generals calls the Muslim Brotherhood “terrorist,” they are using an Orwellian propaganda ploy. As is so often the case, it is the dictatorship that practices terrorism and many of those who resist are destined to be its victims.

This doesn’t mean that there has not been violent resistance to the dictatorship. There have been steadily increasing instances of this, such as car-bombings of government buildings and attacks on police and military posts. The violent resistance started in the Sinai region of Egypt and has now spread across the Nile into the country’s heartland.

For instance, on Dec. 25, the police headquarters at Mansoura, a city northeast of Cairo, was destroyed and 15 people died. But it was not the Brotherhood that launched this or other attacks like it. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (roughly translated as “Defenders of Holy Jerusalem”), a group unaffiliated with the Muslim Brothers, has taken responsibility. Still, the dictatorship in Cairo has taken advantage of the violence to attempt to destroy the Brotherhood. This is probably an impossible goal and its pursuit risks civil war.

It is interesting that Ansar Beit al-Maqdis’s violence has been described in the Western media as “extremist.” Violence can be considered extreme by definition and this group’s violence is spreading. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has warned that
police, soldiers and anyone else associated with the dictatorship is now a target.

On the other hand, rarely have the actions of what now passes for a government in Egypt been labeled “extremist” in the media, although the generals have repeatedly killed and maimed nonviolent protesters. In truth, it is the dictatorship itself which has set down the options for those who resist it: either give up entirely or pick up the gun.

This stands as a lesson in ends and means – the means employed by dictatorial regimes usually don’t allow for peaceful protest and thus in the end, the resistance is steered toward violence.

Abandoning the Democratic Road

There will be many who rationalize Egypt’s military dictatorship by pointing to the flaws in the deposed government of President Mohamed Morsi. Some will point out that, even though freely and fairly elected, the Morsi government was soon rejected by growing numbers of Egyptians. Thus, before the coup, there were large demonstrations against the elected government.

This is true, though the assertion that the protests represented a majority of the population is a politically motivated exaggeration. The problem with this rationale is that, unlike conditions under a dictatorship, there were democratic options open to those who disliked the elected government, such as the political protests.

Morsi opponents could have kept up the demand for broader input into government policy until the government compromised. Just before the coup, there were signs that this point was being reached. Or the opponents could have waited until the next election cycle to attempt to turn the Morsi government out. There is no evidence that Morsi would have prevented future free and fair elections. It is to be noted that one thing the elected government did not do was shoot down protesters in the streets.

It might be that, except for a relatively small youth movement, most of the anti-Morsi coalition was never seriously interested in democracy. From the start of the demonstrations against the elected government, there was little or no hesitation by this coalition to abandon democratic practices.

The regulations and procedures put in place by the prior dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak were repeatedly used to stymie Morsi’s administration. Prominent in the use of this tactic were the courts and judges appointed by Mubarak. It soon became apparent that the anti-Morsi coalition did not have the patience to follow a democratic/electoral route to settling the question of Egypt’s ultimate
character. Theirs was an all-or-nothing attitude which quickly led them to call on the military to “save the nation.”

What was salvation to look like? One thing that is certain is that the Egyptian military lacks the skill to save, and indeed any interest in saving, Egyptian democracy.

What did this strategy get the anti-Morsi coalition? Did it get them a secular government that respects civil and human rights? Did it get them a government that can be trusted to hold free and fair elections? Certainly not, for the means they employed could not lead to such ends. It got them relief from the maybe of Sharia law in exchange for the certainty of a military coup and the violence through which all military dictators rule.

What do the military dictators of Egypt think their arbitrary and violent use of power will accomplish? Do they think that the country will return to the situation under Nasser-Sadat-Mubarak when authoritarian intimidation kept religious organizations under control and civil society quiet? Do they think that anyone will really be fooled by the rigged elections they are planning for 2014?

