

Separating War from the Vets

From the Archive: On Veterans Day, Americans make a point of thanking men and women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces. But this appreciation has the effect of shielding today's perpetual warfare from the critical examination it deserves, as former Marine Matthew Hoh noted in 2012.

By Matthew Hoh (Originally published on Nov. 15, 2012)

I get lots of notes thanking me for my service on Veterans Day. I am grateful and appreciative. My friends, both veterans and active duty service members, receive the same affections of respect and esteem and, of course, value those sentiments.

There comes a time, however, when a line is breached. I have difficulty receiving a message from a teacher thanking me for what I have done for my country. I blush at the handshakes, emails, Facebook posts, Twitter tweets and banners from police officers, firefighters, nurses, nonprofit organizers and volunteers, clergy, utility workers and good parents; people who do more on a daily basis for our nation than I have ever done.

Please understand me. What these men and women do everyday contributes more to the well being and welfare of this nation than anything done overseas over the last decade in our country's name. (With the exception of a relatively small, dedicated cadre who have actually dealt with the several dozen or few hundred terrorists that truly threaten the United States.)

I have no greater pride than in the Marines and Sailors I led in Iraq. They were consummate professionals: tough, disciplined and compassionate. They took care of one another, adhered to vague, illogical and unfair rules of engagement and followed, to the best they could, a mission even more vague, illogical and unfair.

What they did, they did for one another and they would do so again. They deserve the admiration of a nation for their performance and their conduct in situations impossible to understand unless you were there. However, their performance in their duties must be divorced and recognized separately from the misbegotten and politically expedient narrative that we live in a safer America today because of an invasion of Iraq and an 11-year occupation of Afghanistan.

What allows for this unquestioning acceptance of a patriotic and romantic yet specious narrative? Maybe it is the fear resident from the horror of the September 11 attacks? An act carried out by what history will detail to have been a band of madmen and not a force worthy of a war or the designation as an

existential threat.

Maybe it is a form of collective guilt, shame or inferiority for not having served? This attitude within the American public has manifested itself in elected officials and prevents questioning, critical thought or oversight pertaining to anything military in Washington, DC.

Maybe it is a fawning media? Desperate for ratings, pressured by competition and needful of access, the media has been easily suckered by the world's largest and best-trained public relations machine, run by the Pentagon.

Maybe it is even a growth in the general knowledge and understanding of war by the American public? I mean, who needs a draft, because, thanks to video games: "There's a soldier in all of us."

Whatever the reason, it is tragic and absurd that we confuse the hard work and selfless sacrifice of most veterans with overly simplistic, factually lazy and politically manipulative stories of freedom and liberty, of defense of economic prosperity, or of holding back barbarians at our gates.

I am quite certain Godwin's Law is in effect as many read this, but for every analogy or comparison to World War II and Nazi Germany in modern American foreign policy discourse, a referencing of the tragedies of Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia would be more appropriate. For these conflicts are not just closer in time and generation, but are more similar in their substance and form, and in their loss and inconclusiveness, to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq than the Good War is to the Afghan and Iraq Wars.

Do not be misled, we lost the Iraq War and we are losing the Afghan War. Not that either of those wars were worth winning, which, of course, is little consolation to the families of the dead and maimed.

Despite these losses; despite the disgraces of Generals McChrystal, Caldwell, Petraeus and Allen, all undone by vainglorious stupidity; despite the level of the Pentagon's fiscal profligacy, one without equal in the modern world; and despite a suicide epidemic that only the satirical publication *The Onion* seems willing to take head on, the military is the most widely respected institution in the United States.

Veterans deserve a great share of the responsibility for such foolishness. For too long we have been placed on a pedestal, immune from criticism or investigation, in some cases receiving adoration and reverence approaching clerical or pontifical status among the American public.

Have we, those no longer in service, met our obligations to those still serving

and to those who will serve? Have we honestly and critically examined our most recent histories and reported, candidly, what we saw, what we did, what we accomplished, whether or not it was worth it, and what it meant?

Maybe it is too soon for such introspection. Many of the more poignant, sincere and astute recollections and summaries of war have been published decades after the homecomings. Perhaps it is just too soon for many of us. However, as a friend of mine reminds me, for veterans to not speak genuinely, but rather to silently and graciously accept accolades of unwarranted praise and glory, ensures propaganda lives on as history.

Maybe in time my generation will produce memoirists like Kotolwitz, Sledge or Fussel, novelists like Vonnegut, Heller or Mailer, or films like *Paths of Glory*, *MASH* or *The Deer Hunter*. With a few exceptions, most reporting of the Afghan and Iraq wars by veterans has been simply that: reporting.

This absence of critical examination and of serious questioning of the wars by veterans has allowed for an infirmity to take hold within the American people that disallows for questioning warriors and, to the benefit of a few, expedites policies of perpetual war.

