

Neocons: The Men of Dementia

In the classic novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, the great Spanish writer Cervantes explored the danger of mixing delusions of grandeur with adventurous combat. Yet, today instead of the man of la Mancha, we have the neocons playing the men (and some women) of dementia, as ex-diplomat William R. Polk describes.

By William R. Polk

It was over half a century ago that I first read Cervantes' marvelous novel, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. I was then studying at the University of Chile, trying to learn Spanish, and *Don Quixote* was the first novel I remember reading. Or, to be honest, "reading at" because my Spanish was still weak and the text is full of unfamiliar expressions. Also, I was very young and did not know enough about the world to understand fully what Cervantes was saying.

But he had a remarkable gift of writing on different levels. His tale could be enjoyed as just a good story or more profoundly. So, despite my shortcomings, he caught me in his magical web. A few years later, somewhat better equipped, I dipped into *Don Quixote* again in a delightful course on satire I was taking as an undergraduate at Harvard.

So now I have gone back. Or not quite back. Not quite, because I now can put both of those early ventures into a new perspective from experiences I have had and observations I have made over the last half century. I now realize that what Cervantes wrote about his own times could be applied to ours.

Cervantes was writing about themes that recur often and are particularly apposite today. Indeed, the auguries suggest that they may be virtually a prediction. His "Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote" can be read as an amalgam of several of our own "knights errant," and his accounts of his *hidalgo's* adventures foreshadowed some of the wilder forays into combat of our own warriors.

A terrifying thought at least to me is that the hints and themes we can read into his story may be played out in the aftermath of the next election. So, laugh with Cervantes – or shudder with me – over a few pages of his fable.

He begins by anchoring us in place, *En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme* ("in a place on the Plain whose name I don't wish to remember"). As I now transpose it to Washington D.C., he might have written, "at little town in Foggy Bottom whose name I don't wish to remember."

Then he introduces the target of his satire, Don Quixote: *no ha much tiempo que*

vivía un hidalgo de los de lanza en astillero, adarga antigua, rocín flaco y galgo corredor (“not much time has passed since there lived one of those gentlemen of the sort who keeps a lance hanging on the wall, an ancient shield, a bony mare and a greyhound”),

At this point, one stops. Who in our times might fit such a description? Are there such eccentric would-be warriors holed up in government offices, think tanks or war colleges with the symbols of warfare and the hunt flaunted above their desks?

A memory pops into my mind: yes, I remember when it was quite fashionable to festoon the walls of offices in the Executive Office Building, the old State and War Departments, of the White House, with the modern equivalents of Quixote’s lance. Battle-scarred weapons fashioned by the Vietcong were particularly favored. Some of us even brought our hounds (but not our nags) into our offices.

But in those far-off days, knights errant were few even in Foggy Bottom. Now, they seem to have multiplied beyond counting. So, could we single out anyone as our Don Quixote? Names of candidates flow past my inner eye. Indeed, even Cervantes puzzled over the name of his hero. He offers several alternatives.

We might do the same. The character we need to fit his story is an arm-chair warrior who is carried away by his occult reading to the point that he is prepared to embark (or at least to send others to embark) on great (and disastrous) adventures in faraway lands, and whose grip on reality is, like Don Quixote’s, to say the least, faulty.

We have a legion of candidates who fit that bill. So it is hard to pick a single name. Never mind. As Cervantes wrote, the name “matters little for our account; it is enough that the narrative does not depart a single point from the truth.” (*esto importa poco a nuestro cuento; basta que en la narración dé el no se salga un punto de la verdad.*)

Being accurate or at least suggestive within reasonable bounds was very important for Cervantes and is also important for us because the tale we – the combination of Cervantes classically and I in modern terms – relate is hard to believe.

The Land of Neocons

As I say, many of our great statesmen come to mind, but the richest lode is to be found in the neoconservative movement. Whoa! I pull on the reins of my imagination. Could Cervantes have imagined a Dick Cheney? A Paul Wolfowitz? One of the Kristols? Surely such figures are to be seen only in our times?

Well, no. Not at all. History provides quite a few ancestors for them. However, as the text of the book makes clear, Cervantes' *hidalgo* was a complex character who not only read and fantasized but actually himself also went out and fought. Doing both narrows the field rather drastically.

It is hard to find one of the great statesmen we read about, much less those we know in our times, who both proclaimed policy *and* themselves went into harm's way. In the "leisure of the theory class," as Veblen has been amended for our times, the armchair was found to be much more comfortable than the helicopter bucket seat. So, Cervantes would have had to invent a combination of something like Paul Wolfowitz and David Petraeus.

