

The Phony ‘Bad Intel’ Defense on Iraq

Exclusive: Jeb Bush’s stumbling start to his presidential bid has refocused attention on Official Washington’s favorite excuse for the illegal, aggressive and disastrous war in Iraq that it was just a case of “bad intelligence.” But that isn’t what the real history shows, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern recalls.

By Ray McGovern

Presidential aspirant Jeb Bush this week may have damaged his chances by flubbing the answer to an entirely predictable question about his big brother’s decision to attack Iraq.

On Monday, Fox’s Megyn Kelly asked the former Florida governor: “Knowing what we know now, would you have authorized the invasion?” Jeb Bush answered, “I would’ve. And so would’ve Hillary Clinton, just to remind everybody, and so would’ve almost everybody who was confronted with the intelligence they got.”

Kelly: “You don’t think it was a mistake.”

Bush: “In retrospect, the intelligence that everyone saw – that the world saw, not just the United States – was faulty.”

After some backfilling and additional foundering on Tuesday and Wednesday, Bush apparently memorized the “correct” answer. So on Thursday, he proceeded to ask the question himself: “If we’re all supposed to answer hypothetical questions: Knowing what we now know, what would you have done? I would not have engaged. I would not have gone into Iraq.”

It is a safe bet that, by Thursday, Iraq War champion Paul Wolfowitz, now a senior adviser to Jeb Bush, had taken him to the woodshed, admonishing him along these lines: “Jeb, you remembered to emphasize the *mistaken* nature of pre-war intelligence; that’s the key point; that’s good. But then you need to say that if you knew how *mistaken* the intelligence was, you would *not* have attacked Iraq. Got it?”

It was then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz – together with his boss Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick Cheney and a string of neocon advisers – who exploited the tragedy of 9/11 to make war on Iraq, which they had been itching for since the 1990s. They tried mightily (and transparently) to link Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to the Sept. 11 attacks. Following their lead, the fawning corporate media played up this bum rap with such success that, before the attack on Iraq, polls showed that almost 70 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein played some kind of role in 9/11.

Not so, said honest intelligence analysts who, try as they might, could find no persuasive evidence for Hussein's guilt other than the synthetic kind in Wolfowitz's purposively twisted imagination. Yet the pressure on the analysts to conform was intense. CIA's ombudsman commented publicly that never in his 32-year career with the agency had he encountered such "hammering" on CIA analysts to reconsider their judgments and state that there were operational ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

The pressure was reflected in pronouncements at the highest levels. A year after 9/11, President Bush was still saying, "You cannot distinguish between al-Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror." Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was more direct, claiming that the evidence tying Iraq to al-Qaeda was "bulletproof."

But Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to President George H.W. Bush and Chairman of George W. Bush's President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, supported honest analysts in CIA and elsewhere, stating publicly that evidence of any such connection was "scant."

There was the looming danger of a principled leak, or possibly even an insurrection of some kind on the part of those opposed to creating pretexts for war. And so the administration chose to focus first and foremost on "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD).

It would be an easier and scarier sell a claim that Iraq had chemical, biological and perhaps nuclear weapons and that the Iraqis could give them to "terrorists" for another attack on the "homeland" (introducing a term that both the Nazis and the Soviets used to good effect in whipping up nationalistic fervor in wartime).

Brimming with WMD

Unable to get honest intelligence analysts to go along with the carefully nurtured "noble lie" that Iraq played a role in 9/11, or even that operational ties existed between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the administration ordered up a separate but related genre of faux intelligence WMD. This PR offensive was something of a challenge, for in the months before 9/11, Condoleezza Rice and then-Secretary of State Colin Powell had insisted publicly that Saddam Hussein posed no security threat. You don't remember?

On Feb. 24, 2001, Powell had said, "Saddam Hussein has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbors."

And just six weeks before 9/11, Condoleezza Rice told CNN: "let's remember that

his [Saddam's] country is divided, in effect. He does not control the northern part of his country. We are able to keep his arms from him. His military forces have not been rebuilt." Obliging, the compliant U.S. media pressed the delete button on those telling statements.

How many times have we heard that, after 9/11, "everything changed." Well, we were soon to observe a major attempt to apply this adage to Saddam's inventory of WMD that Rice and Powell had said did not exist. The world was being asked to believe that, almost immediately, hundreds of stealth WMD had wafted down like manna from the heavens for a soft landing on the sands of Iraq.

Just days after the Sept. 11 attacks, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld began promoting the notion that Iraq might have weapons of mass destruction and that "within a week, or a month, Saddam could give his WMD to al-Qaeda." This was an early articulation of the bogus "conjunction of terrorism and WMD," now immortalized in what is the most damning, first-hand, documentary evidence of U.S./U.K. collusion in launching a war of aggression on false pretenses and how it was to be "justified."

This evidence was contained in the "Downing Street Memorandum," written on July 23, 2002, though not published until May 1, 2005, by The London Times (discussed in more detail below). The goal was to systematically conflate Iraq's supposed stockpiles of WMD with al-Qaeda and 9/11, as a kind of subliminal fear/revenge message to the American public.

It was not long before the agile Rice did a demi-pirouette of 180 degrees, claiming that Saddam had suddenly become "a danger in the region where the 9/11 threat emerged." By the summer of 2002, the basic decision for war having been taken, something persuasive had to be conjured up to get Congress to authorize it. Weapons of mass deception, as one wag called them, together with warnings about "mushroom clouds" were just what the Doctor Rice ordered.

Sadly, CIA's malleable director George Tenet followed orders to conjure up WMD in a deceitful National Intelligence Estimate issued on Oct. 1, 2002. The NIE's main purpose was to deceive Congress into authorizing war on Iraq, which Congress did just ten days later.

