

George W. Bush: Dupe or Deceiver?

From the Archive: With six in ten Americans – including a majority of Democrats – now holding favorable views of George W. Bush, we republish an analysis by Robert Parry from 2010, when the revisionist history of Bush's presidency began with publication of his memoirs.

By Robert Parry (first published on November 20, 2010)

George W. Bush's memoir, *Decision Points*, is without doubt a self-serving defense of his presidency – and Bush's own words condemn him as a liar – but there is another nagging question that surrounds this curious book: Has the U.S. media/political system become so polluted with falsehoods that even people at the top now believe the propaganda?

It is not clear which is the more troubling answer: that Bush and his advisers were bald-faced liars confident that their elite status lets them deceive at will, or that they have wallowed so long in a Washington's hot tub of spin that their brains can no longer separate fact from fiction.

In general, I assume that political leaders know the truth and just believe that the rest of us are easily manipulated by clever propaganda or can be readily bullied into line. As long as the leaders stick to their story (no matter how false it is), they can rely on their Establishment credentials to tough it out against the few skeptics who dare call out the lies.

But there were moments in reading Bush's memoir when I began wondering whether – at least for him – the other explanation was more plausible, that he was clinically delusional in the sense that he could no longer distinguish between what was real and what had been created by others to appeal to his preconceptions, biases and vanity.

Under this scenario, Bush was the amiable front man who was handled by those around him, by the neoconservatives who wanted to prove their mettle to the Israeli Right with a demonstration of American shock-and-awe against hostile Arabs in Iraq, or by the oil men who saw U.S. military domination of the Middle East as the ticket to trillions of dollars in energy reserves.

These groups grew skilled at baiting Bush with misinformation and exaggeration, knowing what would rile him up and push his buttons. The intellectually lazy but egotistical Bush would then come to think that the plans that they planted in his mind were his and that he was the true Decider.

However, there are other indications in the book that Bush was part of this

lying clique and that the American people were the targets of the falsehoods. In this scenario, Bush grew so confident before an obsequious Washington press corps that he felt he could lie with impunity and that the capital's pundit class would simply nod in acceptance.

An example that supports the Bush-is-a-deceiver scenario emerged several months after the invasion of Iraq, when it became clear that there were no WMD stockpiles. So, Bush began insisting that Iraq's Saddam Hussein "chose war" by refusing to allow UN weapons inspectors back into his country – even though the public had seen the inspectors rushing around Iraq in their white vans for months in late 2002 and early 2003.

Nevertheless, at a White House press briefing on July 14, 2003, Bush told reporters: "We gave him [Saddam Hussein] a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in. And, therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove him from power."

Facing no contradiction from the obsequious White House press corps, Bush repeated this lie in varied forms until the last days of his presidency.

Jarring Admission

The only possible defense of Bush's clear-cut lie was that he might have forgotten that Saddam Hussein had allowed the inspectors to return in fall 2002, giving them unfettered access to suspected WMD sites, and that it was Bush who forced them to leave in March 2003.

However, in his memoir, Bush jarringly acknowledges that he was aware that the UN inspectors were roaming around Iraq during the lead-up to the war.

"Some believed we could contain Saddam by keeping the inspectors in Iraq," Bush wrote. "But I didn't see how. If we were to tell Saddam he had another chance – after declaring this was his last chance – we would shatter our credibility and embolden him."

Bush also recounts the central role that the reintroduction of the UN inspectors had played in April 2002 when he was convincing British Prime Minister Tony Blair to support "coercive diplomacy" against Iraq. Bush wrote:

"Tony suggested that we seek a UN Security Council resolution that presented Saddam with a clear ultimatum: allow weapons inspectors back into Iraq, or face serious consequences. I didn't have a lot of faith in the UN. The Security Council had passed sixteen resolutions against Saddam to no avail. But I agreed to consider his idea."

Ultimately, the UN Security Council did approve Resolution 1441 demanding that Iraq reveal what it had done with its prior weapons programs and allow UN inspectors back in. In fall 2002, Iraq complied with both demands, letting inspectors return and turning over a 12,000-page declaration explaining how Iraq's WMD stockpiles had been eliminated.

Despite Iraq's submission of these records, leading neocons who were itching for war, the likes of Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, mocked Iraq's efforts, a disdain that Bush cited favorably in his memoir, recalling:

"Joe Lieberman was more succinct. He said the declaration was a 'twelve-thousand-page, one-hundred-pound lie.'"