And, of course, he would have transposed Don Quixote's lance, shield, bony mare and greyhound. They don't quite do in our day. So consider our modern Don Quixote trading them in for a fighter-bomber, a Patriot missile system, an aircraft carrier and, although this may be stretching it even for Cervantes, a drone in place of the greyhound.

Never mind. Don't quibble about the tools of the trade. Cervantes, himself, was less concerned with the artifacts than with the mind of his hero. As he tells us, Don Quixote had read so many romantic tales about the glorious adventures of knights errant that "the poor fellow lost his reason to such an extent that not even Aristotle could have untangled the wild imaginations that he believed, were he to be brought back to life just to do that job." (*Con estas razones perdí el pobre caballero el juicio y desvelábase por entenderlas y desentrañarles el sentido que no se sacara ni las entendiera el mismo Aristóteles, si resucitara para solo ella.*)

To try to understand what all the writings were about and what they told him to do, Don Quixote talked with the learned priest of his village. Just so, our modern Don Quixote, having imbibed and partly understood the neoconservative bizarre view of human affairs, consulted with the High Priest of neoconservatism, Leo Strauss, who held forth in his "village" as the President of the University of Chicago once referred to its department of political science. But, as we shall see, Don Quixote chose a rather better guide than did our policy makers.

Cervantes was not kind about the writings of such philosophers. He shows his poor hero dazzled by the intricacies and blind alleys of the outpouring of his version of the great myth peddler. Cervantes has his spinner of tales, a man known as Feliciano de Silva, leading his avid but disoriented devotee into a maze with "clarity of the prose and intricacy of reasoning" exemplified by such marvels as "the reason of unreason affects my reason to such a degree that my reason withers away..." (*La razón de la sinrazón que a mi razón se hace, de tal*

maner, mi razón enflaquece...)

That is, put rather more prosaically, logic and facts cease to matter. It is the vision of romantic action against demonic forces that give the necessary energy for wild endeavors. Thought becomes a banner to signal the grand campaign. And, as Cervantes said, *razón enflaquece* reason withers away.

Finally, as Cervantes tells us, his Don Quixote became so immersed in such readings that he passed the nights from dusk to dawn and the days from dawn to dusk “until finally the brain dried up and he came to lose his mind. Having filled himself with the fantasies he had read in de Silva’s writings, imaginary happenings became actual for him [and] no other interpretation of the world was more real.”

“As a result, having lost his mind, he hit on the strangest plan that had ever occurred to a crazy person anywhere: it came to seem to him appropriate and necessary both to augment his own honor and to serve his republic to make himself a knight errant and take himself around the world with his weapons and on his mount to seek adventures and to put into practice all he had read becoming a knight errant, going about the world with his arms and mount, seeking adventures, righting every manner of wrong and by putting himself in situations of great peril to make famous his name. The poor fellow imagined himself crowned for his valor, at the very least, with the empire of Trebizond; so with these agreeable thoughts in mind, he immediately set out to put into effect his plan.”

But he faced an immediate obstacle: having decided to venture into the dangerous world, Don Quixote realizes that he must be properly “entitled” – that is, he could not afford to be seen as an outlaw or a war criminal but must be recognized as a person legally or at least officially entitled to engage in combat to overthrow and to kill the wicked.

So he seeks someone to dub him a knight, which in contemporary terms would give him legitimacy. Just so, the neoconservatives realized that it was not enough simply to proclaim their doctrine in their journals even if that attracted to their cause real warriors who could put it into effect. Rather they must be vested with authority. Even intellectuals, after all, need to be “knighted” if they are to perform acts that when done unofficially or by ordinary citizens are crimes.

Seeking Authority

So, after an agonized delay in which he found no proper authority to knight him, Don Quixote comes upon an inn whose keeper emerges to welcome him. To our would-

be knight errant the inn is a castle and the keeper is its lord just as *our* Don Quixote found his authority to be the lord of the White House. Cervantes has *his* Don Quixote say and we can be sure that our Wolfowitz-Petraeus spoke similarly – these magic words,

“My adornments are my arms,

My leisure is to fight.”

Then, before the proprietor of the house, Don Quixote falls on his knees, saying “I will never raise myself from where I am, Illustrious Lord, until you have given me what I seek, that which will spread your fame and do good to all humanity ... that I may go forth equipped with the necessary credentials as an armed knight such as never before was to be found in the world.”

