

# The 'Anti-Knowledge' of the Elites

**Exclusive:** It's fairly easy to spot the "anti-knowledge" spouted by the Tea Party and the Religious Right's favorite candidates, but a more subtle form of reality-deprived "group think" pervades America's elites though it is rarely noted in the polite circles of the mainstream media, writes Mike Lofgren.

By Mike Lofgren

In a previous piece, I described how the Republican Party and its ideological allies in the fundamentalist churches have confected a comprehensive media-entertainment complex to attract low-information Americans and turn them into partisans.

The propaganda they are fed has become so disconnected from facts, evidence and logic that it is all too easy to laugh at people operating on demonstrably – and even ridiculously – false premises, such as the notion that Barack Obama, born in Hawaii, is not a natural-born American, or that the Sandy Hook school massacre was an elaborate fake designed to take away the firearms of patriotic Americans.

It would be comforting to believe that somewhere in the commanding heights of our permanent government, there are important players who are serious grownups who know what they are doing. That, at least, is the impression they seek to convey with their sober demeanors, credentials from think tanks or prestigious universities, and the measured, almost soporific testimony they deliver to congressional committees.

Think of Robert Gates, Ashton Carter, Timothy Geithner or Eric Holder. On the surface, they seem the very antithesis of the Tea Party fanatic, gibbering about ISIS training camps in America. The preferred pose of these establishment personages is that of the politically neutral technocrat offering well-considered advice based on their profound expertise.

That pose is nonsense. They are deeply dyed in the hue of the official ideology of the governing class, an ideology that is neither specifically Democrat nor Republican. Domestically, whatever they might privately believe about essentially diversionary social issues ("rube bait") like abortion or gay marriage, they almost invariably believe in the "Washington Consensus": financialization, outsourcing, privatization, deregulation and the commodification of labor.

Internationally, they espouse Twenty-first Century American Exceptionalism: the right and duty of the United States to meddle in every region of the world,

coercive diplomacy, boots on the ground, and the right to ignore painfully-won international norms of civilized behavior. To paraphrase what Sir John Harrington said over 400 years ago about treason, now that the ideology of the Deep State has prospered, none dare call it ideology.

Let us consider some of the tenets of their faith:

–Almost a decade and a half later, it is now permissible to suggest that the invasion of Iraq was less than well considered. But to actually hold the authors of the invasion politically accountable is taboo and to suggest criminal culpability is to get oneself ejected from the salons of the Consensus.

–There is ample evidence of conscious criminal malfeasance, including selling investment instruments deliberately designed to fail, in the financial saturnalia leading, in 2008, to the greatest global economic collapse in 80 years. But our highest law enforcement official said maybe we shouldn't prosecute the high-level instigators. Why? Just because.

–ISIS is seen in Washington as a grave terrorist threat with the potential to knock over the unpopular and unstable regimes of the Middle East (i.e., our client states) like bowling pins. Yet the Washington Consensus sees as the key to defeating ISIS the undermining of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, ISIS's principal military enemy. If a U.S. general in 1942 declared the only way to defeat the Wehrmacht would be for us to fight Nazi Germany and the USSR simultaneously, he would have been committed to a lunatic asylum.

–Could widening income inequality just possibly have something to do with corporations and the rich inducing their bought-and-paid-for politicians to rewrite the tax code, trade laws, labor protections and pension rules in other words, rigging the system? Oh, no, it was all inevitable, say the “sensible centrists;” that's just the way the world works. So maybe if the little people just got off their duffs, loaded up on student debt, and got educated, they'd be ready for the brave new world of the Washington Consensus.

–American International Group executives whose malfeasance or incompetence led to the company being bailed out (and nationalized in all but the name) by the American taxpayer are entitled to keep their stratospheric salaries and bonuses because of a holy principle called “sanctity of contract.” Do autoworkers, or pensioners of the City of Detroit, get to keep their previously agreed-to compensation? No, because that's how a globalized economic system works.

