

Pakistan's Ticking Nuclear Time Bomb

Exclusive: Pakistan's nuclear arsenal remains a top global security threat, as Islamic jihadists penetrate many of the nation's political, educational and military institutions, says Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Dozens of world leaders are arriving in Washington, D. C. for the fourth Nuclear Security Summit, a biennial event dedicated to minimizing the threat of loose nuclear material falling into the hands of terrorists or rogue nations.

The summit couldn't be more timely in view of recent revelations that militants linked to the Islamic State recruited two employees at a Belgian nuclear plant where an insider in 2014 drained thousands of gallons of lubricating oil, severely damaging its turbines.

The summit also comes just days after North Korea released a video threatening a nuclear first strike against Washington – an unrealistic but unsettling boast from one of the world's most repressive and impenetrable regimes.

But an even greater threat to nuclear security lies thousands of miles from Belgium and Korea – in Pakistan. It is home to about 120 atomic weapons, making it the world's fifth largest and fastest growing nuclear arsenal. Pakistan also has large stockpiles of highly enriched uranium and plutonium for making dozens of new warheads.

No one should sleep well while the armed forces who are responsible for securing that deadly stockpile continue to collaborate openly with armed extremists at home and abroad, and adopt provocative doctrines for using nuclear weapons on the battlefield.

Pakistan is one of the last places on Earth to which you'd want to entrust nuclear weapons. The Pakistani industrialist Shakir Lakhani last year declared his country a "failed state," noting that corruption is rampant and that terrorists "have infiltrated our institutions, our schools and colleges, our universities, our police departments, our armed forces and perhaps even our judiciary."

The celebrated journalist Ahmed Rashid warns that Pakistan is "in the process of dissolution, facing the same fate as Syria or Somalia."

Government collapse in Pakistan is the private worry of every nuclear security planner today. Said Gary Sanmore, former National Security Council Coordinator for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "as we look at the sectarian violence

and tensions between the government and the military and so forth – I worry that . . . even the best nuclear security measures might break down. You're dealing with a country that is under tremendous stress internally and externally, and that's what makes me worry."

In words that remain as plausible as ever today, the noted American arms control expert Robert Gallucci said a decade ago that Pakistan is "the number one threat to the world ... [I]f it all goes off – a nuclear bomb in a U.S. or European city – I'm sure we will find ourselves looking in Pakistan's direction."

The Terrorist Threat

Although Pakistan's atomic weapons are doubtless well protected, they remain highly vulnerable to insiders motivated either by extremist ideology or corrupt inducements – both of which are in ample supply. Pakistan makes matters worse by bolstering and in some cases creating the very terrorists who threaten its nuclear stockpiles.

Pakistan has long been a sponsor of international terrorism, most notably in Afghanistan and especially India, its hated enemy. For example, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency helped spawn the notorious group Lashkar-e-Taiba to fight Indian forces in Kashmir.

Terrorist attacks on India's parliament in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008 were spectacular outcomes of Pakistan's malign policy. Pakistani leaders apparently also sheltered Osama bin Laden until the U.S. Navy SEAL raid in 2011, according to a former defense minister.

Days after the leaders of India and Pakistan met on Christmas Day last year in Lahore, terrorists from Pakistan attacked a major Indian airbase, preventing a thaw in the two country's relations. That attack may have been independently planned, but Pakistan's military and intelligence services have a long history of sponsoring such terrorist provocations to derail peace initiatives.

According to Christine Fair, an associate professor at Georgetown University, "Pakistan's security institutions have instrumentalized a menagerie of Islamist militants to prosecute its internal as well as external policies with respect to India and Afghanistan.

"Since 2001, many of these erstwhile proxies have turned their guns and suicide devices on the state and its citizenry under the banner of the Pakistani Taliban. A lack of both will and capacity hinder the state's ability to effectively confront this threat and secure its population.

"Most problematically, Pakistan still wants to nurture some militants who are

its assets while eliminating those who fight the state. Civilians lack the ability, will, or vision to force the security forces to change tactics.”

The resulting “blowback” from Pakistan’s support of terrorism has taken a huge toll, like the suicide bombing in Lahore this Easter. Although it received less media attention than the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, the Lahore bombing a killed twice as many victims.

From 2002 to 2011, terrorists in Pakistan killed 3,700 people and wounded another 9,000. Several times that number died from other forms of political, ethnic, communal, and Islamist violence.

The attack in Lahore was carried out by a break-away faction of the government-sponsored Pakistani Taliban. Gunmen from the Pakistani Taliban previously killed 22 people at Bacha Khan University in January and 145 people, mostly children, at a school in Peshawar last year. The government has been unable or unwilling to rein in such extremist violence. Someday it may prove equally unable to rein in terrorist attacks on its nuclear installations.

The Obama administration knows this, but for the most part maintains the fiction that Pakistan’s military has its nuclear arsenal fully under control. One reason for its diplomatic language and continued military aid is to avoid a rupture that would jeopardize continued U.S. military operations in Afghanistan (as almost happened in 2012 after Pakistan closed NATO supply routes following American airstrikes on Pakistani soldiers suspected of aiding the Taliban).