Amid the media din about WMD, and with Rep. Barbara Lee, D-California, the sole exception, no legislator proved willing to risk being seen as "weak on terrorism" as the mid-term elections approached in November, the disinformation operation was well, you might say a "cakewalk." Tenet and his deputy John McLaughlin satisfied President Bush they could fashion the evidence into a "slam

dunk," and then fed the cooked intelligence to Secretary of State Colin Powell to use at the U.N.

Riding High, Wolfowitz Slips

Basking in the glory of "Mission Accomplished" after Baghdad fell in April 2003, Wolfowitz succumbed to a brief bout of hubris-induced honesty. He openly admitted that the Bush administration had focused on weapons of mass destruction to justify war on Iraq "for bureaucratic reasons." It was, he explained, "the one reason everyone could agree on" meaning, of course, the one that could successfully sell the war to Congress and the American people.

As for the real reasons, Wolfowitz again let his guard drop at about the same time. When asked in May 2003 why North Korean WMD were being treated differently from those claimed to exist in Iraq, he responded, "Let's look at it simply. ... [Iraq] swims on a sea of oil."

Other usually circumspect senior officials have had unguarded moments of candor. In another moment of unusual frankness this one before the war Philip Zelikow, a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board from 2001 to 2003, spilled the other key reason. Discounting any real danger to the U.S. from Iraq, Zelikow pointed rather to the threat he said Iraq posed to Israel as "the unstated threat." It was a threat, he added, that dared not speak its name because it was so politically sensitive.

Are you getting the picture why the Bush administration didn't want to level with the American people who might have viewed the war very differently if the real motives and the nagging doubts had been expressed frankly and bluntly?

The force with which CIA analysts were pressed to manufacture intelligence to serve the cause of war was unprecedented in CIA history and included personal visits by Vice President Cheney to make sure the intelligence analysts knew what was wanted. That many of my former colleagues in the Analysis Directorate took willing part in this unconscionable charade was hard to believe. But they did.

At about this time, an anonymous White House official believed to be George W. Bush's political adviser Karl Rove reportedly boasted, "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality, judiciously, as you will, we'll act again, creating other new realities."

As exemplified by Jeb Bush' memorized lines this past week, there continues to be a huge premium among disciples of Rovian historiography, to "create new reality," blaming "mistaken intelligence" for the debacle in Iraq and the ensuing chaos throughout the region. The intelligence was wrong; but it was *not* mistaken; it was out-and-out fraud.

This had become so clear, yet so little known, that ten years ago this month I was finishing a draft for a chapter I called “Sham Dunk: Cooking Intelligence for the President” to appear in *Neo-CONNED Again! Hypocrisy, Lawlessness, and the Rape of Iraq*.

I was just finishing the draft when a *deus ex machina* arrived in the form of a major leak to the London Times of official minutes of a briefing of then British Prime Minister Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street on July 23, 2002, eight months before the war on Iraq, and three days after visiting CIA Director George Tenet to confirm for Blair exactly what Bush and Cheney were planning. The Downing Street document destroyed the argument, already being promoted in 2005 by those responsible for the fraud, that intelligence mistakes were to blame for the war in Iraq.

The Downing Street Memorandum

I would like to draw from the first couple of paragraphs of the chapter, since, sadly, they seem relevant today as the historical rewrite about “intelligence errors” is recurring now at the start of Campaign 2016. But first, here is the text of the most damaging part of the Downing Street Memo as “C” – Richard Dearlove, the head of British intelligence reported on recent talks in Washington:

“There was a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But ***the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy***. The NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime’s record. There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.”
(emphasis added)

Following is [the introduction](#) to my chapter:

“Let’s review. It was bad intelligence that forced an unwitting president to invade Iraq, right? The sad fact that so many Americans believe this myth is eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of the White House spin machine. The intelligence was indeed bad – shaped that way by an administration determined to find a pretext to effect ‘regime change’ in Iraq.

“Senior administration officials – first and foremost Vice President Dick Cheney – played a strong role in ensuring that the intelligence analysis was corrupt enough to justify, *ex post facto*, the decision to make war on Iraq. It is not altogether clear how witting President George W. Bush was of all this, but there is strong evidence that he knew chapter and verse. Had he been mousetrapped into

this 'preemptive' war, one would expect some heads to roll. None have. And where is it, after all, that the buck is supposed to stop?

"The intelligence-made-me-do-it myth has helped the Bush administration attenuate the acute embarrassment it experienced early last year [2004] when the *casus belli* became a *casus belly* laugh. When U.S. inspector David Kay, after a painstaking search to which almost a billion dollars and many lives were given, reported that there had been no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq since 1991, someone had to take the fall.

"Elected was CIA director George Tenet, the backslapping fellow from Queens always eager to do whatever might be necessary to play with the bigger kids. For those of you just in from Mars, the grave danger posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was what President Bush cited as the *casus belli* for invading Iraq. It was only after Kay had the courage to tell the truth publicly that Bush fell back on the default rationale for the war; namely, the need to export democracy, about which we are hearing so much lately.

"Not surprisingly, the usual suspects in the mainstream media that played cheerleader for the war are now helping the president (and the media) escape blame. Flawed intelligence that led the United States to invade Iraq was the fault of the US intelligence community, explained the Washington Times last July 10 [2004], after regime loyalist Senator Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, released his committee's findings.

"Nine months later, after publication of similar findings by a commission handpicked by the president, the Washington Post's lead headline was 'Data on Iraqi Arms Flawed, Panel Says.' The date was, appropriately, April Fools Day, 2005. In a word, they are playing us for fools. The remarkable thing is that most folks don't seem able, or willing, to recognize that or even to mind.

"On May 1, 2005, a highly sensitive document published by The Sunday Times of London provided the smoking gun showing that President Bush had decided to make war on Iraq long before the National Intelligence Estimate was produced to conjure up 'weapons of mass destruction' there and mislead Congress into granting authorization for war.