Thank you for your sympathies on the hardship of war, they are right and deserved. However, please truly consider the merit of crediting the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq for the continuing liberties, freedoms and welfare of the United States. I did not see any al Qaeda in Afghanistan or weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, nor do I know many Afghans who are benefiting from Karzai's kleptocracy or Iraqis who are grateful for the horrors of civil war.

Rather than receive thanks undeserved, I would prefer we hold ourselves accountable for our mistakes and our failures. Until that time, I will read the below poem each Veterans Day. I have seen more of what it speaks of in war and its aftermath than I ever did of any freedom or liberty.

SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES

By Siegfried Sassoon

I knew a simple soldier boy Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark, And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum, With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain. No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know The hell where youth and laughter go.

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Rubio's Big-time Military Build-up

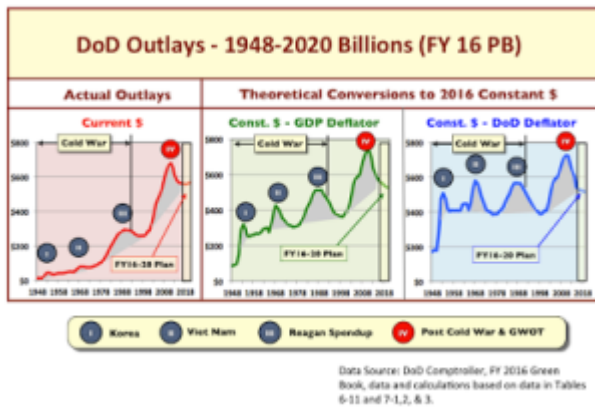
Sen. Rubio and most other Republican presidential contenders are competing with ambitious plans to launch a new U.S. military buildup, arguing that the modest cuts under President Obama have gutted America's global strength, a dubious proposition that budget watchdog Chuck Spinney explores.

By Chuck Spinney

Attached herewith is presidential candidate Marco Rubio's "peace thru strength" plan for "restoring" America's defense. To be sure, this is only an opening shot in a Presidential bidding war that is sure to intensify in the coming months, with each candidate in both major parties trying to *out-tough* the others by spending more on defense (Bernie Sanders perhaps being the only exception).

Before reading Rubio's piece of strategic wisdom, I urge you to think about the magnitude of what Rubio calls "\$1 trillion in indiscriminate defense budget cuts." Rubio's \$1 trillion total is for cutbacks in the Pentagon's future projections of its defense spending plans, not the actual cutbacks from the spending peak in 2010.

The graphic below places the actual cutbacks into a historical perspective: The chart shows that Department of Defense (DoD) spending declined by between \$110 billion and \$154 billion between 2010 and 2015, depending on if or how one chooses to account for inflation.



One can compare the reductions from the boom peak in 2010 (labeled #IV in the graphic) to those reductions after earlier peaks (#s I, II, & III). The effects of the \$110 billion to \$154 billion in cutbacks since 2010 are now embodied in President Barack Obama’s spending plan for 2016-2020 (highlighted in the yellow rectangle on the far right of each graph).

These cutbacks do not come close to accounting for the Pentagon’s bow wave* of financial requirements in the laundry list outlined by Rubio in his attached “policy” statement. The chart shows there is a boom-bust character to defense spending. The recent inflection point suggests we are approaching the end of the fourth bust and may be on the cusp of another or fifth boom.

Comparatively speaking, the current inflection in DoD’s spending trend shows signs of bottoming out at a much higher level than for any of the three preceding busts, all of which were conditioned in some way by the Cold War. Even the prominent spending hawk Loren Thompson recently characterized the current bust as being the “mildest defense downturn on record.”

Note that Thompson’s characterization of the most recent downturn as being relatively mild remains unchanged, regardless of how one accounts for the effects of inflation. This is true even if one uses DoD’s self-serving estimates of inflation which make the earlier budgets of the 1950s and 1960s look larger, thereby making the current budget look like less of a departure from past budgets.

Yet Sen. Rubio, R-Florida, suggests below the most recent cutbacks have been catastrophic in their effect. So, one might reasonably ask Mr. Rubio the following question: After spending all that money during the boom between 1997 and 2010, which happened to be the largest spending spree since the end of WWII, and given the relative mildness of the recent declines, *why* do you say it is now necessary to embark on a huge crash program to rebuild our defenses?

Could it be that the pissant “war on terror” has cost far more than either of

the far more intense wars in Korea or Vietnam (intensity being measured in terms of optempos and forces deployed)? And if so, Mr. Rubio, would you please explain *why* the the Global War on Terror cost so much more than Vietnam or Korea, or for that matter even World War I?

And *why* the diversion of money into GWOT resulted in a requirement for the kind of massive investment program you describe below, particularly in view of the fact that Congress set up a special contingency fund, separate from the Pentagon's "base" budget to pay for the war on terror?