One can only imagine how the modern bond was forged. However it was done, we know that our modern hero-to-be was welcomed into the “House” by its Great Lord who proceeded to anoint him with the signs of high office. Neither would have been put off by the earlier hero’s expectations:

“Who could doubt that in the coming times, when my glorious deeds emerge in the light of true history ... my brave deeds will deserve to be cast in bronze, carved in marble and painted on canvasses to be seen for all time. Ah you! Wise enchanter of the future! Whoever you may be. To you will fall the honor of chronicling my great crusade!”

He also admonished the future historian not to forget his warhorse.

And so, in our marvelous age of instant history, it happened as predicted – or requested. It was not long before that very chronicle appeared. Written not about Don Quixote, of course, but about his modern and only partial successor, Paul Wolfowitz, under the title *Visionary Intellectual, Policymaker and Strategist*. The author was so fulsome that he certainly did not forget the “warhorse,” the great weapons of war.

Back to the Inn/Castle/White House, the keeper/lord/president mentions that although he had not read – he was not noted for his reading– the marvelous accounts that had so affected both the old and the new Don Quixotes, while still a young man he too had wandered the world, seeking adventures.

In place of Seville, Malaga, Cordoba and Toledo, in the earlier account, read New Haven, Cambridge, Austin and Dallas – and, after a number of shady enterprises, as we are told by Cervantes earlier and by the media in our times, they both had entered their “houses.” Castle lords or not, they both were empowered to dub anyone a knight “or at least as much a knight as anyone in the

world was." (*y tan caballero, que no pudiese más en el mundo.*)

So empowered, Don Quixote sets out on his first venture, rushing to "regime change" a tyranny. It happened like this:

As Don Quixote was riding along, he heard moans coming from a forest he was passing. Looking for a cause for which to fight, he exclaimed "I give thanks to Heaven for giving me so soon a means to carry out my calling." With that, he rode into the forest where he saw a "stout rustic" lashing a poor boy. Don Quixote exploded in anger and, thinking that the rustic was a knight, challenged him to a fight. The peasant tried to excuse himself by saying that the boy had been stealing from him and was not protecting his sheep. And "he says I am a miser who does not want to pay him what I owe him."

Furious, our hero threatens the tyrant with his lance and orders him to pay the boy at once or "if not, by The God, I will make an end to you." (*Pagadle luego s̄n más r̄plica; si no, por el Dios que nos rige que os concluya y aniquile en este punto. Desatadlo luego.*)

So it happened also that when our modern heroes rode through the deserts of the Middle East, they saw a robust fellow (Iraq) mistreating a little fellow (Kuwait). When our heroes accosted him, the big fellow said that the little fellow was stealing his oil and not helping him protect his flock (the Arab nations) from the advancing Iranians. So Iraq, who had no money "with him" as Cervantes says of the lout Don Quixote encountered, said he could not pay Kuwait what it owed it.

In Cervantes' tale: the bully said he would take the little boy under his control and promised eventually to pay him the money. The boy was terrified and said that he would never trust the bully. But Don Quixote brushed his worries aside and said that he had given orders, which the peasant would obey. The boy need not worry; all would be well. And, if the peasant did not pay, he, Don Quixote would return and punish him.

Waiting until the valiant knight was out of sight, the peasant then tied the boy again to the tree and lashed him nearly to death.

So what happened in the story as it unfolded in our times? Our replacement of the peasant, the dictator of Iraq, consulted with the American ambassador who told him that we really took no position on what happened to the boy, Kuwait. The Americans apparently meant that the Saddam Hussein should be allowed a little "beating" of Kuwait, but not too much.

Saddam took that to give him permission, a "green light," as America had flashed to another dictator in far-off Indonesia. So he grabbed Kuwait. The Americans

were surprised by the ferocity of the attack because they thought he would not take *all* of the country. That is, not beat the “boy” nearly to death, as Cervantes’s rustic set about doing.

“And in this manner,” wrote Cervantes, “the valorous Don Quixote righted the wrong, being very happy that everything turned out so well according to the high ideals of knighthood.”

Wisely, Cervantes had his hero ride happily away. It was not so, as we know, in the modern version. Infuriated that Saddam went too far, the Americans returned to punish him. Then, having announced that they had imposed the high ideals of democracy, literally at the point of the lance, our modern heroes stayed on at the house of the cruel peasant, tore it apart and killed many of his family and are still there.