"The British document is classified 'SECRET AND STRICTLY PERSONAL U.K. EYES ONLY.' And small wonder. It contains an official account of Prime Minister Tony Blair's meeting with top advisers on July 23, 2002, at which Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6 (the U.K. equivalent to the CIA), simply 'C' in the written document, reported on talks he had just held in Washington with top U.S.

officials. Blair has now acknowledged the authenticity of the document.

“As related in the document, Dearlove told Blair and the others that President Bush wanted to remove Saddam Hussein through military action, that this ‘was seen as inevitable,’ and that the attack would be ‘justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.’ He continued: ‘... but the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.’

“Dearlove tacked on yet another telling comment: ‘There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.’ British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw concurred that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, but noted that finding justification would be challenging, for ‘the case was thin.’ Straw pointed out that Saddam was not threatening his neighbors, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea, or Iran.

“As head of MI6, Dearlove was CIA Director George Tenet’s British counterpart. We Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) have been saying since January 2003 that the two intelligence chiefs’ marching orders were to ‘fix’ the intelligence around the policy. It was a no-brainer.

“Seldom, however, does one acquire documentary evidence that this the unforgivable sin in intelligence analysis was used by the most senior U.S. government leaders as a way to ‘justify’ a prior decision for war. There is no word to describe our reaction to the fact that the two intelligence chiefs quietly acquiesced in the corruption of our profession on a matter of such consequence. ‘Outrage’ doesn’t even come close.”

Challenging Rumsfeld

A year later in Atlanta, I had an unusual chance to publicly challenge then Defense Secretary Rumsfeld no stranger to the dissembling about WMD about his earlier claims saying he knew where the WMD were in Iraq, and knew of ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda. My question grew into a mini-debate of four minutes, during which he lied, demonstrably, on both issues. As luck would have it, May 4, 2006 was a very slow news day, and our mini-debate took place in early afternoon, enabling serious journalists like Keith Olbermann to perform a “fact-check.”

Finally, on June 5, 2008, then-chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee Jay Rockefeller made some remarkable comments that got sparse attention in U.S. media. Announcing the findings of a bipartisan report of a five-year study on misstatements on prewar intelligence on Iraq, Rockefeller said:

“In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or

even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.”

Anyone know what “non-existent” intelligence looks like?

What has become painfully clear since the trauma of 9/11 is that most of our fellow citizens have felt an overriding need to believe that administration leaders are telling them the truth and to ignore all evidence to the contrary. Many Americans seem impervious to data showing that it was the administration that misled the country into this unprovoked war and that the “intelligence” was conjured up well after the White House decided to effect “regime change” in Iraq (or introduce democracy, if you favor the default rationale) by force of arms.

I have been asking myself why so many Americans find it so painful to delve deeper. Why do they resist letting their judgment be influenced by the abundance of evidence, much of it documentary, exposing how little or no evidence there was to support what was a most consequential fraud? Perhaps it is because they know that responsible citizenship means asking what might seem to be “impertinent” questions, ferreting out plausible answers, and then, when necessary, holding people accountable, rectifying the situation, and ensuring it does not happen again.

Resistance, however, remains strong. At work in all of us to some degree is the same convenient denial mechanism that immobilized so many otherwise conscientious German citizens during the 1930s, enabling Germany to launch its own unprovoked wars and curtail civil liberties at home. Taking action, or just finding one’s voice, entails risk; denial is the more instinctive, easier course.

But it is too late for denial. We might take to heart Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s warning: “... there is such a thing as being too late. ... Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: ‘Too late.’”

Ray McGovern works with *Tell the Word*, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served for 27 years in CIA’s Analysis Directorate, coming “out of retirement” when he saw his former profession being corrupted to “justify” a war of aggression. At that point he joined with others to create Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) in an attempt to hold former colleagues accountable.

Losing the American Republic

Decades of letting neocons dictate a hawkish foreign policy have put the American Republic in profound danger, just as presidents from George Washington to Dwight Eisenhower predicted, warnings that Americans must finally take to heart, says ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk.

By William R. Polk

In *The Financial Times* of April 23, Philip Stephens begins a perceptive article with the obvious statement that “It is easier to say that Obama never gets it right than to come up with an alternative strategy.”

Of course it is. It was never easy to construct a coherent policy, but it was never impossible. The problem we face today is different. It is that for a long time we have not been presented by our leaders with *any* strategy. So the obvious question a citizen (and a taxpayer) should demand be answered is why, despite all the effort, all the proclamations and all the lives and money we are spending, does almost every observer believe that we do not have a policy that we can afford and that accomplishes our minimal national objectives? In this first part of a two-part essay, I will address that problem.

In short, where is the problem? It is tempting to say that it is our lack of statesmen. Where are the heirs to the men who put the world back together again after the Second World War? By comparison to those who we empower today, those earlier leaders appear heroic figures.

True, they had monumental faults and made costly mistakes, but they thought and acted on an epic scale and tried to cope with unprecedented problems – the reconstruction of Europe, the ending of colonialism in Africa and imperialism in India, the amalgamation of scores of new nations into an acceptable structure of the world community and the containing of unprecedented dangers from weapons of mass destruction.

Today, only half joking, Europeans say that they see only one world-class statesman – German Chancellor Angela Merkel. I seek but find no comparable leaders on the American scene. As Mr. Stephens judged, “Barack Obama has led from behind on the global stage [while] Republicans [are thinking only in terms of] a bumper sticker world.”

We may lament our poverty of leadership, but there are ways to make it function. “Princes,” since long before Machiavelli have always used advisers; some even listened to them. Surely the capable people among us – like the “wise men” who

whispered in the ears of those earlier leaders – can guide today's leaders toward more viable policies and away from the chaos that engulfs us.