In short, Mr. Rubio, *where did the money spent in boom #IV go?* And *how* can you account for it, given that the Pentagon's own bookkeeping system cannot pass an audit that links transactions to appropriations as required by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 and the Accountability and Appropriations Clauses of the Constitution?

Such common sense questions, of course, will not be asked in any of the circuses passing for presidential debates, or by pliant reporters in the mainstream media, or by poohbahs on the Sunday talk shows. But if you want to get a hint of what these record budgets bought for the taxpayers, before the budget started declining in 2010, I would urge you to reread "[Flush With Cash, Running on Empty \(I\)](#)," posted last June.

Since no one will ask Rubio these questions, ask yourself, dear reader, "What kind of security will Rubio's plan really buy for John Q. Average American?" Hint: Could the answer be *more of the same*, that is to say: (1) continued aging of weapons, (2) more shrinking of force structures, (3) increased pressure to cut readiness to bail out the imploding modernization program, and most importantly, (4) a continuation of ever intensifying budget crises fueled by cost growth to be exploited by demagogic ignoramuses who are in the hip pocket of the Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex?

*The term "bow wave" refers to a buildup of budget requirements in the future that is created by investment decisions made today. It is a chronic feature of defense planning and is created deliberately by the bureaucratic gaming strategies explained in Part III of my 1990 pamphlet [Defense Power Games](#).

The bow wave of rising investment requirements sets up the conditions for a continual budget crisis that creates a pervasive atmosphere of pressure to raise defense spending over the long term. This budget pressure cooker has nothing to do with any external threats facing the United States but goes a long way in explaining the boom-and-bust pattern of defense spending.

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, The Blaster](#). This is the third in a series of occasional postings describing the political-economy of U.S. defense spending in the 21st Century. Postings I and II can be found [here](#) and [here](#).]

Marco’s Plan to Restore Military Strength



As President, Marco will:

Restore Military Strength

–Work to return to Secretary Gates’ fiscal year 2012 budget baseline over the course of his first term and begin to undo the damage caused by \$1 trillion in indiscriminate defense cuts.

–Plug critical operations and maintenance shortfalls, restore military readiness through accelerated training and exercises, and make targeted investments in urgent modernization priorities.

–Build a “full spectrum” force able to maintain security simultaneously in Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Recapitalize the Navy

–Immediately begin to increase the size of the Navy to a minimum of 323 ships by 2024.

–Work with our allies in Asia to forward deploy a second aircraft carrier in the Pacific while increasing the carrier force from 10 to 12.

–Restore continuous, credible naval combat power to the Mediterranean Sea.

–Build the new Ohio-class Replacement (ORP) ballistic submarine to ensure a credible and survivable 21st century strategic deterrent.

–Build at least two attack submarines every year to preserve America’s undersea dominance amid intensifying naval competition.

- Fully integrate the F-35B and push ahead with development of a new amphibious-assault vehicle.
- Build an amphibious fleet of 38 ships (from today's 30) to meet the Marine Corps wartime lift requirement.
- Reverse reductions to the operating status of 11 of our 22 current cruisers.
- Replenish depleted inventories of critical munitions while accelerating development and procurement of new advanced strike and anti-ship missiles.
- Fully fund Navy-Marine Corps maintenance and modernization accounts.

Modernize the Air Force

- Invest in better Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance capabilities at the theater and strategic levels.
- Prioritize returning Air Force readiness to pre-Obama levels.
- Accelerate F-35A procurement.
- Develop and field the Long Range Strike Bomber capable of both conventional and nuclear missions to replace our current aging fleet of B-52, B-1, and B-2 bombers.
- Reposture the tactical Air Force for increased presence in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia.
- Ensure that the KC-46 tanker program stays on track to replace the aging KC-135 fleet.
- Ensure development of the Long-Range Stand-Off weapon.

Strengthen the Ground Forces

- Reverse the current cuts and maintain the Marine Corps and the Army at their pre-9/11 end-strengths of 182,000 and 490,000 respectively.
- Strengthen international partnerships to reduce the need to deploy ground troops.
- Work to return a corps headquarters to Europe and station additional BCTs in Eastern Europe to deter Russian aggression.
- Reexamine the Army's mobility and prepositioning to respond to crises in the Pacific.

–Continue to invest in Army Special Operations capabilities to remain at the cutting edge of the continuing war on terrorism.

–Maintain the Army’s proficiency across the full spectrum of war in order to combat state actors, defeat non-state threats, and shape the security environment to America’s advantage.

–Revamp the Army’s acquisition system and specifically look at options to modernize its aging vehicle and helicopter fleets.

Reform Military Personnel and Benefits

–Reform the military benefit structure and military career paths and specializations to attract and retain high quality personnel to the military, while preserving a sustainable balance between training and procurement needs.

–Continue recent efforts to reform military retirement, education, and healthcare on the basis of the recommendations of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission.