As Cervantes makes clear and as we know from experience not only in Iraq but in a string of other countries, the intervention of the great warrior resulted in the total breakdown of social institutions, security, justice and protection of the weak.

Cervantes could not have imagined how many times and in how many places his parable would be reenacted! But already, he realized that “regime change” gives birth to chaos and misery.

When Don Quixote finally got back to his own house, having been severely beaten in another encounter on the way, his friends decided that it would be an act of mercy to demolish the fantasies that had driven him mad and had nearly gotten him killed.

The great man’s housekeeper thought that all that was necessary was to sprinkle Holy Water on the books in his library, but his friends thought that the ridiculous doctrine could be erased only by sterner action. They were too late. He was already infected by the ideas he had imbibed.

I leave it to the reader to draw the modern parallel. Is it too late for us and our valiant leaders to realize how pernicious are the delusions they have imbed, how many lives they have cost, how much treasure they have wasted? We cannot be sure, but the trends are against us.

Suffice it to say that the neoconservatives are again plugging their dangerous policies and myopic views of cultures and societies and urging more mummery despite the record of their past malpractice. Behind the buzzwords of counterinsurgency and “nation building,” they caused and then justified not only the great harm done to those who stood in their way but also violations of those principles that have guided our democracy.

Cervantes catches this violation neatly. Since one of the books Don Quixote had been reading was called *The Knight of the Cross*, Cervantes has the village priest remark that “behind the cross stands the devil.” (*mas tambin se suele decir, “tras la cruz est el diablo.*) Or, as we might transpose it to modern terms, behind the philosophical musings of Leo Strauss lurk the violent warmongering of the neoconservatives and the justifications for the rise of the “security state.”

These collections were both pernicious, but undoubtedly the results of the impact of Strauss were far worse. They were directly harmful to our liberty and well-being.

Sancho Panza

It is here where Cervantes introduces Sancho Panza whom some readers find to be an even more complex character than the great knight himself. Often a man of good sense, sometimes even noble and generous, he was also greedy and inconsistent. He was fair game for Don Quixote, and our wild warrior quickly brought Sancho into his court. Who was he?

As Cervantes describes him, he was “a working man, living nearby, a good man (if such a title could be given to a poor man) but not very bright; so after inveigling him with (soothing) words and (lavish) promises, he got the poor hick to agree to go with him and serve him as his squire.

Among other things Don Quixote argued was that he ought to be willing to go along because, if their venture succeeded, they would win some island of which he would become governor. With these promises and others, Sancho Panza, although himself a simple working man, gave up his fields, left his wife and children and signed on as squire.”

It is hard to avoid reading Barack Obama into the character of Sancho. Having listened to the brave words of the neoconservatives, Obama and many members of Jefferson’s, Jackson’s and Roosevelt’s Party of “the common man,” the Democrats, readily gave up their customary fields of concern, the well-being of their families and fellow citizens, said goodbye to their long-time partners and rushed off as followers of the new doctrine in pursuit some distant “island” where they could win both laurels and emoluments.

As they rode along together, Sancho (here the opportunistic Democrat) assured Don Quixote (here the Obama convert to Bush’s policies) that “if you give me that island you promised, I will rule it, no matter how big it is.”

But, as I have said, Sancho was a complex figure and another part of his personality his innate common sense comes out in the most famous of the great

knight's misadventures, the attack on the windmills.

As Cervantes tells the story, the great knight suddenly sighted some windmills and turning to his newly commissioned acolyte said, "luck has brought us even more than we could have desired; for there you see, Friend Sancho Panza, revealed before you 30 or a few more vicious giants with whom I think to do battle, deprive them of their lives [and] with whose spoils we will begin to enrich ourselves for this is a just war and is a great service to God to drive such vile species from the Earth."

An astonished Sancho, blurted out, "What giants?"

"Those you see before you," replied Don Quixote. "those with the long arms"

"Look, Your Excellency," Sancho replied, what you see there are not giants, only windmills and what seems to be long arms are just wings to catch the wind and make the millstone turn."

"It is clear," continued Don Quixote, that you do not understand such matters. Those are giants. And if you are fainthearted, stand aside and say your prayers while I engage them in fierce and unequal battle." With that the valiant knight spurred his horse into battle. [I have condensed the beginning section of Chapter 8.]

We all have heard the story of what happened next: the windmill's wings caught the knight's lance, pulled him and his horse into the air and smashed them onto the ground. And, as Cervantes tells us, he was particularly grieved over the breaking of his lance.