These examples reveal a display of infantile logic or pernicious mendacity every bit as flagrant as Ben Carson's mumblings or Donald Trump's berserker rants. Yet, rather than selling snake-oil miracle health cures, as Carson and Mike

Huckabee have done, the people who inflict this nonsense on us typically wind up teaching at the Kennedy School of Government, or serving as the president of a university or as a board member of a Fortune 500 company.

The imbecility of Tea Party dervishes is easy enough to detect, so why does the equally twisted reasoning of the bipartisan Wise Men (and women) escape public detection? Perhaps the reason is that democracy, or at least the oligarchically managed democracy that exists, is, in the words of H.L. Mencken, "based upon so childish a complex of fallacies that they must be protected by a rigid system of taboos, else even half-wits would argue it to pieces."

The principal enforcer of those taboos is the prestige media. Their main method is to define "objectivity" to mean "a refusal to judge." But when the truth is accessible and corroborable, it would be silly to stage a debate in which proponents of a spherical earth and champions of a flat earth receive equal time, with the debate's moderator expressing doubt as to the verdict until one side or the other triumphs with clever rhetoric. Yet that is the prestige press' default position.

It is occasionally refreshing when outlandish characters like Trump refuse to play by the rules. For 14 years, whether and to what extent George W. Bush's potential nonfeasance (or actual negligence) facilitated the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, has generally been an off-limits subject for the mainstream media.

Only when Trump broached the subject was the press free to jump on it. And the interviewer, Bloomberg's Stephanie Ruhle, immediately interrupted Trump by blurting out, "Hold on, you can't blame George Bush for that!" One wonders whether she was doubtful of the truth of his statement or worried about the potential blowback against her career.

As Josh Marshall, editor of Talking Points Memo, pointed out, the American media naively (or timidly) treated House Republicans' interminable hearings on the assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, as if it were a serious and judicious attempt to determine the facts in the case. It was only when Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-California, the House majority leader, committed a Freudian slip by saying that the hearings were designed to derail Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, that the press was "allowed" to judge the intent of the House Republicans' investigation.

And sure enough the media have responded, with even *Newsweek*, normally a purveyor of conventional wisdom, publishing a sharp critique of the kangaroo-court aspect of the investigation. That said, one tack the media will *not* take on Benghazi is to look at the bigger picture: that the intervention in Libya was

a massive, bipartisan failure of the Washington Consensus, with the Obama administration executing it and the House and Senate Republican leadership egging it on.

Normally free from criticism, much less accountability, the careerists of Washington enjoy a lucrative racket. Take General Keith Alexander, the former director of the National Security Agency. On his watch the most massive leak of government secrets in history occurred, and several members of Congress also claimed he misled them about the scope and legality of his agency's collection of Americans' private information.

Yet he managed to parlay those failures into a big payday. In 2014, Alexander set himself up as the head of a consulting boutique called IronNet Cybersecurity. His principal client is one of Wall Street's largest lobbying groups, the Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association (SIFMA), from which he receives \$600,000 per month.

The money is often beyond the dreams of avarice, but that is not the only factor in play. All the big players have been sheep-dipped in a world view that becomes a reflex.

The anthropologist E. T. Hall, in "Beyond Culture," put it this way: Everything man is and does is modified by learning and is therefore malleable. But once learned, these behavior patterns, these habitual responses, these ways of interacting gradually sink below the surface of the mind and, like the admiral of a submerged submarine fleet, control from the depths. The hidden controls are usually experienced as though they were innate simply because they are not only ubiquitous but habitual as well."

The twin seductions of money and Washington "group think" have led our Wise Men into one disaster after another in both domestic and foreign policy. In view of their lamentable record over the last decade and a half, their advice and counsel is probably no better than that of a snake-handling shaman in the remotest hollow of West Virginia, and certainly a good deal more expensive.

**Mike Lofgren is a former congressional staff member who served on both the House and Senate budget committees. His book about Congress, The Party is Over: How Republicans Went Crazy, Democrats Became Useless, and the Middle Class Got Shafted, appeared in paperback in August 2013. His new book, The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government, will be published in January 2016.**

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# Obama Keeps Pentagon Spigot Open

Though he ran for the White House as a “change” candidate, President Obama has mostly favored continuity, including bending to the usual pressure from the Military-Industrial Complex to keep the Pentagon spending flowing, as budget watchdog Chuck Spinney explains.