–Ensure the Department of Veterans Affairs is accountable and that our veterans have access to the best treatment possible when they return from the battlefield.

Transform the Pentagon Bureaucracy

–Optimize the Pentagon workforce by shrinking the Pentagon bureaucracy and achieving the correct balance between uniformed personnel, civilians, and contractors.

–Facilitate a more-technologically agile and adaptable workforce that can leverage technological evolution.

–Develop fellowship programs in the private sector for defense department personnel to renew skills to comport with industry standards.

Overhaul the Acquisition Process

–Streamline the acquisition process to prevent costly mistakes, hold private contractors accountable, and field top of the line technology to future warfighters.

–Remove barriers and strengthen exemptions for commercial acquisitions allowing the Pentagon to leverage cutting edge commercial technology, such as data analytics, cloud computing, 3-D printing, and robotics.

Modernize Missile Defense for the 21st Century

–Expand missile defense by speeding up deployment of interceptors in Europe, deploying a third site in the United States, and ensuring that advanced programs are adequately funded.

–Work interoperably with allies on missile defense , we should encourage the spread of missile defense technology as a solution to the spread of ballistic and cruise missiles.

–Increase the Missile Defense Agency’s Research & Development budget and create a rapid-fielding office to focus on fielding directed energy weapons, railguns, UAV-enabled defenses, and other means to defeat a threat missile across its entire flight trajectory.

Modernize and Protect Strategic Assets

–Ensure continued freedom of access to space in the face of a potential adversary’s development of anti-satellite missiles.

–Modernize the nuclear arsenal and stop the Obama administration’s proposed cuts to the nuclear arsenal.

–Pursue arms control only when it is in America’s interest and when prospective negotiating partners comply with their commitments to us.

Promote Innovation for the 21st Century

–Ensure U.S. military technological superiority by prioritizing key areas of defense technology that will counter those adversaries and competitors seeking to undermine our military predominance.

–Improve anti-submarine capabilities; procure advanced air warfare capabilities; sustain our advantage in precision strike from land, air, and sea; and invest in electronic warfare capabilities.

–Expand the use of rapid acquisition processes for key innovative technologies.

Posture the Force for the Cyber Era

–Improve cyber defense capabilities by hardening DoD systems and examining the sourcing of our weapons components.

–Outline a declaratory policy so our adversaries understand the consequences of attacking our computer systems.

–Improve offensive cyber capabilities and ensure that Cyber Command cyber mission forces have the tools and authorities to perform the cyber offensive mission.

–Better integrate cyber threats and cyber aspects of modern warfare in training, doctrine, and exercises across the combatant commands.

Ensure that the cyber threat is appropriately prioritized by all services; study whether cyber should be its own service rather than a mission of the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force.

The Progressives' Green Party Dilemma

Many progressives struggle with the “lesser-evil” dilemma. They may sympathize with Green Party positions but fear that voting for Green candidates will give right-wing Republicans control of the U.S. government, as in getting George W. Bush close enough to steal Election 2000 from Al Gore, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

The presumptive presidential candidate for the U.S. Green Party, Dr. Jill Stein, has long held definite ideas of what the party's position should be on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And, despite some past skepticism from Palestinian advocates, Stein's position is, from the progressive point of view, as near perfect as one is likely to get from an American politician. She has stated in a position paper the following:

“United States policy regarding Israel and Palestine must be revised to make international law, peace and human rights the central priorities. The United States has encouraged the worst tendencies of the Israeli government as it pursues policies of occupation, apartheid, assassination, illegal settlements, blockades, building nuclear bombs, indefinite detention, collective punishment, and defiance of international law. We must reset U.S. policy regarding Israel and Palestine, as part of a broader revision of U.S. policy towards the Middle East.”

Stein has government actions in mind to make this policy change real, including the withholding of material support and the diplomatic and economic isolation of those who consistently violate human rights and international law.

If Stein prevails as the party leader and carries through her position into the party platform, it should be enough to cause every supporter of justice in the Middle East (and in other areas as well, for the party's positions on many issues, domestic and foreign, are consistently progressive) to give serious consideration to supporting the Green Party's national candidates.

Certainly the Greens deserve to be on the ballot in every state and have enough supporters to make their candidacy a serious one.

Of course, the actual election of the Green Party, with or without Stein, is an unlikely event. Modern American politics has never been congenial for third parties. On a national level the best the U.S. Greens have done was 2.74 percent of the vote when Ralph Nader ran as their presidential candidate in 2000, a result I will consider more closely below.

The mass media gives the party almost no attention and, while the Green Party presidential candidate in 2012, Stein was not invited to any of the televised debates.

Even so, it is interesting to speculate what would happen if American progressives and others rallied around the Green Party and it actually attained power and moved to implement Jill Stein's position paper on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What If?