Why is this not happening? Is it that what they have to say is not “popular” or that they cannot reach the decision makers? Or that the structures we have built into our political and economic systems block them? Is it the enormity of the problems we face? Or is it that we lack information? Or is it the want of a matrix or framework in which to place what we know and to decide on the feasibility and affordability of what we want?

More fundamentally, could it be that we, the citizenry, the voters and the taxpayers, simply do not care enough or keep ourselves well enough informed to make our leaders perform the tasks they avidly seek and we pay them to do?

Each of these possible causes of our current malaise urgently demands our attention. Let me briefly look at them and then move, in my second essay, toward a guide to a viable policy.

Complex World

First, let us admit that the world is indeed more complex today than in earlier times. There are more “actors” and at least some of them have to perform in front of audiences that are more “politicized” than they used to be. Nationalism affects more people than a century ago, and today it is laced with religion in an explosive mixture. A spreading and intensifying sense of fairness and minimal rights shapes actions among peoples who used humbly to submit. Bluntly put, fewer people today are willing to suffer or starve than were their grandparents.

Second, nations that hardly existed are caught up in insurgencies, guerrilla wars and various forms of violence. Supra- or non-national religious movements are not new, but they have become very “worldly” and are now sweeping through Africa and Asia. Some are sowing hatred and massacring or driving into exile whole populations. At the same time, corrupt governments and “warlords” impoverish societies while outside manipulation by force of arms and “dirty tricks” further destabilizes or even destroys political order, leaving trails of shattered lives.

The outside quest for “regime change” has plunged many developing countries into chaos. Floods of migrants pour out in desperate quest for safety while many of those who remain will die wretchedly as they watch their children grow to adulthood stunted from sickness and hunger. We and several “theys” are stirring the pot. But, regardless of who created these problems, they must be faced today. And they are certainly complex.

Third, while events are certainly complex, we know an astonishing amount about

them. Never in human affairs have so many studied so much. So our leaders are primed to do their jobs. At least they should be. Information is not lacking.

In the United States, we employ some 17 intelligence agencies manned by upwards of 100,000 presumably skilled people, a Department of State and associated agencies employing (at my last count) nearly 20,000 officers, a White House staff including the National Security Council numbering in the hundreds, a galaxy of war colleges through which pass most of the senior officers of over half of the world's military and security services, dedicated staffs and subsidized "think tanks" like RAND and more or less independent think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations, Brookings, etc.

The media doesn't do as much as it used to do to educate us, but it is now augmented by "blogs," opinion pieces, reports and memoirs. Multiple organizations of the United Nations and hundreds of non-governmental organizations provide almost daily accounts of every human activity. And some people still read and even write books.

Even those of us who, by government criteria, have no "need to know," have access to most of this flood of information. Some is withheld from those of us our Government does not "clear" to receive it, but most of the withheld or at least delayed information is actually about "us" – the covert activities, foibles, misdemeanors and crimes of our team.

Our leaders are keen to inform us about the (false) beliefs and (dangerous) actions of foreigners. And even if Government often does not help us to understand other peoples, most of what we need to know about them is available in the public domain beyond the reach of government censorship.

So censorship is not the only reason we are not well informed. We citizens must accept much of the blame. Many of us sit on vast "dry" islands where the floodtide of information does not reach or where we or others have built dykes to keep it out. We have allowed the media to drop the pretense of informing us; its job is to entertain us.

When "news" is read out by attractive "presenters," it is also a form of entertainment. Television is not conducive to difficult issues. It is best on "sound bytes." But it is not only the nature of the media that is formative: most observers believe that it is in large part our laziness or lack of concern that keeps us ill-informed and little engaged. We read little and seek reassurance more than knowledge. Above all, we wish to avoid being challenged.

Easy Opinions

As Alex de Tocqueville observed of us, "the majority undertakes to supply a

multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own.”

And it is not just opinions or judgments on contemporary affairs, but even general knowledge that is missing. Surveys show that many Americans do not know where Vietnam, Ukraine and Afghanistan are. Some could not find our national capital on a map. As Aaron Burke remarked in the Feb. 14, 2014 *Washington Post*, some of our would-be ambassadors knew nothing of the character, politics, language, religious affiliation of even those countries to which they were being sent.

Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, was filmed on C-Span commenting that some of the nominees were “totally unqualified.” In this, sadly, they represent us. [See: Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (1996). Chapter 6, “The Consequences of Political Knowledge and Ignorance.”]

Is this ignorance important? The French conservative philosopher, Josef de Maistre answered that it is because “every nation gets the government it deserves.” If citizens are uneducated or passive, they can be controlled, as the Roman emperors controlled their peoples with bread and circuses, or as other dictatorships have with “patriotic” demonstrations or manufactured threats.

Indeed, a people can make themselves willing dupes as the Germans did when they voted Hitler into power in a free election. Ignorance and apathy are the pathogens of representative government. Under their influence, constitutions are weakened or set aside, legislatures become rubber stamps, courts pervert the law and the media becomes a tool. So, even in a democracy, when we duck our civic duties in favor of entertainment and do not inform ourselves, the political process is endangered.

Danger, as our Founding Fathers told us, is ever present. They thought of our system as an experiment and doubted that we could maintain it over time. We have come close to losing it. And today we see signs of its fragility.

American ignorance and apathy extend even to issues immediately affecting the lives of most of us – like jobs, housing, food and health – and when it comes to devoting attention to such possibly terminal issues as nuclear war, baseball always wins. The choice, as the expression goes, is a “no brainer.”

This can be disastrous because, as our first president warned us, unscrupulous politicians can manipulate the public. George Washington found this particularly dangerous in foreign affairs. As he wrote in his Farewell Address, the dangers inherent in dealing with other countries may lead to “the necessity of those

overgrown military establishments, which under any form of Government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.”