By Chuck Spinney

The Pentagon just won another small skirmish in its long war with Social Security and Medicare. That is the unstated message of the budget deal just announced gleefully by congressional leaders and President Barack Obama. To understand why, let’s take a quick trip down memory lane.

Last January, President Obama submitted Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 budget to Congress, and he proposed to break the spending limits on both defense and domestic programs. These limits are set by the long-term sequester provisions of the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA), which, for better or worse, is the law of the land, and Obama was asking Congress to change the law.

Mr. Obama wanted to finance his ramped up spending proposals by increasing taxes. Of course, he knew that the Republican-controlled Congress lusted for defense increases but hated domestic spending, particularly entitlements, such as Social Security and Medicare.

Moreover, he knew increasing taxes was like waving the red cape in front of the Republican budget bulls. So, he knew his budget would be dead on arrival. Obama’s budget, nevertheless, had one virtue: it was up-front about the intractable nature of the budget problem. In effect, whether deliberately or not, Obama laid a trap that the Republicans merrily walked into during the ensuing spring and summer.

Obama’s gambit set into motion a tortured kabuki dance in the Republican-controlled Congress. The Republicans, as Obama well knew, wanted to keep up the appearances of adhering to the BCA. But at the same time, they wanted desperately to shovel money into the Pentagon’s coffers.

The net result was that Obama’s proposal triggered a series of increasingly irrational Congressional negotiations, bizarre back-room deals and weird budget resolutions. These machinations came to a head with the passage of a National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that proposed to (1) keep the Pentagon’s base budget at the BCA level of about \$499 billion, but (2) pack the accounts in the Pentagon’s Overseas Contingencies Operations fund (OCO) with a programs and pork

that should have been in its base budget.

The reason for the dodgy OCO “slush fund” rested in the politically irresistible fact that the OCO is a separate war-fighting fund for the Pentagon that is *exempt* from the spending limits set by the BCA’s sequester provisions. [The OCO is a George W. Bush gimmick, created in 2001 after 9/11 to capitalize on the national hysteria to pay for the Global War on Terror by taking its costs off the books. All our previous wars, e.g., WWI, WWII, Korea, Viet Nam, Kosovo, were funded out of the “base” defense budget and there was no need set up a special war fighting account.]

The net result of the smoke and mirrors by the Budget and Armed Services committees of Congress was a total defense budget that was almost identical to Obama’s original submission, but one that was not accompanied by his domestic funding increases or his tax increases. And this monstrosity was all wrapped up in a ridiculous pretense of adhering to the BCA limits.

Last week, President Obama seemed to close the trap by vetoing the 2016 NDAA. But this too was smoke and mirrors.

The veto put in motion yet another kabuki dance, this time behind closed doors between the White House and the leaders of Congress. The goal was to reach an overall budget deal that would avoid a government shutdown, which the majority Republicans were terrified of being blamed for on the eve of an election year. At the same time, they wanted to dodge the BCA’s sequester bullet while they shoveled more money into the Pentagon.

That deal has now been joined, and the Republic has been saved, albeit at an unknown price. Nevertheless, some of its sordid details or that price are now beginning to seep through the chinks in the Hall of Mirrors that is Versailles on the Potomac. According to this [report](#) in Defense News, the elements of the budget deal include the following:

The deal raises the BCA spending caps (again) by \$80 billion over next two years; including \$50 billion in FY2016 and \$30 billion in FY2017. It also increases the Federal Government’s debt limit. These spending increases would be split equally between defense and domestic programs, and they would be financed by two squirrelly provisions, to wit:

The first financing gimmick cuts back Medicare and Social Security disability benefits. But if past is prologue, the cut to Medicare is likely to be reversed again next year, which is an election year, because everyone in Congress wants the endorsement of the American Medical Association. The cut to Medicare providers was first made permanent law by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, and

since then Congress has reversed the scheduled provider cut 17 times.