Privately, however, President Obama “questions why Pakistan, which he believes is a disastrously dysfunctional country, should be considered an ally of the U.S. at all,” reports Atlantic magazine’s Jeffrey Goldberg.

According to David Sanger, Obama told his staff in 2011 that Pakistan’s potential disintegration – and the resulting “scramble for its (nuclear) weapons” – represented his “single biggest national security concern.”

A Question of Doctrine

In addition to having “the world’s fastest-growing nuclear arsenal,” Pakistan “is shifting toward tactical nuclear weapons intended to be dispersed to front-line forces early in a crisis, increasing the risks of nuclear theft should such a crisis occur,” according to a new report on “Preventing Nuclear Terrorism” by experts at Harvard University’s Belfer Center.

Pakistan intends to use these smaller nuclear warheads against *conventional* Indian forces in case another war breaks out between the two major powers on the Asian subcontinent. Such mobile weapons are inherently vulnerable to seizure by

terrorists during transit.

The intended tactical use of such weapons on the battlefield also raises the odds of any military conflict escalating rapidly to an all-out nuclear war. During a war over Kashmir in 1999, Pakistan's government "ordered the arming of its nuclear missiles, potentially bringing the two countries to the brink of a nuclear conflict," according to military historian Joseph Micallef.

Needless to say, an all-out nuclear war between India and Pakistan could kill, wound or sicken tens of millions of people and render much of South Asia virtually uninhabitable.

"We are really quite concerned about . . . the destabilizing aspects of their battlefield nuclear weapons program," said the U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this March. To which a senior Pakistani nuclear adviser replied, "We are not apologetic about the development of [tactical nuclear weapons] and they are here to stay."

Washington's Inadequate Response

The Obama administration recognizes the threat from Pakistan and other source of "loose nukes" but has failed to make them a priority. As Steve Mufson reported in the *Washington Post*, "in his fiscal 2017 budget, Obama has proposed deep cuts in spending on programs to stop nuclear proliferation while leaving intact military spending on a new generation of weapons. . . .

"For fiscal 2017, the Obama administration has proposed its smallest nuclear security budget ever. The proposal would slash spending for the National Nuclear Security Administration's international program by roughly two-thirds, to a level last seen in the mid-1990s."

Besides restoring funding, the administration should make collaboration with Russia on nuclear security programs a higher priority than escalating conflicts over less vital issues like the future of Crimea.

In a letter sent to President Obama on March 28, six Democratic U.S. senators also recommended that his administration lead by example, and seek to reduce the bloated nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia to 1,000 warheads and 500 delivery vehicles by 2021.

With regard to Pakistan, Washington should apply more pressure – including withholding military aid – to restrain its provocative nuclear policy toward India, and its support for terrorist organizations.

At the same time, however, the administration should avoid special favors to India that stoke Pakistan's paranoia and resentment. For example, the Bush administration's nuclear cooperation agreement with India, which allowed U.S. nuclear technology sales to India, contributed to the arms race between India and Pakistan and "did long-lasting damage toward both the global non-proliferation norms and the efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons," according to Subrata Ghoshroy, a researcher at MIT.

And if Washington really wants to get serious about Pakistan, it must eliminate Islamabad's remaining leverage over the United States. That means withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan once and for all, so Pakistan cannot unleash its proxies to kill American soldiers or cripple the U.S. logistics chains.

Once Afghanistan is off its agenda, Washington can finally focus on that region's real threat to world security: Pakistan's growing nuclear stockpile.

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Reagan's Bargain/Charlie Wilson's War

From the Archive: The threat from Pakistan's nukes began with Ronald Reagan's deal trading U.S. acquiescence on nukes for Pakistani help organizing Islamist militants to fight Soviets in Afghanistan, wrote ex-CIA analyst Peter W. Dickson in 2008.

By Peter W. Dickson (Originally published Jan. 6, 2008)

What's left out of a movie about history often interests only a few experts in the field. However, the release of one that chronicles the successful *sub rosa* American effort to bleed the Soviet Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s may prove to be an exception.

"Charlie Wilson's War," which stars Tom Hanks, tells the story of a hard-drinking, womanizing Texas congressman who nudged Congress and the Reagan administration to give more arms, especially high-tech Stinger missiles, to shoot down Soviet helicopters in Afghanistan in the 1980s. But the movie

distorts or leaves out a number of crucial details.

The movie opens with Wilson's conversion to a sympathetic attitude toward Muslims while sitting in a hot tub with several naked women in the Fantasy Suite at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. While frolicking in the tub, Wilson glances at a televised report of Dan Rather interviewing Afghan fighters. A visibly disturbed Wilson suddenly decides something must be done to help these people being butchered by the Soviet Army, which had invaded their country in December 1979.