If so, they have failed to consider the possibility that the democratic election of Mohamed Morsi may well have changed the historical equation. In terms of history, what they should be referencing is not their own dictatorial past but the events of Algeria in the 1990s, where another military regime shut down the pro-Islamic results of a democratic election and triggered a decade of savage civil war. This is an end that is quite consistent with the means used by the Egyptian generals in 2013.

**Evolving U.S. Response**

The U.S. government had been a consistent backer of Egyptian dictatorships ever since Anwar Sadat made his historic peace with Israel in March 1979. From that time on the U.S. Treasury has been paying out at least $1.55 billion (the publicly used low figure) in mostly military aid to Egypt. That aid has helped sustain a corrupt Egyptian officer corps that now controls a good part of the Egyptian economy and has no one to fight except its own people.

In February 2011, a genuinely popular and mostly nonviolent revolt forced the collapse of the Mubarak dictatorship. This led to Egypt’s first internationally monitored, free and fair election. For a while it looked like the Egyptian military would be forced out of politics, and U.S. President Barack Obama seemed to accept this turn of events.

Even when the Egyptian generals returned to form and pulled off their coup in
July 2013, the Obama administration reacted with displeasure and cut off some of the annual aid payments. The only ones in the Middle East who found this objectionable were other U.S.-supported dictatorships such as those in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates.

However, now the U.S. government might be considering to once more support an Egyptian dictatorship. Suggestions that this might be the case came recently from Secretary of State John Kerry in a Nov. 20 speech to the State Department’s Overseas Security Advisory Council where Kerry showed an embarrassing lack of knowledge about the events that brought down the Mubarak dictatorship and a remarkably naive notion of what it takes to make and sustain a revolution.

Thus, Kerry said: “Those kids in Tahrir Square, they were not motivated by any religion or ideology. They were motivated by what they saw through this interconnected world, and they wanted a piece of the opportunity and a chance to get an education and have a job and have a future, and not have a corrupt government that deprived them of all of that and more. And they tweeted their ways and Facetimed [sic] their ways and talked to each other and that’s what drove that revolution. And then it got stolen by the one single most organized entity in the state, which was the Brotherhood.”

The fact that Kerry could make such a diagnosis to a group of allegedly knowledgeable security advisers is chilling. Kerry is way off the mark and here is why:

— The very brave youths of Cairo and Alexandria who began the 2010-2011 protests against the Mubarak dictatorship laid the basis for the conditions that eventually brought down that regime. But they alone could not and did not achieve that goal.

— These youth were not devoid of either religion or ideology. Most were Muslims of varying degree of practice and almost all of them believed in a democratic ideology.

— Despite their use of social networking and other technologies, the youth groups were too small to make a revolution.

— The revolution became possible only when much greater numbers were introduced into the streets to transform the demonstrations from large to massive. The decision to bring out those numbers was taken by the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that is religious but was also willing to follow a democratic path.

— The Brotherhood could manage to bring out the large numbers not just because it was “the most organized entity in the state” but because for decades it has also been the most effective and popular social service organization in Egypt.
The truth then is that the Brotherhood did not “steal” the revolution, it made the revolution possible.

Today’s Egypt is a mess. It is an economic mess thanks to decades of military dictatorship, corruption and greed. It is a political mess for the same reason. Whatever faults might be laid at the feet of the elected Morsi government, none of them warranted a return to thuggish military rule – an action which, for all practical purposes, brought the ideals of the Arab Spring to a tragic end.

One can only hope that the U.S. government, rising above the historical ignorance of John Kerry and his speech writers, will hold to principle and have as little as possible to do with the regime in Cairo. It is a nasty regime, brutal to its own people, barbaric in its policy toward the imprisoned population of Gaza and, not surprisingly, in bed with the Zionists and autocratic Gulf monarchs.

As for Egypt’s democratic revolution that almost was, one can hope that it survives as a precedent for the future.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest*; *America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.