To convert Cervantes to our times, imagine, I ask you, that the windmill was the little perceived, simple and otherwise engaged country of Afghanistan. Without much thought of the danger or the cost and no perceived consideration of alternative actions, we charged in and like him were caught in the whirling melee of its fiercely independent people.

Don Quixote was, of course, mad, but his action was unprecedented; we, in contrast, whether mad or not, had ample warnings from the experiences of the British and the Russians. Both the British and the Russians had lost their armies and their "lances" jousting there. Our Don Quixote, now multiplied by tens of thousands, paid a heavy price both for knowing no history and for having believed the wild dogmas of the neoconservatives.

Could this painful venture – and all our other escapades in Vietnam, Somalia, Libya (and now perhaps Syria and even Ukraine) have been avoided? An attempt to answer that question takes us back to Sancho Panza. Sancho was a realist and

tried to dissuade the knight errant from some of his dementia, but he – like modern Democrats – also sought to profit from the dementia. Recognizing Sancho's venality, Don Quixote promised him a kingdom if he obeyed.

In our times, the "kingdom" is not a faraway and imaginary island but victory at the polls, promotions and even the forges of "lances." These rewards come about more easily and quicker from sound and fury than from careful and constructive action.

Cervantes got it right. Don Quixote's flights of madness are addictive. Eventually, even Sancho was converted. And today, as we see almost daily the Obama administration has taken over the major aspects of the neoconservative creed. Looking to a future of the probable choice between a Hilary Clinton and a Jeb Bush, who will have the will to call a halt to madness?

Cervantes speaks to us all.

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Israel's Looming War on Lebanon

As Israel joins Saudi Arabia and other Sunni sheikdoms in their sectarian war against the Shiites, Israel's new front may well be in Lebanon, with Israel attacking Hezbollah in a move that could also kill the Iran nuclear deal, as Trita Parsi and Paul Pillar explain.

By Trita Parsi and Paul Pillar

There are signs Israel may be at war again this summer. This time, not with Hamas in Gaza but with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Such a war may be the result not only of spillover from the Syrian war or ongoing Israeli-Hezbollah tensions. The deciding factor may be an Israeli calculation that war will shift momentum in the U.S. Congress decisively against the pending nuclear deal with Iran – a deal that critics say will increase Iran's maneuverability in the region, including its support for Hezbollah.

In spite of AIPAC, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Saudis and some of its GCC allies having done everything they could to kill the pending nuclear deal with Iran, they have failed. The negotiations are on track. Many opinion polls show that a comfortable majority of Americans support President Barack Obama's diplomacy with Iran.

If a Congressional vote on a resolution rejecting the nuclear deal were held today, President Obama probably would prevail – possibly without even having to use his veto to defeat the attempt by Republicans and pro-Netanyahu Democrats to scuttle the historic diplomatic agreement with Tehran.

Opposition arguments – from claiming that the deal is a capitulation to Iran to the notion that it is unacceptable to make a deal with a regime like that in Tehran – have not sufficiently resonated with the public to kill the agreement. This has caused some disarray in the opposition camp.

Indeed, if you are in that camp right now, it is reasonable to expect that the search is not for a new argument but for a game-changing development: an event so powerful it shifts the momentum in Congress back to AIPAC, Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia and the other opponents of a nuclear deal.

Arguably, a military confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah this summer could fit that bill. The argument that the deal – and the more than \$50 billion that would be returned to Tehran – would strengthen Iran in the region and empower its allies would become much more potent if Israel were in an active conflict with Lebanon with Hezbollah rockets hitting Israeli cities, as was the case in 2006. Such a scenario can become the much desired game-changer that may cause many pro-Netanyahu Democrats to break with Obama.

All of this could be dismissed as speculative except for the fact that a case for a war with Hezbollah has been made in Israel for the past few months. On May 12, the *New York Times* reported that Israeli is preparing for “what it sees as an almost inevitable next battle with Hezbollah.” An Israeli official added in comments to the *Times*: “We will hit Hezbollah hard.”

The Israelis argue that Hezbollah is engaged in a massive military buildup, and that Israel is publicizing Hezbollah's armament “to put the problem on the international agenda in case there is another conflict.” According to the Israeli military, Hezbollah now has the capacity to hurl 1,200 rockets a day at Israel.

Israel has been pushing this angle for several months. In February, 28 U.S. lawmakers came to Israel's aid and wrote the Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon, demanding that the UN stop Hezbollah from rearming. The

letter accused the UN of failing to enforce resolutions, including one that requires the “disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias.”