First, we have to mention the actual role of position papers as well as party platforms. They are statements of "what we *might* do if we had sufficient power." And indeed, it is rare that presidents are elected with such power – that is, with their party also in control of both houses of Congress. Nonetheless, Stein is a principled person and I have no doubt that, given the opportunity, she would attempt to turn these theoretical positions into practice.

Second, the Green Party president would have to monitor carefully the government bureaucracy attached to the Executive Branch to make sure its leaders actually did what she instructed it to do. This would require a lot of shifting around at the upper levels, where the State Department (including some embassy staff), Department of the Treasury, Department of Defense and some others are staffed with pro-Israeli appointees. After these reassignments are carried through the middle-echelon civil service bureaucrats would probably be fairly reliable and responsive.

Third, the Green Party president would find herself in a battle royal with Congress (assuming the Greens did not take control here too) over questions of aid and structurally created ties with Israel that lay outside of the president's hands. For instance, much of the infamous \$3 billion "aid" package given to the Zionist state yearly can only be altered by Congress. I think such a battle, carried out publicly, would be very beneficial for the country as a whole, but it also might end with a Green Party president having to compromise.

The Progressive's Dilemma

The dream of a successful Green Party sounds great and it is heartening that there is actually a political party out there with the courage and wisdom to take a stand for international law, peace and justice. But, given the present political state of things, Jill Stein may run for office, but she really cannot win.

And, that sets up the progressive's dilemma – the question whether, under these circumstances, progressives should actually vote for the Green Party's national ticket candidates.

The dilemma was first made apparent in the year 2000 when Ralph Nader, running for president on the Green Party ticket, got close to 3 million votes. The other two candidates in that race were the Democrat Al Gore and the Republican George W. Bush. The race proved close enough that some have seen Nader's campaign as a "spoiler" drawing off enough otherwise Democratic votes to throw the race to Bush.

Actually, I cannot resolve this dilemma, but I can tell you that it begs the question of why the most reasonable and rational political party, the one with positions that actually deal with both the nation's and the planet's worsening problems, remains at best a marginal player here in the United States.

The answer to this question probably has to do with the way most Americans, confined as they are within their local venues, have been acculturated to see the world – a range of perception that, over the decades, has melded with the range of propaganda put out by the two major parties.

This has left the more rational positions expressed by the Green Party vulnerable to the charge of naive idealism. In other words, most Americans, at least those who bother to vote, see the world through indoctrinated eyes and this makes it psychologically comfortable to vote for Democrats or Republicans even though doing so perpetuates old and deepening problems.

Heading off in new directions means going beyond politically conditioned perceptual views. And, even if it is demonstrably more reasonable and promising to do so, such a change causes a lot of discomfort.

So are we stuck in a self-destructive rut here? Quite likely. And, if history acts as a guide, the most likely thing to kick the U.S. out of the rut is catastrophe – something even worse than the fiascos of Vietnam and Iraq, and the economic time-bombs of ongoing bank scandals.

That is a really sad conclusion, especially since such a catastrophe could lead

the nation toward the hard right rather than the progressive left. However, it just may be the truth of the matter.

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

The Question Marks over Erdogan

Turkish President Erdogan's electoral victory opens new risks and some hopes for the region's future, depending on whether an empowered Erdogan ratchets up his autocratic approach or chooses to ease up on his military adventurism and repression of the Kurds, as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

Predictions among Turkey-watchers about the outcome of Turkey's Nov. 1 elections were mostly wrong, including my own, as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to regain majority control of Parliament. Anxiety over potential political and social chaos played a significant role in voters' decisions not to change leadership, particularly when no other party offered convincing leadership qualities (except possibly the new Kurdish party.)

The country is now left with a leader who over the past few years has distinguished himself by a list of negatives: his single-minded pursuit of executive power far in excess of constitutional provisions, his intimidation and harassment of political rivals, the muzzling of the media and the judiciary, and the tightening of the narrowing circle of often corrupt yes-men around him.

In the eyes of many, the country would have been better served by a coalition government that could have delimited Erdoğan's often arbitrary, paranoid and erratic use of power. But the voters have spoken and supported him for a fourth time. Turkey now faces the uncertain consequences of continuing and controversial single-party (read Erdoğan) rule.

Turkey faces many burning questions, but I'd like to focus here on the most central one, the overarching Kurdish question and its direct links to the fate of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey itself.

Turkey's Syrian policy under Erdoğan has done more to damage the country than any other issue.

While it was reasonable during the height of the Arab Spring to expect that Bashar al-Assad, too, might soon join the other fallen dictators, he proved remarkably resilient (and increasingly brutal) in crushing all opposition. We need to remember that Assad had been a virtual protege of Erdoğan for over a decade, but when Assad rejected outright Erdoğan's fatherly advice to handle the early opposition in Syria with moderation Erdoğan turned on him and decided to arm Assad's enemies.