The truth was quite different and evidently too awkward politically for the film producers to portray. According to the book by George Crile upon which the film is based, the hot tub scene took place in June 1980. Crile describes Wilson's sudden conversion to a sympathetic position toward Muslims as occurring in October 1982 when the Texas congressman, fully-clothed, visited Lebanese refugee camps after the Israeli invasion of that country.

Previously a staunch supporter of the Jewish state, Wilson was shocked by what he saw in those refugee camps, instilling in him empathy toward Muslims that evolved into his zealous support of the *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Nuclear Blackout

But surely the most glaring omission in the film is the fateful trade-off accepted by President Ronald Reagan when he agreed not to complain about Pakistan's efforts to acquire a nuclear weapons capability in exchange for Pakistani cooperation in helping the Afghan rebels.

On page 463 of his book, Crile characterizes this deal or understanding as "the dirty little secret of the Afghan war" – General Zia al-Haq's ability to extract not only "massive aid" from Washington but also to secure Reagan's acquiescence in Pakistan's nuclear weapons program via a congressional waiver of U.S. nonproliferation laws in December 1981.

This bargain may have been dirty but it certainly was no secret. Indeed, Washington's acquiescence via the congressional waiver was the subject of continuing press coverage throughout the 1980s. But this history remains a taboo topic for many within the Washington Establishment, especially those who look back favorably on the Reagan presidency.

Bob Woodward in his 1987 book *Veil* about the notorious CIA director of the era (William Casey) and Joseph Persico in his voluminous Casey biography published in 1990 discuss the aid program for the Afghan *mujaheddin*. But these authors don't mention the Reagan-Zia bargain and how the congressional exemption granted

to Islamabad in late 1981 effectively negated any intelligence reporting about the Pakistani nuclear weapons program from that point on.

Likewise, Tim Weiner in his recent best-selling work, *Legacy of Ashes The History of the CIA*, is silent about how policy completely trumped intelligence on this crucial security issue.

Robert Gates, Casey's longtime deputy, provided rich detail on the covert military aid to the Afghan rebels and even discusses Wilson's pivotal role on pages 320-321 in his own CIA-cleared memoir, *From the Shadows*. But Gates also doesn't mention the waiver for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.

The public also will find no mention of this issue in the new two-hour History Channel documentary about Wilson's campaign to support the *mujaheddin*.

Bhutto's Murder & Nuclear Politics

However, the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto puts into sharp relief the question that now unnerves U.S. policy-makers: Will political instability enable terrorist groups to gain access to Pakistan's nuclear weapons? This question first troubled the U.S. government nearly 30 years ago, when it learned of Pakistan's effort to acquire a nuclear weapons capability in the late 1970s.

Press reports about Pakistani nuclear activities led President Jimmy Carter to cut off all aid to Islamabad on April 6, 1979, as required by U.S. counter-proliferation laws. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Carter and his National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski tried to restore some aid to Pakistan, but their efforts were overtaken by the hostage crisis with Iran and the political distractions of the 1980 presidential campaign.

During that campaign, Reagan made it clear that he had little use for existing U.S. nonproliferation policy seeking to stop nations from developing nuclear weapons. "I just don't think it's any of our business," the Republican presidential candidate said.

In the wake of his landslide victory in 1980, Reagan pressured Congress to resume military aid to Pakistan through a waiver of U.S. nonproliferation laws. Some congressional Democrats worried about the risks of looking the other way concerning Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. But Charlie Wilson wasn't one of them.

One might have thought that the neoconservatives, such as Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, who were emerging as influential voices during the early Reagan years, would have objected to American indifference toward an Islamic nuclear

weapons program that could threaten Israel. But there is no record of any protest from them, either.

Instead, as the movie makes clear, there was a strong desire to “get even” with the Soviets by tying them down in a quagmire in Afghanistan comparable to the one into which the U.S. sank in Vietnam. However, this retribution against the Soviets in Afghanistan required breaking the linkage, established in the Nonproliferation Act of 1978, between U.S. intelligence reporting and the legally mandated termination of all aid to any country found to be seeking nuclear weapons.

So, Congress with the House still under Democratic control gave Reagan what he sought – a six-year waiver for Pakistan that enabled Washington to supply Zia the military aid he demanded, including F-16 fighter jets. Under these new rules, Reagan had to submit “annual reports” to Congress about Pakistan’s nuclear activities, but it was left to the President’s discretion what he would choose to reveal.

From that point on, the Reagan administration never put any serious pressure on Islamabad to stop what it was doing on the nuclear front. But this see-no-evil approach ran into some embarrassments and difficulties, as Crile describes in his book. In 1985 and again in 1987, Pakistani nationals were arrested and indicted in U.S. courts for trying to acquire, inside the United States, high-tech components and materials for a nuclear device.

In July 1985, an angry Congress retaliated by making the continuation of aid to Pakistan dependent on “annual certifications” from the White House that Pakistan “did not possess a nuclear weapon” and that the continuation of U.S. aid was helping to dissuade Islamabad from trying to acquire such a capability.