“The violence in the area caused by Hezbollah is horrific, and it results from the failure of the United Nations to enforce Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701,” the lawmakers wrote.

The case for preventive military action against Hezbollah was recently made by Ambassador Dore Gold, who is considered close to Netanyahu and was just appointed director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Accusing the UN of having failed to stop Hezbollah, Gold argues that “Either the IDF will have to destroy the weapons now being stored in southern Lebanon, or let Hezbollah fire thousands of rockets into Israel. What would you do?”

Hezbollah already seems overextended due to its involvement in the Syria conflict, and it could ill afford a war with Israel at this time. Nonetheless, if Israel attacks Lebanon, it is difficult to imagine Hezbollah not responding, despite its difficulties in Syria and despite the impact it may have on the ongoing Iran talks.

General Yahya Rahim Safavi, military adviser to Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warned on May 21 that any Israeli attack would unleash a firestorm of missiles on its cities “Iran, with the help of Hezbollah and its friends, is capable of destroying Tel Aviv and Haifa in case of military aggression on the part of the Zionists,” he said.

Clearly, if Israel and Hezbollah do go to war, killing the Iran agreement would not be the only motivation. But the prospect that such a war would greatly support the rhetoric of those in the United States arguing against the deal with Iran would certainly be a major consideration in the minds of Israeli policymakers. The temptation of being able to kill the Iran agreement may become the deciding factor in Israel’s decision-making.

If so, it wouldn’t be the first time that an Israeli confrontation with Hezbollah would be motivated by a belief (or desire) that war with Iran was looming. In the midst of the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006, Israel’s then-Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh said Lebanon was all about Iran. “War with Iran is inevitable. Lebanon is just a prelude to the greater war with Iran,” he commented.

Sneh was wrong. War with Iran neither was nor is inevitable. But a war with Hezbollah this summer can help Israel make sure that peace with Iran is beyond Obama’s reach.

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Persecution of CIA’s Jeffrey Sterling

The U.S. government’s successful prosecution of ex-CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling for leaking secrets about a failed covert operation to the press followed a long campaign against him for protesting racial discrimination inside the spy agency, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

A dozen years before his recent sentencing to a 42-month prison term based on a jury’s conclusion that he gave classified information to a *New York Times* journalist, former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling was in the midst of a protracted and fruitless effort to find someone in Congress willing to look into his accusations about racial discrimination at the agency.

ExposeFacts.org has obtained letters from Sterling to prominent members of Congress, beseeching them in 2003 and 2006 to hear him out about racial bias at the CIA. Sterling, who is expected to enter prison soon, provided the letters last week. They indicate that he believed the CIA was retaliating against him for daring to become the first-ever black case officer to sue the agency for racial discrimination.

As early as 2000, Sterling was reaching out toward Capitol Hill about his concerns. He received a positive response from House member Julian Dixon (D-California), a former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, who expressed interest in pursuing the matter of racial discrimination at the CIA and contacted the agency about his case, Sterling says. But the 20-year member of Congress died from a heart attack on Dec. 8, 2000.

Sterling recalls getting special firing treatment in early 2002 from John Brennan, then a high-ranking CIA executive, now the agency’s director and a close adviser to President Barack Obama: “He personally came down to the administrative office to tell me that I was fired. Someone told me that, ‘Well, you pulled on Superman’s cape.’”

Soon after the CIA fired him, the *New York Times*, *People* magazine and CNN

reported on Sterling's lawsuit charging the CIA with racial discrimination. But Sterling found no support from civil rights organizations.

In a letter dated Jan. 9, 2003, to Al Sharpton's National Action Network, Sterling recalled joining the CIA in 1993 "to serve my country", "but the clubby and racially exclusive atmosphere in the Agency denied me such an opportunity."

The letter went on: "The Agency taught me Farsi and I was trained as an expert against Iranians and terrorists. I proved my abilities as a case officer, however, when the time came for my use in the field or to move up in the ranks of officers, I was 'too big and too black.' That and other discriminatory treatment I received during my time at the Agency are the impetus behind my suit."

In an interview for the new documentary "[The Invisible Man: NSA Whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling](#)" (which I produced on behalf of ExposeFacts), Sterling told the film's director Judith Ehrlich that CIA leaders quickly focused on him when they learned about a leak of classified information to *Times* reporter James Risen in the early spring of 2003. (At the emphatic request of the Bush White House, the story was spiked by the *Times* leadership and did not reach the public until a book by Risen appeared in January 2006.)