But as the main armed opposition to the regime fell increasingly into the hands of the more effective Islamic State (also known ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, the western anti-Assad coalition began to back off from further support to it, reasoning that even an Assad regime would be far less damaging (for nearly everyone) than a seizure of Damascus by jihadi forces.

Erdoğan long resisted this analysis of the extremist threat and continued his dalliance with jihadi groups, until finally, reluctantly, yielding in part to western demands, and then suffering the worst terrorist attack in modern Turkish history in October led by an ISIS-led group in Ankara. Many argue that this terrorist outrage, in which Turkish security forces were strangely remote from the scene, actually helped shape the national mood of fear that facilitated Erdoğan's victory on Nov. 1.

But the grander issue of Kurds spills across the region. The international conflict surrounding ISIS rages in part around the Kurdish regions of northern Syria along the Turkish border, and contributed to reigniting the Kurdish armed struggle (PKK) within Turkey itself. Erdoğan, who had made major strides in the past decade in working towards political reconciliation with the Kurds, finally reversed course and sought cynical political gain in allowing negotiations with the PKK to deteriorate. The result was a return over the past year or so to mutual armed confrontations with the PKK and a heightened fear among the electorate of growing domestic violence.

Blame for this serious deterioration and backsliding in the Kurdish issue, however, lies on both sides: the PKK too was ready to burnish its image through selected guerrilla operations against Turkish forces and officials. The PKK has particularly felt threatened by the successful emergence of a moderate left-of-center Kurdish party (HDP) in Turkey that offers a rival leadership to Turkey's Kurds. In November the HDP gained a vital ten percent swing vote presence in Parliament, despite Erdoğan's major efforts to defame and suppress the party.

The upshot is that the Kurdish issue now represents probably the single most burning issue in both domestic and foreign policy of the country. Non-resolution of this issue is part of the cancer eating at the region in several of the following ways.

–Domestically, Turkish Kurds need to be better politically integrated into the country and their calls for greater political and cultural autonomy need to be acknowledged. Ankara may be uncomfortable with the process but failure to do so can only accelerate demands among Kurds for more radical solutions including potential outright separatism, something not now seriously on their agenda.

Having secured his political position for the next four years, will Erdoğan now seek to tone down the harshness of his recent rhetoric and try to work with the various Kurdish elements inside and outside the country?

The Kurds even within Turkey are hardly a monolithic group. They are united in seeking to secure greater Kurdish rights within the country, but are physically scattered all over the country, Istanbul is the biggest Kurdish city in the world. They differ linguistically and disagree on political tactics.

Can Kurds unite behind the new moderate HDP and assist in bringing PKK operations inside Turkey to an end? Or will some Kurds value violence as a pressure point against Ankara?

–While Erdoğan has sought to use any and all means to overthrow Assad, he rejected cooperation with the very effective leftist anti-ISIS Syrian Kurdish group, the PYD. Because the PYD is aligned with the PKK, Erdoğan was shockingly even willing to throw the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani to the ISIS wolves last summer had it not been for U.S. intervention. Washington in fact admires the PYD, to Ankara's consternation, as one of the most effective non-jihadi forces against ISIS.

–Some degree of political and cultural autonomy of Syrian Kurds in the north is essential to any future political structure in Syria. Ankara now resists that eventuality, but it is almost inevitable. At that point the Syrian Kurds would then join Turkish and Iraqi Kurds as working toward significant elements of local autonomy.

–The handwriting is now on the wall for Iran, the last of the four major Middle Eastern states with a large Kurdish population, possibly the second biggest Kurdish population in the region. Iran, a highly multiethnic country, will face mounting pressure from their own Kurdish population whose aspirations Tehran has quite failed to address, except through violence and repression and has shown far less flexibility than either Ankara or Baghdad now show.

Contacts between Iraqi and Iranian Kurds are intimate. Iran's Kurds will increasingly affect Tehran's dealings with its neighbors.

–The ongoing dilemma of the Kurds are emblematic of the overall failure of most Middle Eastern states to deal successfully with ethnic and religious minority

populations. Handling of the Kurdish issue writ large is central to handling the broader conflicts of this region.

The Kurds have ended up gaining political ground in almost every one of the regional wars in the Middle East since 1990 in bringing the once obscure Kurdish issue into international prominence. The Kurdish profile in all regional countries continues to grow and is central to solutions to domestic Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian and, soon, Iranian problems.

Will Erdoğan now continue to exploit Kurdish problems to strengthen his own hand? Or will he possibly “turn statesman” again, having now secured his political future for some years to come? His present operating style is not reassuring, but then politics can bring surprises.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle) grahamefuller.com

Obama's Double-Standard on Leaks

Though President Obama touts America as a nation of laws and evenhanded justice, there is a blatant double-standard regarding how people are punished for national security breaches whistleblowers are harshly punished but the well-connected get a pass, writes John Hanrahan.