His words demand our attention because we all welcome comfortable simplicity in place of confusing complexity, and it is in military affairs where the lack of statesmanship among the leaders and ignorance among the people is most clear.

In one of the great theatrical gestures known to history (or legend), that eagle among the hawks, Alexander the Great, demonstrated the easiest way to deal with complexity. To untie the Gordian knot – the very symbol of complexity – he simply cut it. His point was that there is no need to understand if one has a sharp knife.

Alas, as the decades of the cutting of knots in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other places has shown, no matter how sharp the knife, the knot may not be so neatly sliced as Alexander thought. Indeed, as we have observed in our recent wars, “knots” prove capable of reuniting their coils.

President Washington’s Wisdom

George Washington, judged by today’s standards, was neither so well informed nor so lavishly advised as are modern American leaders, but at least on war and peace his instinct was sure and at the end of his career, he embodied the American myth of national decency.

In his “Farewell Address,” he told us that the only safe – because moral – policy is to “Observe good faith and justice towards all Nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all. ... In the execution of such a plan nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular Nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded [because] The Nation, prompted by ill will and resentment sometime impels to War the Government, contrary to the best calculations of policy. ... The peace often, sometimes perhaps the Liberty, of Nations has been the victim. ... Real Patriots ... are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.”

Partially echoing the values Washington hoped would underlie American action and reacting to the far stronger forces that have grown as America grew, Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed during the 1956 joint Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt that we must all be governed by “One Law,” not one law for us and our friends and another for other states.

On the eve of his departure from the White House, Eisenhower picked up and expanded another of Washington’s – and the Founding Fathers’, (who were deeply

suspicious of the military and of the people's ability to control it) – main themes, the danger of “those overgrown military establishments, which under any form of Government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.”

Against the power of “the military-industrial complex, ” Eisenhower memorably warned that “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. ...

“This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”

To judge how little we have heeded his warning, just multiply the figures Eisenhower cites for the costs of the guns, warships, rockets and planes. When he spoke, our aggregate cost of all the tools of war was about \$320 billion; today the cost (in inflation adjusted dollars) is more than double that amount and also is larger than the aggregate outlay of all other nations.

And, beyond the monetary cost thus measured is the security cost – the world has become far more dangerous at least in part *because of* our emphasis on our military role. So, Eisenhower questioned, is this “the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking?”

Is anyone who has his hand on the wheel, that is any responsible leader, seriously considering whether there is a smoother, safer, more economical and less painful road? If so, I have failed to identify him or her. And, apparently, neither has Mr. Stephens of *The Financial Times*.

Bowing to the Military

One aspect of this problem is that the military, drawing on the prestige it gains as our defender, is vastly over funded and catered to by both the Executive Branch and the Legislature. As Washington and Eisenhower feared, they have become a state within our nation. This is evident in almost every aspect of the comparison between the military and civilian parts of our government.

Consider the contrast with the Civil Service. The contrast is as sharp in

America as in “tin pot” dictatorships in the Third World. When I served in government, I observed that any general and many colonels could summon up an Air Force plane for a junket whereas even the Under Secretary of State had to get special clearance from the President and then negotiate with the Pentagon for official trips; then there were and still are wildly disproportional side benefits given to the military and what amount to penalties assessed to the civilians.

For example, roughly half of all ambassadorial appointments were removed from the Foreign Service and given to non-professionals. As Edward Luce wrote in the Dec. 7, 2014 *Financial Times*, “imagine how [much] harder it would be ... to recruit talented military officers if plum generalships were handed out to amateurs who had never worn a uniform.”

The transformation of America into a military culture has deep roots. Arguably it began long before the formation of the Republic in the settler wars with the Native Americans. In the “young republic,” it was carried forward in the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson’s push into “the Floridas” and James K. Polk’s war with Mexico. Then, during and after the Civil War, Americans became truly a warring people. (This is the title of the interpretive history of the American people on which I am at work.)

This legacy was carried forward in two world wars, hundreds of smaller military actions and a half century of Cold War. In 2013, Richard F. Grimmett and Barbara Salazar Torreon reported to Congress on “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad” from 1798. They found five declared war, six undeclared wars and hundreds of other military actions. [Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service.]

Few Americans, I suspect, are fully aware – despite scores of books and hundreds of articles – of the dimensions of our country’s commitment to the military establishment and the “security” culture embedded in it. Eisenhower’s Military-Industrial Complex has grown not only in size but in spread. It now shapes Congressional action, influences media reporting and convinces labor to cooperate in its projects. Indeed, it is built into the fabric of American society and economy to an extent that would have terrified the Founding Fathers.

Beyond the Military-Industrial-Congressional-Media-Labor Complex, as it has become, are three other powerful aspects of the “security state.” The first of these is the creation of a more or less autonomous elite army within the standing army which, itself, is apart from what the Founding Fathers thought of as our prime military force, the state militias.

This Special Operations Force, according to the Congressional Research Service

in 2013 (the latest available figures) was composed of some 67,000 troops and operated under a separate budget of about \$7.5 billion. It has its own “think tank,” sources of intelligence, school and even its own magazine (*Special Warfare*) that prints favorable articles by journalists from all over the world on “politico-military” affairs.

The second aspect of the growth of the military is in overseas bases. They are believed to number over 1,000 and are located in about 63 countries. These figures do not include the “floating bases” on aircraft carriers, troopships and “insertion” vessels nor, for the most part, the bases jointly operated with other countries and special intelligence facilities.

The third aspect is the extension of the military into “security” and intelligence fields that are partly or wholly funded by the Defense Department and often are commanded by serving military officers. According to a recent book, 1,074 new federal government organizations, the existence of which is “classified” and generally withheld from public knowledge, and nearly 2,000 private companies work out of at least 17,000 locations within the United States and an unknown number abroad.