"They already had the machine geared up against me," Sterling says in the film. "The moment that they felt there was a leak, every finger pointed to Jeffrey Sterling." He added: "If the word 'retaliation' is not thought of when anyone looks at the experience that I've had with the agency, then I just think you're not looking."

His letters to members of Congress, being reported here for the first time, show that Sterling was anticipating severe retribution as early as mid-2003, more than seven years before he was indicted on numerous felony counts, including seven under the Espionage Act, for allegedly informing Risen about the CIA's Operation Merlin. That operation had given flawed design material for a nuclear weapon component to the Iranian government in early 2000. According to Risen's reporting, Merlin "may have been one of the most reckless operations in the modern history of the CIA."

While the prosecution put on 23 witnesses from the CIA during Sterling's trial in January this year, negative comments about his actual job performance at the CIA were rare during their testimony. An exception was David Cohen, who headed the CIA's New York office when Sterling worked there. Cohen, a notably hostile witness who called Sterling's job performance "extremely sub-par", booted Sterling from the New York office in 2000.

Shortly after 9/11, Cohen left the CIA to head up a New York Police Department program that drew strong criticism and opposition from civil liberties groups. In 2002, as my colleague Marcy Wheeler wrote, Cohen “got a federal court to relax the Handschu guidelines, which had been set up in 1985 in response to NYPD’s targeting of people for their political speech. After getting the rules relaxed, Cohen created teams of informants that infiltrated mosques and had officers catalog Muslim-owned restaurants, shops, and even schools.”

The CIA fired Sterling in January 2002 after many months of administrative limbo. His letters the following year reflected escalating disappointment and anger at an absence of interest from members of Congress as well as from civil rights organizations including the Rainbow Push Coalition and the NAACP. Sterling says that none answered his letters.

“It has become apparent there is a general fear of taking on the CIA,” said a June 26, 2003 letter from Sterling to the then-chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Elijah Cummings (D-Maryland). “As a result, I have been engaged in a solitary and completely one-sided battle against the Agency that has left me ruined. There has been no one to stand with me either out of fear or ignorance. At every turn, the Agency has attempted to denigrate me and get rid of my case.” (Sterling’s lawsuit was to continue along a convoluted judicial path for over two more years, until a court finally dismissed it on grounds that a trial would reveal state secrets.)

Sterling says he never got a reply from Rep. Cummings. “Congressman Cummings does not recall receiving such a letter,” his press secretary Trudy Perkins told me this week.

Sterling’s letter to Cummings came two months after the White House had succeeded at persuading the *Times* management not to publish Risen’s story on Operation Merlin. Meanwhile, the government was searching for someone to blame for the leak.

“Now it seems I am part of a leak investigation being conducted by FBI,” Sterling’s letter said. “Apparently, information related to very sensitive operations I was instrumental in conducting was leaked to the press thereby causing the FBI to launch an investigation.”

The letter added: “As I have absolutely nothing to hide, I agreed to meet with the FBI to show my veracity and assist in their investigation. During that meeting, it was apparent that CIA has been instrumental in pointing the finger directly at me as a source of this leak. Though the FBI Agents conducting the session emphasized that I was not the target of their investigation, it was more than obvious to me that I will be the one to eventually take the fall.”

The indictment of Jeffrey Sterling came seven-and-a-half years later, at the end of 2010.

Testimony at Sterling's trial showed that the FBI did little or no investigation of other individuals who had extensive knowledge of Operation Merlin. For instance, the then-chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Pat Roberts (R-Kansas), shielded the committee's chief of staff by successfully insisting that the FBI not interview him about the leak, even though, or perhaps because, investigators viewed the committee's chief of staff as a key suspect. Trial testimony showed that the FBI had initially suspected that the leak came from the Senate committee staff.

On July 17, 2003, four months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Sterling sent a letter to Sen. Carl Levin (D-Michigan), who had recently been chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and remained its ranking member.

"Given the courage you have displayed along with a few other Senators in speaking out about the current intelligence controversy related to Iraqi WMD," Sterling wrote, "I feel that you would be an appropriate Senator to reach out to. What I have to say is substantially related to the current debate about WMD intelligence."

At Sterling's trial four months ago, Judge Leonie Brinkema effectively barred defense efforts to present information related to Sterling's concerns about such matters. But those concerns are evident in Sterling's letter to Sen. Levin, which addressed issues of CIA activities related to weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East region.