By John Hanrahan

There he goes again. In recently proclaiming Hillary Clinton free of any national security breach, even as the FBI was continuing its investigation of her use of a potentially risky private email server for official business while she was Secretary of State, President Barack Obama continued his disturbing pattern of rendering his personal verdict ahead of legal proceedings in high-profile cases involving classified government information.

From Private Chelsea Manning to General David Petraeus to Edward Snowden and now to Hillary Clinton, the President has sounded off with his opinions on guilt or innocence, and on any alleged damage to national security, in advance of either a trial, or an indictment, or completion of an investigation.

Short version: whistleblowers Manning and Snowden clearly guilty; former high government officials Petraeus and Clinton, no problem.

In April 2011, two years before court martial proceedings began and almost two years before Manning acknowledged being a source for hundreds of thousands of classified documents released by Wikileaks, Obama proclaimed Manning guilty. The materials Manning provided to Wikileaks exposed diplomatic secrets and U.S. military abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan, including showing greater numbers of civilian casualties than admitted publicly by U.S. officials.

Among the most shocking was the classified "collateral murder video" that showed U.S. military personnel in an Apache helicopter in a Baghdad suburb indiscriminately firing on and killing more than a dozen people, including rescuers and two Reuters employees, and wounding others, including two children.

Likewise, exiled whistleblower Edward Snowden was excoriated in absentia by Obama in January 2014 for providing to journalist Glenn Greenwald, filmmaker Laura Poitras and others a trove of frightening National Security Agency documents. The documents showed that the Big Brother State had indeed arrived via the NSA's worldwide, dragnet surveillance and data collection programs.

Petraeus received Obama's no-harm-no-foul verdict in November 2012, while Clinton won the president's thumbs-up during a *60 Minutes* appearance by the President that was broadcast this past Oct. 11.

In his public pronouncements, a double standard has been applied by the President to powerful former governmental figures caught up in investigations regarding classified information. In Obama's eyes, neither Petraeus nor Clinton did anything wrong: Not Petraeus in providing extremely highly secretive documents to his mistress Paula Broadwell; nor Clinton, in using her personal email server to conduct official business while she was Secretary of State, a server that might have contained classified information and that critics contend could have been easily penetrated by hackers, including unfriendly foreign governments.

And in both the Petraeus and Clinton cases, Obama stated his views publicly in an early stage of an investigation, sending a message that would certainly give pause to FBI investigators and federal prosecutors trying to build a case involving either of those two powerful former government officials.

It's worth revisiting some of what Obama said about these various national security investigations, and the possible impact his statements had or might have on subsequent events in these cases:

Chelsea Manning

On April 21, 2011, Obama was confronted, and recorded, at a political fundraiser by a Manning supporter who wanted to know why Manning was being prosecuted on

such serious charges. Manning, said Obama, was “irresponsible, risked the lives of service members and did a lot of damage. He broke the law.”

Remember, this was two years before Manning went to trial and almost two years before Manning acknowledged being the source for documents released by Wikileaks. Nothing had been proved against Manning in any legal forum.

Obama also made further comments that have a delightful irony about them, given the subsequent investigation of Petraeus, as well as the disclosure that former CIA Director Leon Panetta had provided classified information to the makers of the torture-justifying movie, “Zero Dark Thirty.”

Said Obama: “If I was to release stuff, information that I’m not authorized to release, I’m breaking the law. We’re a nation of laws. We don’t individually make our own decisions about how the laws operate.”

To those of us who attended sessions of Manning’s 2013 court-martial, with the defense hamstrung by adverse national security rulings and barred by espionage law from mounting a public-interest defense, the verdict was not surprising. But the draconian 35-year sentence meted out by military judge Colonel Denise Lind was a shocker even in the context of the sham that is “military justice.”

Human nature, being what it is, would suggest that when the top military boss, the commander-in-chief, publicly pronounces the defendant guilty in advance of trial, some attention is certainly paid further down the chain of command to not only winning a conviction, but imposing a stiff sentence as well.

In that context, the President’s pre-trial comments amounted to exerting undue command influence, as Manning supporters and even some in the mainstream press pointed out at the time. NBC News chief Pentagon correspondent Jim Miklaszewski wrote this:

“The Uniform Code of Military Justice prohibits ‘Command Influence,’ in which a superior officer up the chain of command says or does something that could influence any decisions by a military judge or jury in a criminal case. As commander in chief, there’s no one higher up the chain than the president.”

In receiving that unconscionable 35-year prison term from Judge Lind, Manning may indeed be paying the price for Obama’s pre-trial comments.

General Petraeus

On Nov. 9, 2012, just three days after Obama was reelected, Petraeus resigned as CIA director as the news broke of his affair with Paula Broadwell. A mere five days after that, with the FBI’s investigation still in an early phase, Obama, in

his first post-election news conference, all but exonerated Petraeus, saying:

“I have no evidence, from what I have seen at this point, that classified information was exposed.” He also said that he had seen nothing “that in any way would have had a negative impact on our national security.”