Instead of highlighting the threat posed by a Pakistani nuclear weapons program, the Reagan administration postulated an optimistic “best-case” scenario, which downplayed the whole issue by claiming that the Pakistanis still had not crossed the “possession” threshold. That was essentially the argument that both Reagan and his successor, George H.W. Bush, made – and Congress accepted – from 1985 through 1989 even after the departure of the last Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 1989.

(A discussion of the White House certifications can be found in two books about the Pakistani nuclear program, *Nuclear Jihadist* by Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, and *Deception* by Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark.)

Determined to protect the pipeline for smuggling weapons to the Afghan *mujaheddin*, Charlie Wilson also helped deflect attention away from the Pakistani

nuclear program in 1987 and 1988. Crile claims that Wilson made several successful efforts to blunt the impact of intelligence briefings about the status of the Pakistani nuclear program to congressional committees contemplating a cut-off of all aid at that time.

Speaking Power to Truth

Wilson's alleged success in countering such briefings and blocking a congressional aid cut-off represented a classic case of the subordination of truth and law to raw power and political calculations. The movie producers evidently concluded that scenes of Wilson's desperate efforts to cover up Pakistan's nuclear ambitions would not look too good in the film, so that part of the story disappeared from the cinematic version of history.

This deeper, darker saga would have conflicted with the filmmakers desire to highlight the heroic qualities of the movie's main protagonist (Wilson played by Tom Hanks), not to mention the justness of the Afghan cause.

Unfortunately, the glaring omissions tend to reinforce the triumph of a false narrative about the dismal record of American involvement in the Middle East, including the Reagan-Bush administration's indifference, almost blasé attitude about the emergence of a Muslim nuclear bomb.

Given Crile's detailed discussion of this "dirty little secret of the Afghan war" in his book, the filmmakers surely can't say they were unaware of this darker side of the story. Now in the wake of Bhutto's murder less than two weeks after the movie's release this omission seems even more glaring than before, at least for those who know about Reagan's fateful bargain with Zia.

The movie implicitly does acknowledge another historical irony of the Afghan war as it relates to the 9/11 attacks. The Afghan war against the Soviet infidels brought together a violent mix of Arab radicals, including the wealthy Saudi Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden and these Arab *jihadists* later turned their anger toward the United States, after it intervened to reverse Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and then set up permanent bases inside Saudi Arabia.

From his refuge in Afghanistan, bin Laden justified his terror war against the United States, including the 9/11 attacks, as necessary to drive the American infidels from Muslim lands. Though this irony is referenced obliquely in the movie, the producers steered clear of mentioning bin Laden by name or giving the Saudi *jihadist* a cameo in "Charlie Wilson's War."

Instead, the filmmakers through Hanks's end-of-movie lamentation lamely suggest that the big mistake was that Washington should not have left Afghanistan in the lurch after the Soviet Army withdrew in February 1989.

Alternative History

Would such humanitarian aid to Afghanistan after 1989, similar to the later U.S. protection for the Muslim minority in the Balkans – especially Kosovo in the mid-1990s – really have made the 9/11 attacks less likely?

This is a complicated question. There was a 18-month window between the Soviet Army's departure from Afghanistan in February 1989 and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 when in theory Washington and the Soviets could have put pressure on the Afghan *mujaheddin* and the Soviet-supported regime under Mohammad Najibullah to negotiate a ceasefire and reach some form of accommodation.

That never happened. As Gates remarks on page 432 in his memoir: "Afghanistan was at last free of the foreign invader. Now Afghans could resume fighting among themselves and hardly anyone cared."

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait presented the Bush administration with other, more pressing regional problems. Even after the liberation of Kuwait in early 1991, the U.S. decided to maintain military bases in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf as a check on Saddam, who retained power in Iraq. Ultimately, those long-term U.S. bases fanned the flames of radical Muslim anger and put Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda on their path to 9/11.

So, it seems doubtful that a surge in humanitarian aid to help rebuild Afghanistan after Najibullah finally was ousted in April 1992 would have lessened resentment among radical Muslims like bin Laden.

Yet, as damaging as the confrontation with Islamic fundamentalism has been to America's security interests, the more serious long-term threat may be posed by Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, which successfully tested a nuclear device in May 1998.

The Pakistani bomb has added an ominous nuclear twist to the radical Islamic "blowback," a threat that might have been avoided if Reagan had made different choices in the mid-1980s, if he had put a higher value on disrupting Pakistan's nuclear program than on challenging the Soviets in Afghanistan.

The consequences of Reagan's decisions were compounded by the failure of the first Bush administration to bring the warring Afghan factions to the peace table after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. The unchecked chaos in Afghanistan then contributed to the rise of the Taliban, an organization of young Islamic militants trained by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

After capturing Kabul in 1996, the Taliban used brutal tactics to restore order.