Sterling's letter to Levin stated that "since April 2000", just two months after Operation Merlin gave flawed nuclear weapon design information to Iran, "I have been reaching out to numerous members of Congress including both intelligence committees to bring to their attention my concerns about the CIA's efforts directed at terrorism (focus on pre 9/11) and dangers of certain operations, particularly involving WMD in the Middle East. My efforts all fell upon deaf ears."

The letter continued: "Finally, after close to three years of trying, I gained an audience with the Senate Intelligence Committee, more specifically, Committee staffers this past March. I told them my concerns and provided necessary details and specifics. I pointed out though I had extensive experience in Iranian operations, the WMD information had significant impact on intelligence related to Iraq."

(Sterling had gone through legal channels to meet with Senate Intelligence

Committee staffers. A dozen years later, testimony at Sterling's trial revealed that only negligible action had resulted. A high-ranking committee staff member told of asking the CIA if its Operation Merlin was problematic, and predictably the CIA replied that the operation was just fine.)

Shortly after he met with Senate committee staff, Sterling's letter to Sen. Levin said, "in early April the information was evidently leaked to the press. I have no idea what the staffers did with the information, but it is difficult for me to assume that the leak did not somehow originate from the Senate Intelligence Committee.

"From the frantic way the CIA threatened my attorney with sanctions and threats to send their security folks to pay me a visit, it was clear that CIA automatically assumed I was the source of the leak without even confirming that I had talked with individuals cleared to hear the information.

"I have been trying to do the right thing, and I found myself in the middle of a firestorm involving the [Bush] Administration and the highest levels of CIA and FBI. Given the current debate on intelligence and the credibility of the President, I can certainly understand the attempts to make me just 'go away.'

"Despite the great personal risk I am undertaking reaching out to you, I feel it my duty to bring to your attention information that is vital to the national security of this country. I feel this especially given the way the President and the administration has skewed the truth with regard to WMD intelligence."

Sterling's letter to Levin noted that "as a Senator, you should have the proper clearance for me to discuss intelligence matters with you," and closed with a one-sentence paragraph: "I do hope to hear from you soon." Sterling told me that he never heard from Sen. Levin.

Likewise, Sterling says, he received no reply to the Oct. 2, 2006 letter that he sent to Rep. Mel Watt (D-North Carolina), who then chaired the Congressional Black Caucus. (Watt, like Levin, is no longer in Congress.) That year had begun with publication of Risen's book *State of War*, followed by an FBI raid on the home near St. Louis that Sterling shared with his then-fiancee and current wife Holly.

"Now there is a federal grand jury sitting attempting to come up with something to indict me on," Sterling wrote. Recalling how his discrimination suit was tossed out of court on "national security" grounds, he added: "I think it is deplorable how I am denied the opportunity to utilize the courts to defend my civil rights, yet they can use the same system to most likely charge me with a supposed crime."

Like his going through channels to file an internal complaint with the CIA and then a court lawsuit alleging racial discrimination at the agency, Sterling's going through channels to express concerns to the Senate Intelligence Committee was to be repeatedly used against him during the January 2015 trial that resulted in a prison sentence of three and a half years.

Inside the courtroom, in front of the jury, the prosecution often cited his lawsuit and his contact with Senate Intelligence Committee staffers as clear indications of bitterness, vengefulness and motive for taking the actions alleged in the indictment.

At the CIA and the Justice Department, authorities routinely depicted Jeffrey Sterling as a "disgruntled" employee. During interviews for "[The Invisible Man](#)," he addressed how that depiction has played out for him:

"I think the label 'disgruntled' came from the moment that I complained, in any aspect. I was not being part of the team. People say that individuals play the race card. What about the other side of that? The race card was certainly being played with me. And you can say it was the white race card because I wasn't white. They had all those cards. And if there isn't going to be a true, real, honest investigation with any veracity, the natural conclusion is going to be 'disgruntled.' It's a very easy label to place."

Norman Solomon's books include [War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death](#). He is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and coordinates its [ExposeFacts](#) project. Solomon is a co-founder of [RootsAction.org](#), which has encouraged donations to the [Sterling Family Fund](#). Disclosure: After the guilty verdict four months ago, Solomon used his frequent-flyer miles to get plane tickets for Holly and Jeffrey Sterling so they would be able to go home to St. Louis. [This article originally appeared at [ExposeFacts.org](#).]