Exceeding Authority

More unsettling but not surprising is that with so much power behind them, some senior military commanders feel able to step outside of their statutory roles to pontificate on affairs beyond their competence and authority. One who this year frightened our European allies was U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the head of NATO’s operational command. He was taken to task by German Chancellor Merkel, as reported in the March 7, 2015 issue of the respected German weekly *Der Spiegel*, for “dangerous propaganda” in publicly recommending policies verging on warfare with Russia.

German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier intervened personally with the NATO General Secretary because of Breedlove’s statements. Breedlove’s action was not unprecedented. General David Petraeus essentially ran American affairs in Afghanistan and Iraq while treating the statutory American authority, the ambassador, as a junior partner.

In “The Killing Machines” (*The Atlantic*, September 2013), Mike Bowden recounts the argument between U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Cameron Munter in 2011 and CIA Director Leon Panetta over the ambassador’s authority to veto assassinations. Munter quoted Title 22 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations that made the ambassador the chief American authority in the country to which he was appointed. “That means,” commented Bowden, “no American policy should be carried out in any country without the ambassador’s approval.”

Panetta took the dispute to President Obama who ruled in favor of the CIA. Elsewhere also, senior military officers have frequently violated the word and the intent of the Framers of the Constitution in forming and proclaiming policies. In the most famous case of assumption of such powers in the past, President Harry Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur. That was long ago.

It isn't only, as the American psychologist Abraham Maslow is quoted as saying, "if you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail," but also that ambitious men naturally seek opportunities. In business, they seek money; in the military they seek promotion. Pursuing these goals is often admirable but unchecked it also creates dangers or harms the public interest.

History writings are full of accounts of generals who destroyed civilian regimes and often destroyed republican liberty. A prudent people will insist that its government both *use* its military when necessary and always *control* it. Fear that the people would fail to do so animated the discussions of our Founding Fathers when they were writing our Constitution in 1787. [Madison, *Notes*, passim.] Our first military leader warned us of the danger as I have quoted him above.

The Iraq War Disaster

So now consider what we have been doing on the two major American wars of the post-Vietnam years. Because I have written on them in detail elsewhere, I will only touch on those aspects that will flesh-out the skeleton I have sketched above or illustrate why we need to avoid tactical lunges and adopt strategic thinking.

I begin with Iraq. Iraq illustrates failure to understand the context in which we act, our propensity to jump before looking and our role in creating a security threat. [I have dealt with Iraq intensively in *Understanding Iraq* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).]

Consider first the context: Iraq was one of the many countries that evolved from the collapse of imperialism. Put together by the British at the end of the First World War from three provinces of the Ottoman Empire under an imported and British-controlled monarchy, it never found a secure political identity. To control the country, the British built a military organization that in comparison with other aspects of the regime and the society was strong. Consequently, Iraq suffered military coup after coup.

Most incoming dictators were simply predatory, but the last in the sequence, Saddam Hussein, made Iraq socially and economically one of the most advanced countries in Africa and Asia. Profiting from increasing oil wealth, he promoted the growth of a middle class, secularized the regime and provided the public

with free health services and free education. Whereas in 1920, under the British, only 30 Iraqis were receiving secondary education (and the British thought that was too many), in 1985 the student population reached nearly one and a half million.

The number of doctors went from 1:7,000 to 1:1,800 and life expectancy rose from 40 to 57 years. Schools, universities, hospitals, factories, theaters and museums proliferated. Saddam's aim was power, and like many Third World leaders he was not an attractive person, but perhaps without meaning to do so, he set in motion events that would have forced Iraq to become a more democratic society. "Would have," that is, had development not been short-circuited by war.

The first war began in September 1980 with an Iraqi attack on America's enemy, the revolutionary Iranian government led by Ayatollah Khomeini, that had overthrown the government of America's ally, the Shah. The American government took a short-sighted view of the war and assisted the Iraqis with provision of the most sophisticated intelligence then available (which enabled the outnumbered Iraqis to defeat the Iranians in crucial battles), but at the same time it supplied Iran with lethal military equipment (in the Iran-Contra affair).

Both the Iraqis and the Iranians realized that America was playing a cynical game. Henry Kissinger summed it up by saying, "It's a pity they both can't lose." It does not seem, in retrospect, that serious thought was given to how war would impact on both societies and on American interests. This is borne out by the extension of the war to Kuwait.

Kuwait was another of the legacies of imperialism. In the eyes of every Iraqi leader, including its British-installed and American-favored three kings, Kuwait was an Iraqi province. It was the British who had forced the Ottoman Empire to give it quasi-autonomous status in 1913 – and in 1923 got both the puppet Iraqi government and the precursor of the Saudi state to recognize its frontiers.

Initially, Britain was interested in using it to block any threat to its Indian empire. Following Indian independence in 1947, that interest was replaced by the special relationship under which newly oil-rich Kuwait invested heavily in cash-starved England. Additionally, both Britain and America were keen that it keep its separate status so that no one Middle Eastern power dominate oil production. Then, for reasons that are still obscure but certainly evinced a lack of strategic thinking, the American government gave the impression that it would not oppose the Iraqi attempt to take over Kuwait.

It happened like this: The war with Iran lasted eight years, killed tens of thousands Iraqis and cost about \$15 billion yearly. (Proportionally, the Iraq-

Iran war was more costly than the American war in Vietnam.) Saddam Hussein proclaimed that he was fighting Iran on behalf of the Arabs and particularly of the Kuwaitis who had a deep fear of Iranian aggression. [For more background on Iraq's invasion of Iran, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Saddam's Green Light.](#)"]

Souring on Saddam

Initially at least, the Kuwaitis (and other Arab leaders) agreed with him and supported his war effort. But as the fighting stalemated, they not only stopped their aid to Iraq but demanded repayment of what they had lent. Saddam had used up all of Iraq's reserves. The price of oil fell below what could sustain his regime. He became desperate. He begged and pleaded but to no avail.