They also offered protection to Osama bin Laden and his extremist al-Qaeda organization. More recently, those historic links between al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Pakistan's ISI continued to concern U.S. officials as they witnessed Pakistan's worsening political instability and worried about the uncertain control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

Pakistan's poisonous brew of Islamic radicalism, political unrest and nuclear weapons is arguably the most dangerous legacy from Ronald Reagan's trade-offs with General Zia two decades earlier. But did Reagan have any better options in the mid-1980s?

Reagan could have heeded initial strong reservations expressed by the Pentagon's Joint Chiefs of Staff and withheld the Stingers from the *mujaheddin* in March 1986. But if Reagan had gone down that road, and undermined Charlie Wilson's plans, the Soviet Army probably would have prevailed in Afghanistan.

And General Zia surely would have pressed ahead with Pakistan's nuclear weapons program anyway, though in the face of stronger U.S. efforts to thwart that program.

Fall of the Soviet Union

In terms of exploring alternative history, it is also worth asking in the light of the movie "Charlie Wilson's War" whether the Soviet empire would have unraveled anyway regardless of Reagan's decision in March 1986 to send Stingers to the *mujaheddin*.

There were, after all, other pressures on the Soviet Bloc, including growing internal demands for human rights, government failures to meet consumer needs, a widening gap with the West in technological innovation, and separatist sentiments among ethnic groups. Then on April 26, 1986, only a month after Reagan had to make a decision concerning the Stinger missiles, the horrendous nuclear accident at Chernobyl traumatized the Soviet leadership.

This disaster encouraged Mikhail Gorbachev to reverse the policy against on-site nuclear inspections a crucial shift concerning verification that enabled the Reagan administration to conclude nuclear arms reductions in Central Europe with Moscow. And these arms-control negotiations, which prompted the departure of prominent neoconservatives (Richard Perle and Frank Gaffney) from the Pentagon in 1987, insured a decline in East-West tensions.

That, in turn, encouraged popular unrest within the Soviet Bloc and the defection of Moscow's Warsaw Pact allies within two years. Nonetheless, speculation about alternative history has its limits.

As we have suggested, the fate of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union hinged on many other factors. Plus, a confrontation between American and Islamic radicalism was probably inevitable given the Gulf War that drove Saddam from Kuwait in 1991 and left behind a permanent U.S. military presence in the region.

But there is no doubt that in the future the disposition of Pakistan's nuclear devices could become extremely troublesome, especially since al-Qaeda is expanding its base of support in the mountainous northwest provinces of Pakistan and these terrorists may still have powerful friends within Pakistan's intelligence services.

Unfortunately, the widely acclaimed movie, "Charlie Wilson's War," given its highly selective treatment of history is more likely to confuse than clarify how risky Reagan's decisions with regard to Pakistan in the 1980s were to the long-term security of the United States.

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A 'Silent Coup' for Brazil?

Brazil and other Latin American progressive governments are on the defensive as U.S.-backed political movements employ "silent coup" tactics to discredit and remove troublesome leaders, writes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

Brazil keeps its coups quiet (or at least quieter than many other Latin American countries). During the Cold War, there was much more attention to overt military regime changes often backed by the CIA, such as the overthrow of Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, the ouster of Chile's Salvador Allende in 1973 and even Argentina's "dirty war" coup in 1976, than to Brazil's 1964 coup that removed President João Goulart from power.

Noam Chomsky has called Goulart's government "mildly social democratic." Its replacement was a brutal military dictatorship.

In more modern times, Latin American coups have shed their image of overt military takeovers or covert CIA actions. Rather than tanks in the streets and grim-looking generals rounding up political opponents – today's coups are more like the "color revolutions" used in Eastern Europe and the Mideast in which leftist, socialist or perceived anti-American governments were targeted with

“soft power” tactics, such as economic dislocation, sophisticated propaganda, and political disorder often financed by “pro-democracy” non-governmental organizations (or NGOs).

This strategy began to take shape in the latter days of the Cold War as the CIA program of arming Nicaraguan Contra rebels gave way to a U.S. economic strategy of driving Sandinista-led Nicaragua into abject poverty, combined with a political strategy of spending on election-related NGOs by the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy, setting the stage for the Sandinistas’ political defeat in 1990.

During the Obama administration, this strategy of non-violent “regime change” in Latin America has gained increasing favor, as with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s decisive support for the 2009 ouster of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya who had pursued a moderately progressive domestic policy that threatened the interests of the Central American nation’s traditional oligarchy and foreign investors.

Unlike the earlier military-style coups, the “silent coups” never take off their masks and reveal themselves as coups. They are coups disguised as domestic popular uprisings which are blamed on the misrule of the targeted government. Indeed, the U.S. mainstream media will go to great lengths to deny that these coups are even coups.

The new coups are cloaked in one of two disguises. In the first, a rightist minority that lost at the polls will allege “fraud” and move its message to the streets as an expression of “democracy”; in the second type, the minority cloaks its power grab behind the legal or constitutional workings of the legislature or the courts, such as was the case in ousting President Zelaya in Honduras in 2009.