Obama then poured it on, reminding the American public that this four-star general is a unique man who deserves being left alone because of all of his service on our behalf.

“We are safer because of the work that Dave Petraeus has done,” Obama said. “And my main hope right now is, is that he and his family are able to move on and this ends up being a single side note on what has otherwise been an extraordinary career.”

Obama may or may not have known that just the previous month (October 2012) Petraeus had lied to the FBI that he had not provided any classified information to Broadwell (who co-authored a biography of Petraeus). He had also signed a statement upon leaving the CIA that he had no classified material in his possession, another lie.

When the FBI raided Petraeus’s home in April 2013, agents confiscated from an unlocked desk drawer eight notebooks that contained what the *New York Times* described as “handwritten classified notes about official meetings, war strategy, intelligence capabilities and the names of covert officers.” Petraeus himself described material in some of the so-called “black books” as being “highly classified.”

Petraeus subsequently admitted providing the classified notebooks to Broadwell and worked out a sweetheart plea deal under which he was not charged with a felony or covering up by lying to the FBI, but instead was allowed to plead guilty to a minor misdemeanor count of unauthorized removal and retention of classified material.

For that, in marked contrast to two convicted CIA whistleblowers, John Kiriakou and Jeffrey Sterling, who received prison sentences of 30 months and 42 months, respectively, Petraeus was given no prison time. His slap-on-the-wrist “punishment”: two years probation and a \$100,000 fine.

In addition to having a compliant Justice Department to thank, Petraeus can certainly give a tip of his general’s hat to a president, who made his views clear early on: Namely, you do not send a world-famous general to jail for an offense that would likely land any less heralded soldier in federal prison for many years.

In any event, present and future high-ranking government officials should take note: There is now an apparent “mistress exception” loophole in all those laws and regulations relating to the leaking of classified materials.

Edward Snowden

In a Jan. 17, 2014 speech touting what he described as his plans to reform U.S. surveillance practices, President Obama said that the “Snowden disclosures” had the effect of “revealing methods to our adversaries that could impact our operations in ways that we may not fully understand for years to come.”

“Given the fact of an open investigation, I’m not going to dwell on Mr. Snowden’s actions or his motivations,” Obama said. “Our nation’s defense depends in part on the fidelity of those entrusted with our nation’s secrets. If any individual who objects to government policy can take it in their own hands to publicly disclose classified information, then we will not be able to keep our people safe, or conduct foreign policy.”

Five days after Snowden revealed himself as the whistleblower source for the NSA documents, the Justice Department filed a criminal complaint against him, charging him with theft and, more seriously, with two espionage charges: “unauthorized communication of national defense information” and “willful communication of classified communications intelligence information to an unauthorized person.”

In the event Snowden someday faces a trial, you can bet that some variation of Obama’s words, that Snowden’s disclosures had revealed “methods to our adversaries that could impact our operations in ways that we may not fully understand for years to come”, will be part of the prosecutor’s arsenal of charges. Just as was the case in the Chelsea Manning, Jeffrey Sterling and John Kiriakou prosecutions, whistleblowing equates to endangerment to us all.

Hillary Clinton

In an appearance on CBS’s *60 Minutes* that was broadcast on Oct. 11, 2015, Obama said that Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server is “not a situation in which America’s national security was endangered.” While he opined that Clinton’s use of the non-governmental server was a “mistake,” Obama added: “I don’t think it posed a national security problem.”

How can the President be so sure in the initial stages of an investigation that Manning is guilty and Petraeus and Clinton have done nothing to endanger national security? That Snowden and Manning, though, did endanger national security, but Clinton’s problematic private server, there for the possible picking by friendly or unfriendly nations or terrorist factions, did not?

This gratuitous support for Clinton, coming smack in the middle of the FBI investigation, sends a message down the civilian chain of command: Move on. Nothing to see here. An FBI agent or Justice Department prosecutor might just want to think twice about whether it's a great career-enhancing move to keep pursuing the Clinton email matter when the President sends such a message out to the world.

(As if the pressure weren't already enough, knowing that the woman you're investigating could very likely be elected president next year.)

Even people who believe that Clinton did nothing wrong, who feel that this is just another Republican-influenced vendetta to sabotage her presidential campaign, should be concerned that a president would interject himself thusly into an ongoing investigation.

Two days after the *60 Minutes* broadcast, White House press secretary Josh Earnest issued one of those statements intended for that segment of the American public that just fell off the turnip truck: The President's comment on *60 Minutes* was "based on what we publicly know" and "certainly was not an attempt, in any way, to undermine the importance or independence of the ongoing FBI investigation."

A president who taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School has to know that casting such public judgments with the weight of the presidency behind them, guilty for whistleblowers who perform a true public service, exceptions for high-ranking government officials because a double standard applies, further erodes the already crumbling rule of law in this fearful post-9/11 era.

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