A violent man, Saddam decided to take what the Kuwaitis would not give, but, himself a crafty politician, Saddam sought American approval. He probably thought America "owed him one" for having fought its enemy, Iran. So he thought America might agree to his reclaiming Kuwait.

When he met with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, she (on orders) told him that the U.S. Government "took no position on Arab frontiers." Saddam took this to be a "green light" – like President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger given to Indonesia's General Suharto to reclaim East Timor – and invaded. [Kissinger and others denied it at the time, but we now have access to the documents and know that they condoned and conspired a few years before, in 1975, with the Indonesian dictator General Suharto, certainly no more attractive a figure than Saddam, on the invasion. (See Briefing book 62 in the [nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB62/](#))]

The American ambassador told *The New York Times* that no one thought (with no sense of history and apparently no appreciation of Saddam's desperation) the Iraqis would take "all of Kuwait!"

The Americans and others, including the Russians, reacted sharply. Kuwait's assets were frozen out of Saddam's reach. The UN demanded an Iraqi withdrawal. And Saddam became even more desperate. Some in the American government apparently believed that the Iraqis might plunge into Saudi Arabia eastern province where its oil fields are located. So America put together a coalition, including Saudi Arabia and Syria, to chase the Iraqis out of Kuwait. It was successful. President George H.W. Bush ordered the invading forces to break Saddam's army but not to occupy the country.

However, the war against Saddam was allowed to spill over into actions that were not then foreseen by American leaders and for which the United States and Iraq would pay a fearful price. The U.S. acted in ways that increased Saddam's

desperation and increased his sense of humiliation. It also allowed or perhaps even condoned actions that promoted sectarian – Sunni-Shiite – hostilities to a level not experienced in the Islamic world for centuries.

And, by giving the impression of hostility toward all aspects of Islam, the U.S. shifted such previously anti-Saddam activists as Osama bin Laden into leaders of a *jihād* against America. Little or no thought was given, apparently, to how the initial objective of getting the Iraqis out of Kuwait could be turned into a stable and constructive result.

Much worse, of course, was to follow a decade later in the George W. Bush administration. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was not caused by Saddam's attack on Kuwait but was a deliberate act of aggression. It was justified to the American public by the allegation that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons and allegation that Bush knew to be false; he simply ordered his Secretary of State, General Colin Powell, to lie to the public and America's allies.

Whereas George Washington had warned in his Farewell Address that "The Nation [that is, the public], prompted by ill will and resentment sometime impels to War the Government, contrary to the best calculations of policy," George W. Bush's Government deceived the Nation. As Washington also warned, the "Real Patriots" – who, in the Iraq case, realized what was happening and spoke out – "are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests."

Those interests included preservation of the lives of at least 4,500 soldiers who died and the several hundred thousand American soldiers who were wounded. Also of interest were the expenditure of some \$2 trillion in treasure, the 2.6 million men and women whose labor could have contributed to the American economy. Less tangible but no less real was the goodwill that America had long enjoyed among all Iraqis and other peoples and a peace that has been lost in unending war.

This was all predicted and much could have been avoided. It is notable that even David Kilcullen, Bush's strategist who had been recruited by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and relied upon by General David Petraeus, was quoted as saying that "Perhaps the most stupid thing about Iraq was invading the country in the first place." [Ken Sengupta, "David Kilcullen: The Australian helping to shape a new Afghanistan strategy," *The Independent*, July 9, 2009.]

The Afghan Quagmire

I turn now to the failure of American policy in Afghanistan.

The people of Afghanistan at least since the time of Alexander the Great had

repeatedly and violently demonstrated their determination not to be ruled by foreigners. In 1842, they inflicted the worst defeat the British army suffered in the Nineteenth Century. Soberly, the British then recognized that they were not going to transform the Afghans and that attempting to do so was not worth the cost.

So, essentially, they played their new version of “the Great Game” by Afghan rules. They bribed, cajoled and flattered the Afghan rulers and where they could and at little cost fought a sort of French-Moroccan *Beau Geste* or American-style “Wild West” campaign on the Northwest Frontier against the tribal peoples. They recognized that what they really wanted – to keep the Russians out of South Asia – didn’t require more.

When their turn came, the Russians were not willing to take such a detached approach. In 1979, they dived into Afghanistan and tried, as they were doing in their Turkish Central Asian provinces, to Russify and partially to Communize it. Their policy was more than a failure; it was a catastrophe. [The best account is Rodric Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011). Also see William R. Polk, *Violent Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) Chapt. 11.]

The war was a catastrophe both for the USSR, which the Afghans played a major role in destroying, and also for Afghanistan, which became a “failed state.” It was that failed state – a shattered, warlord-plagued maelstrom – the Russians had left behind that the Taliban movement tried to overcome with a violent assertion of primitive “Afghanism.”

Objectively, America never had any compelling interest in Afghanistan. It had no known major resources, was poor, backward and remote. Moreover, anyone with a slight knowledge of history would know that it had proven to be one of the most difficult countries in the world to rule, much less to “regime change” or “nation build.”

Not only had the Afghans defeated the British and the Russians but they tolerated only a modicum of control by their own government. Each village or small neighborhood of villages ruled itself and was rigidly locked into traditional culture. Largely based on Islamic law but including elements that were pre-Islamic, the social code featured segregation of women, revenge for insult (*badal*), protection of refugees (*melmastia*) and absolute independence. In the south, it was known as the *Pukhtunwali*. That culture was not to America’s liking, but it was Afghan’s culture. Slowly and cautiously, it had been evolving toward a more “enlightened” and liberal pattern.

Evolving, that is, when left more or less to its own devices. When under

attack, Afghan society closed upon itself and reverted to customs that the Russians had found (and Americans would find) objectionable. Generally, however, at least the Americans have not found disapproval of customs to be a sufficient reason to invade other societies. What caused the American invasion was, ironically, a playing out of two commands of the *Pushtunwali*, the Afghan "way."