Both strategies usually deploy accusations of corruption or dictatorial intent against the sitting government, charges that are trumpeted by rightist-owned news outlets and U.S.-funded NGOs that portray themselves as “promoting democracy,” seeking “good government” or defending “human rights.” Brazil today is showing signs of both strategies.

Brazil’s Boom

First, some background: In 2002, the Workers’ Party’s (PT) Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva came to power with 61.3 percent of the vote. Four years later, he was returned to power with a still overwhelming 60.83 percent. Lula da Silva’s presidency was marked by extraordinary growth in Brazil’s economy and by landmark social reforms and domestic infrastructure investments.

In 2010, at the end of Lula da Silva's presidency, the BBC provided a typical account of his successes: "Number-crunchers say rising incomes have catapulted more than 29 million Brazilians into the middle class during the eight-year presidency of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former trade unionist elected in 2002. Some of these people are beneficiaries of government handouts and others of a steadily improving education system. Brazilians are staying in school longer, which secures them higher wages, which drives consumption, which in turn fuels a booming domestic economy."

However, in Brazil, a two-term president must sit out a full term before running again. So, in 2010, Dilma Rousseff ran as Lula da Silva's chosen successor. She won a majority 56.05 percent of the vote. When, in 2014, Rousseff won re-election with 52 percent of the vote, the right-wing opposition Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) went into a panic.

This panic was not just because democracy was failing as a method for advancing right-wing goals, nor was the panic just over the fourth consecutive victory by the more left-wing PT. The panic became desperation when it became clear that, after the PT had succeeded in holding onto power while Lula da Silva was constitutionally sidelined, he was likely returning as the PT's presidential candidate in 2018.

After all, Lula da Silva left office with an 80 percent approval rating. Democracy, it seemed, might never work for the PSDB. So, the "silent coup" playbook was opened. As the prescribed first play, the opposition refused to accept the 2014 electoral results despite never proffering a credible complaint. The second move was taking to the streets.

A well-organized and well-funded minority whose numbers were too small to prevail at the polls can still create lots of noise and disruption in the streets, manufacturing the appearance of a powerful democratic movement. Plus, these protests received sympathetic coverage from the corporate media of both Brazil and the United States.

The next step was to cite corruption and begin the process for a constitutional coup in the form of impeachment proceedings against President Rousseff. Corruption, of course, is a reliable weapon in this arsenal because there is always some corruption in government which can be exaggerated or ignored as political interests dictate.

Allegations of corruption also can be useful in dirtying up popular politicians by making them appear to be only interested in lining their pockets, a particularly effective line of attack against leaders who appear to be working to benefit the people. Meanwhile, the corruption of U.S.-favored politicians who

are lining their own pockets much more egregiously is often ignored by the same media and NGOs.

Removing Leaders

In recent years, this type of “constitutional” coup was used in Honduras to get rid of democratically elected President Zelaya. He was whisked out of Honduras through a kidnapping at gunpoint that was dressed up as a constitutional obligation mandated by a court after Zelaya announced a plebiscite to determine whether Hondurans wanted to draft a new constitution.

The hostile political establishment in Honduras falsely translated his announcement into an unconstitutional intention to seek reelection, i.e., the abuse-of-power ruse. The ability to stand for a second term would be considered in the constitutional discussions, but was never announced as an intention by Zelaya.

Nevertheless, the Supreme Court declared the President’s plebiscite unconstitutional and the military kidnapped Zelaya. The Supreme Court charged Zelaya with treason and declared a new president: a coup in constitutional disguise, one that was condemned by many Latin American nations but was embraced by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

This coup pattern reoccurred in Paraguay when right-wing Frederico Franco took the presidency from democratically elected, left-leaning Fernando Lugo in what has been called a parliamentary coup. As in Honduras, the coup was made to look like a constitutional transition. In the Paraguay case, the right-wing opposition opportunistically capitalized on a skirmish over disputed land that left at least 11 people dead to unfairly blame the deaths on President Lugo. It then impeached him after giving him only 24 hours to prepare his defense and only two hours to deliver it.

Brazil is manifesting what could be the third example of this sort of coup in Latin America during the Obama administration.

Operation *Lava Jato* began in Brazil in March of 2014 as a judicial and police investigation into government corruption. *Lava Jato* is usually translated as “Car Wash” but, apparently, is better captured as “speed laundering” with the connotation of corruption and money laundering.

Operation *Lava Jato* began as the uncovering of political bribery and misuse of money, revolving around Brazil’s massive oil company Petrobras. The dirt – or political influence-buying – that needed washing stuck to all major political parties in a corrupt system, according to Alfredo Saad Filho, Professor of Political Economy at the SAOS University of London.

But Brazil's political Right hijacked the investigation and turned a legitimate judicial investigation into a political coup attempt.

According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra in Portugal and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, although Operation *Lava Jato* "involves the leaders of various parties, the fact is that Operation *Lava Jato* – and its media accomplices – have shown to be majorly inclined towards implicating the leaders of PT (the Workers' Party), with the by now unmistakable purpose of bringing about the political assassination of President Dilma Rousseff and former President Lula da Silva."