The second financing gimmick is to sell crude oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Ironically, this rather bizarre provision is peculiarly fitting to the culture of Versailles on the Potomac. Few remember that the reserve was justified to the American people in 1975 as an insurance “cushion” to reduce the adverse effects of future rises in oil prices or supply disruptions engineered by OPEC, which is controlled by our supposed “ally” Saudi Arabia.

So why sell the reserve’s oil when prices are near record lows (adjusted for inflation) compared to those of the last 15 to 20 years, particularly since the Saudis are flooding the market to take out the U.S. frackers? Who benefits is a fascinating question with all sorts of twists and turns and is not yet answered.

But it is worth recalling the 1997 Balanced Budget Act had a provision to sell the Naval Petroleum Reserve at Elk Hills (sold in 1998) at that time, the largest privatization of government assets in history, precisely when oil prices were at their lowest level (adjusted for inflation) since the 1960s. It was sold to Occidental Petroleum which made a killing.

There is one thing the deal makes clear, however. The Pentagon’s share of the spending increases would be \$33 billion in FY16, made up of a \$25 billion increase in the Pentagon’s base budget and an \$8 billion increase in the OCO. As for how the Pentagon’s \$15 billion increase in FY17 will be allocated, the report in Defense News is silent.

So, there is good reason why champagne corks are popping in halls of the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex (MICC) and its lobbying affiliates on K Street. Indeed, to celebrate the triumph, the Air Force immediately announced it awarded Northrop-Grumman with a huge *concurrent engineering* contract (Milestone B) to design and build the first 21 of 100 new long-range strike bombers, which heretofore had been shrouded in heavy secrecy.

No one knows what this bomber will even look like, let alone what the program will cost, but two years ago, there were reports of a “pre-cost-growth” total program cost estimate (R&D and production) reaching \$81 billion. At least one of the MICC’s euphoric wholly-owned subsidiaries in the Fourth Estate has already written that 100 bombers are not enough, given the threats we face and the number of aging bombers that need to be replaced.

This new bomber program is, by far, the largest weapon acquisition program yet started in the Twenty-first Century. Moreover, its heavy concurrency means that the production-related money will quickly start flowing to hundreds of

congressional districts, well before the bomber is designed.

So, before you can say sequester next year, the Bomber, like the troubled F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, will be *unstoppable*. And, like the F-35, it will acquire a life of its own to live on, no matter how badly it fails to meet its cost goals, its capability specifications, or its production quotas, for the simple but powerful reason that a majority in Congress are being bought off today in a way that will ensure they vote for it tomorrow.

But there is more. The new Bomber is just the beginning of the new defense boom that Mr. Obama and Congress are launching beneath the smoke and mirrors of their budget practices. The Pentagon already has a bow wave of increased spending for new weapons in its R&D pipeline.

In that sense, it is no accident that, a year ago, as he was departing the Pentagon, the Pentagon's ineffectual comptroller Robert Hale characterized the new bomber as the "canary in the coal mine." He was wringing his hands over the rapidly growing requirements for larger defense budgets in the future, requirements he helped to create.

"Bow waves" are a perennial feature in Pentagon planning. I first heard the term in 1973. The current bow wave, like its predecessors, will lead inexorably to more budget crises and more dodgy budget deals made by the best government money can buy.

So, once again, Mr. Obama had a shot at leading from the moral high ground, and once again, he blew it. He had the Republicans on the ropes, with all their warts on full display, but then he squandered an opportunity to effect even a pretense of challenging a thoroughly corrupt system.

Obama's most recent performance is yet more proof that he is no change agent. A better characterization would be that he is merely another Manchurian Candidate, whose role is to protect the interests of the factions making up the shadow government that is now running the show, what former Republican congressional staffer Mike Lofgren calls the U.S. "deep state." [See Lofgren's upcoming book, *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government.*]

[This essay is the second in a series of occasional essays on the nature of defense spending. The first can be found here.]

**Chuck Spinney is a former military analyst for the Pentagon who was famous for the "Spinney Report," which criticized the Pentagon's wasteful pursuit of costly and complex weapons systems. [The article appeared originally at his blog.]**

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