Misunderstanding Afghanistan

First was the absolute imperative of the Afghan way, the granting of protection (*malmastia*) to fleeing warriors. The Taliban honored this tradition by giving sanctuary to Osama bin Laden whose followers in the al-Qaeda movement had attacked America in 2001. The U.S. Government demanded that Osama be handed over. The Afghan Government refused. To have done so would have been, in Afghan eyes, a mortal sin.

So, second, America itself employed another recognized part of the Afghan code, *badal*, or revenge. It attacked. As the then Taliban Minister of War later told me, "we understood your desire for revenge. ... It is also our way."

It was the Afghan way, but was it either necessary or useful to America? Put another way, could American objectives have been accomplished at lesser cost in another way?

To answer that question requires a definition of objectives: First was the objective of the American political leaders. They believed that they had to demonstrate toughness. About nine in 10 Americans (and between six and seven Britons) favored the invasion. It was easy for President Bush to ride the popular surge. Indeed, he not only rode but spurred on war fever.

Second, as George Washington had long before warned, "The Government sometimes ... adopts through passion what reason would reject." Reason would have avoided a ruinous war. But instead of adopting the course demanded by the national interest, or trying to think with the public through the options, Bush played on popular emotion. The Taliban were bad and America had to punish them.

Third, on their side, the Taliban leaders knew that a war would be ruinous for them. They were not very adroit, but they tried to find a way to avoid it. They could do so only within the code by which they lived. To have met the American demand to surrender Bin Laden would have been a mortal sin, but they had some flexibility in applying *malmastia* – they had to *protect* Bin Laden but need not to *allow* him to act as he might wish. So they took him into "protective" custody and proclaimed that they would prevent him and his followers from engaging in further foreign activities. It is not clear that the Bush administration even considered any possible variation of that option.

So Bush ordered the attack. Despising the ragged, ill-armed guerrillas, the Americans struck. The war might have ended in a bloody but limited raid. Instead, without much thought, it morphed into a conflict that, *so far*, has lasted nearly 14 years, has cost America 2,357 dead, perhaps 50,000 wounded and at least \$1 trillion.

The number of Afghans killed or wounded is not known but is certainly in the hundreds of thousands; the sick and malnourished amount to nearly half the population; a whole generation of children have been “stunted” and will never grow to full potential; the traditional civic order has been replaced by a corrupt and brutal collection of mafias that both engage in the largest drug business in the world and also steal (and ship abroad) billions of U.S. aid dollars. There is no light at the end of that tunnel.

I find no evidence that the U.S. government at any point from before the invasion to the present carefully considered whether or not it really had any strategic interest (the Russians were in full retreat and we no longer had a compelling interest in protecting India) in Afghanistan. It simply took whatever seemed to be the next step as the trajectory of events seemed to dictate and, since other than bribery it had little to offer, those steps were military.

During the last 14 years, we have relied almost exclusively on military action. At first, the action was “boots on the ground.” Recently, in our attempt to cut American casualties, we have shifted largely to “coercive air power.” [Robert Pape, *New York Times*. April 21, 2015.]

Our aim has been to “decapitate” the guerrilla forces and to beat down insurgent attacks. Both have failed. On the one hand, as we have killed more senior and experienced leaders, younger and more ambitious or violent men have replaced them, and, on the other hand, surveys show that guerrilla action has increased – not been suppressed – in and around areas that have been attacked by drones or special forces.

If we cannot win, have we tried negotiation? No, in fact we have made any form of negotiation virtually impossible. Among our moves, one stands out baldly: the American military and the CIA have maintained a “kill list” of insurgents to be shot on sight. Because the list is secret, no Talib can know if he is on the list. So he is apt to suspect that any offer of negotiation is really a trap, designed both to kill him and to divide and weaken his movement. [As discussed by Jo Becker and Scott Shane in the *New York Times*, May 29, 2012. I have discussed this and other aspects of the Afghan conflict in a series of essays in my book *Distant Thunder* (Washington 2011).]

The cost of our failure to win or negotiate is still being paid: we are still

engaged in combat, still striking targets, still shoveling in billions of dollars to a failed puppet government. And in this unending war, we have created far more enemies than we have “pacified” or killed. Now they come not only from Muslim Asia and Africa, but even from Europe and America. They are enemies we helped to create. We were sold a phony policy and self-defeating means to implement it: counterinsurgency never worked anywhere and certainly has not worked in Afghanistan.

Lessons Needed Learning

It would be rewarding if one could say that our experience in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan has made us wiser in our approaches to Somalia, Syria, Libya and Yemen, but it is hard to substantiate that conclusion. Yet the lessons are there to be learned. There are more, but consider just these few:

- Military action can destroy but it cannot build;
- Counterinsurgency does not work and creates new problems;
- Nation building is beyond the capacity of foreigners;
- Piecemeal, uncoordinated actions often exacerbate rather than solve problems;
- The costs of military action are multifold and usually harm not only the attacked but also the attacker’s society and economy;
- Reliance on military action and supply of weapons to the client state encourages it to undertake actions that make peace-seeking harder rather than easier;
- War radiates out from the battlefield so that whole societies are turned into refugees. In desperation they flee even far abroad and create unforeseen problems.
- The sense that the attacker is a bully spreads and converts outsiders into enemies;
- Failure to understand the society and culture even of the enemy is self-defeating;
- Angry, resentful people eventually strike back where they can and so create a climate of perpetual insecurity.

The result of such actions is deforming to the central objective of an intelligent, conservative and constructive American foreign policy – the preservation of our well-being. So, in the second part of this essay, I propose

to show how we might begin to approach strategic thinking to accomplish our central national objective.

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