De Sousa Santos called the political repurposing of the judicial investigation "glaringly" and "crassly selective," and he indicts the entire operation in its refitted form as "blatantly illegal and unconstitutional." Alfredo Saad Filho said the goal is to "inflict maximum damage" on the PT "while shielding other parties."

Neutralizing Lula

The ultimate goal of the coup in democratic disguise is to neutralize Lula da Silva. Criminal charges – which Filho describes as "stretched" – have been brought against Lula da Silva. On March 4, he was detained for questioning. President Rousseff then appointed Lula da Silva as her Chief of Staff, a move which the opposition represented as an attempt to use ministerial status to protect him from prosecution by any body other than the Supreme Court.

But Filho says this representation is based on an illegally recorded and illegally released conversation between Rousseff and Lula da Silva. The conversation, Filho says, was then "misinterpreted" to allow it to be "presented as 'proof' of a conspiracy to protect Lula." De Sousa Santos added that "President Dilma Rousseff's cabinet has decided to include Lula da Silva among its ministers. It is its right to do so and no institution, least of all the judiciary, has the power to prevent it."

No "presidential crime warranting an impeachment has emerged," according to Filho.

As in Honduras and Paraguay, an opposition that despairs of its ability to remove the elected government through democratic instruments has turned to undemocratic means that it hopes to disguise as judicial and constitutional. In the case of Brazil, Professor de Sousa Santos calls this coup in democratic disguise a "political-judicial coup."

In both Honduras and Paraguay, the U.S. government, though publicly insisting

that it wasn't involved, privately knew the machinations were coups. Less than a month after the Honduran coup, the White House, State Department and many others were in receipt of a frank cable from the U.S. embassy in Honduras calling the coup a coup.

Entitled "Open and Shut: the Case of the Honduran Coup," the embassy said, "There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup." The cable added, "none of the . . . arguments [of the coup defenders] has any substantive validity under the Honduran constitution."

As for Paraguay, U.S. embassy cables said Lugo's political opposition had as its goal to "Capitalize on any Lugo missteps" and "impeach Lugo and assure their own political supremacy." The cable noted that to achieve their goal, they are willing to "legally" impeach Lugo "even if on spurious grounds."

Professor de Sousa Santos said U.S. imperialism has returned to its Latin American "backyard" in the form of NGO development projects, "organizations whose gestures in defense of democracy are just a front for covert, aggressive attacks and provocations directed at progressive governments."

He said the U.S. goal is "replacing progressive governments with conservative governments while maintaining the democratic façade." He claimed that Brazil is awash in financing from American sources, including "CIA-related organizations." (The National Endowment for Democracy was created in 1983, in part to do somewhat openly what the CIA had previously done covertly, i.e., finance political movements that bent to Washington's will.)

History will tell whether Brazil's silent coup will succeed. History may also reveal what the U.S. government's knowledge and involvement may be.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.

Selling Out Palestinian Rights

Hillary Clinton and other Democrats have led the way in abandoning principles of human rights, democracy and rule of law by pandering to Israel and its powerful lobby, explains Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

In early March, Professor Richard Falk, former United Nations Special Rapporteur

for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, wrote an essay explaining that American foreign policy generated by Democratic Party presidents has been much to blame for the disastrous fate of the Palestinians.

The Democrats have allowed themselves to be suborned by Zionist special interests for reasons we will explore below. It is Democratic officials who also verbally attack any American who stands up for the rights of Palestinians, and do so, if anything, more strongly than their Republican competitors.

Falk worked tirelessly from 2008 to 2014 to bring about justice for the Palestinian people – something that, if achieved, would have raised the esteem of both the U.N. and the U.S. among millions of Arabs. Officials appointed by Democratic President Barack Obama, including National Security Advisor Susan Rice and current U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power, repaid Falk for his efforts with insulting ad hominem attacks.

For instance, Power celebrated Falk's departure from his post by asserting that, "his publication of bizarre and insulting material has tarnished the U.N.'s reputation and undermined the effectiveness of the Human Rights Council. The United States welcomes Mr. Falk's departure, which is long overdue."

It is to be noted that at no time did Professor Falk issue a report, or even make a public statement, that was not based on documented fact and a clear understanding of international law. One suspects that Ambassador Power knew this to be so and that her vitriol against Falk was the act of an amoral political agent of an amoral government.

Professor Falk sees much of the U.S. government's policy in the Middle East as a consequence of a State Department long populated by Zionists along with the power and influence of an Israeli-directed bloc of special interests.

President Obama's own efforts at Middle East policy formulation began, according to Falk, with the rhetorical assertion that the United States is "different because we adhere to the rule of law and act in accord with our values in foreign policy." Yet this claim has always been false, and very quickly, the President's words lost meaning as lobby pressure bent policy (with the singular exception of the Iran nuclear deal) to the will of the Zionist cause.

Hillary Clinton

Watching the distressing kowtowing this past week to that same lobby by Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton has proven Richard Falk undeniably correct. In her speech to the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), an organization which, in truth, functions in the U.S. as the agent of a foreign power (Israel), Clinton proclaimed the following:

–That as president she will take the U.S.- Israeli relationship “to the next level,” which entails lavishing on that state most of America’s latest defensive and offensive weaponry and the negotiating of yet another defense treaty – a “ten-year defense memorandum of understanding.”

–This is allegedly necessary because, Israel “faces three evolving threats – Iran’s continued aggression, a rising tide of extremism across a wide arc of instability, and the growing effort to delegitimize Israel on the world stage.” Here she refers to the boycott or BDS movement. These threats make “the U.S.- Israel alliance more indispensable than ever.”

Juan Cole’s rebuttal to Clinton’s assertions is particularly good. He points out that when the situation is looked at soberly, Israel has no conventional security threats, including from Iran, that necessitates billions of dollars of American weapons and a binding defense memorandum. Cole accurately points out that the “rising tide of extremism” is, to a good extent, a function of the U.S. invasion of Iraq (which both Clinton and the Israelis supported), and the dissolution of Syria (which has become a national security goal of Israel). Finally, by describing BDS as a movement that must be suppressed, she is endangering U.S. constitutional rights.

–Clinton extols the U.S.-Israel alliance as one of “shared values.” She describes Israel as “a bastion of liberty.” This is de rigueur propaganda and, for the Palestinians, has no convincing connection to reality.

Clinton then qualifies her dubious assertion by asking, “will we, as Americans and as Israelis, stay true to the shared democratic values that have always been at the heart of our relationship.” She is no doubt including “America” in this question as a reference to the problematic behavior of Donald Trump and his supporters. However, her question, as it applies to Israel, has already been answered.

Gideon Levy

The well-known Israeli journalist Gideon Levy was in Washington, D.C. last week and had an interview with Max Blumenthal. In it he warned of just how far Israel has drifted from “democratic values” as well as how complicit American liberals, such as Hillary Clinton, are in the process of Israeli moral and political corruption.

Levy tells us that “American liberals should know ... that they are supporting the first sign of fascism in Israel. I don’t call it yet fascism, but [the] first signs [are] very clear. ... And America keeps financing it. This should be known and should be recognized by any American, mainly the liberals, who care where

their taxpayer money goes, and so much of it.

“I mean, there is no source of hope right now. There’s no alternative to Netanyahu. ... The atmosphere, as I said, is becoming less and less tolerant, and the standing of democracy is minimal and many times very twisted.”

Levy then takes particular aim at the substantial, if unofficial, U.S. support for Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and Golan Heights:

“Occupation is American values? Occupation serves the American interest? Doesn’t America see that it pays a hell of a price for this automatic and blind support of Israel and of the occupation project? Is it reasonable that in the 21st century, the United States will finance an apartheid regime in the occupied territories? All those questions should be raised.”

Levy is by no means alone at raising the alarm about where Zionism has led Israeli society. For a more detailed treatment of the intolerance and nascent fascism showing its face, the reader can take a look at Israeli Professor David Schulman’s [“Israel: The Broken Silence,”](#) a review of six exposes on Israeli society and behavior. This has just been published in the April 7 edition of *New York Review of Books*.

Schulman concludes that “The far right in Israel very readily opts for totalitarian modes of thinking and acting, and it’s not clear who is left to stop it.” It certainly will not be Hillary Clinton.

Who raises objections to the consequences of U.S. complicity in Israel’s political disaster? People such as Richard Falk and Gideon Levy do and thereby keep alive some semblance of rational discourse about the place of democratic values in U.S. foreign policy formulation. However, despite their rhetoric, liberal politicians like Hillary Clinton have clearly abandoned those values when it comes to any reference to Israel and its behavior.

What this means is that the substance of Clinton’s speech at the AIPAC convention was mere propaganda – an effort to rationalize, or perhaps simply to cover up, deeper and more base motives. Therefore, if supporting “shared democratic values” is not what motivates Clinton’s kowtowing, what does?

The answer is naked political opportunism. Here is the formula: (1) American politics runs on domestically garnered money, and lots of it: running for office, just about any office from dog catcher to president, requires constant financial solicitation; (2) special interests, be they economic concerns, professional organizations, or ideologically motivated groups are a major source of these funds; (3) in exchange for their largesse, such interests require political support for their causes.

Here enters, among others, the Zionists, whose deep pockets, ability to shape media messages, and rally voters, both Jewish and Christian, are well known. An alliance with the Zionists is politically profitable while incurring their anger is sometimes politically fatal.

Of course, such an alliance means the abandonment of any objective or even rational consideration of U.S. policy toward Israel and much of the rest of the Middle East. And indeed, the national interest relating to this increasingly dangerous part of the world has long ago been tossed overboard. It has been replaced by the parochial interests of wealthy, well-organized and influential ideologues.

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