Though Bush stayed on course for war, he portrays himself in his memoir as a reluctant warrior, forced to launch an aggressive war because of the Saddam Hussein's belligerence. Bush wrote:

"Whenever I heard someone claim that we had rushed to war, I thought back to this period. It had been more than a decade since the Gulf War resolutions had demanded that Saddam disarm, over four years since he had kicked out the weapons inspectors, six months since I had issued my ultimatum at the UN, four months since Resolution 1441 had given Saddam his 'final opportunity,' and three months past the deadline to fully disclose his WMD. Diplomacy did not feel rushed. It felt like it was taking forever."

There is, of course, some madness in Bush's argument as well as contempt for the factual record. The truth was that Iraq had disarmed and had tried to comply with Resolution 1441; Saddam Hussein had responded to his "final opportunity" by letting the UN inspectors back in; and he couldn't "fully disclose his WMD" because he didn't have any to disclose.

Peace Lover

Bush devotes a large segment of his memoir to fabricating a false history so the American people will see him as a peace lover who was left with only one option: war.

"I remembered the shattering pain of 9/11, a surprise attack for which we had received no warning," Bush wrote. "This time we had a warning like a blaring siren. Years of intelligence pointed overwhelmingly to the conclusion that Saddam had WMD. He had used them in the past. He had not met his responsibility to prove their destruction.

"He had refused to cooperate with the inspectors, even with the threat of an invasion on his doorstep. The only logical conclusion was that he was hiding

WMD. And given his support of terror and his sworn hatred of America, there was no way to know where those weapons would end up.”

Yet, even amid these lies and rationalizations, there remains the possibility that Bush was more the duped dauphin than the wily prince. He surely had plenty of conniving counselors whispering in his ear from behind his throne.

Just days after the 9/11 attacks, Bush described a meeting of his national security team at which Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, an arch-neoconservative, “suggested that we consider confronting Iraq as well as the Taliban” in Afghanistan. So, the idea of invasion was planted early.

Bush, however, insisted that he was reluctant to go in that direction, writing:

“Unless I received definitive evidence tying Saddam Hussein to the 9/11 plot, I would work to resolve the Iraq problem diplomatically. I hoped unified pressure by the world might compel Saddam to meet his international obligations. The best way to show him we were serious was to succeed in Afghanistan.”

Bungling Tora Bora

Despite Bush’s protestations about not rushing to war with Iraq and needing to succeed first in Afghanistan, Bush notes in passing the key moment when he pivoted prematurely from finishing off Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s leadership at Tora Bora in fall 2001 and instead focusing the U.S. military on Iraq war plans. Bush wrote:

“Two months after 9/11, I asked Don Rumsfeld to review the existing battle plans for Iraq. We needed to develop the coercive half of coercive diplomacy. Don tasked General Tommy Franks [then in charge of the Central Command covering the Middle East and Central Asia] with updating the plans. Just after Christmas 2001, Tommy came to Crawford to brief me on Iraq.”

What Bush left out of that narrative was what was later revealed by a Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigation, that Franks was overseeing the military operation aimed at capturing or killing bin Laden when Rumsfeld relayed Bush’s order to freshen up the invasion plan for Iraq.

According to the committee’s analysis of the Tora Bora battle, the small team of American pursuers believed they had bin Laden trapped at his mountain stronghold at Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan and called for reinforcements to seal off possible escape routes to Pakistan.

But Bush was already turning his attention to Iraq, as his neocon advisers wanted. The Senate report said:

"On November 21, 2001, President Bush put his arm on Defense Secretary [Donald] Rumsfeld as they were leaving a National Security Council meeting at the White House. 'I need to see you,' the president said. It was 72 days after the 9/11 attacks and just a week after the fall of Kabul. But Bush already had new plans" for freshening up the invasion plans for Iraq.

In his memoir, *American General*, Gen. Franks said he got a phone call from Rumsfeld on Nov. 21, after the Defense Secretary had met with the President, and was told about Bush's interest in an updated Iraq war plan.

At the time, Franks said he was in his office at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida working with one of his aides on arranging air support for the Afghan militia who were under the guidance of the U.S. Special Forces in charge of the assault on bin Laden's Tora Bora stronghold.

Franks told Rumsfeld that the Iraq war plan was out of date, prompting the Defense Secretary to instruct Franks to "dust it off and get back to me in a week."

"For critics of the Bush administration's commitment to Afghanistan," the Senate report noted, "the shift in focus just as Franks and his senior aides were literally working on plans for the attacks on Tora Bora represents a dramatic turning point that allowed a sustained victory in Afghanistan to slip through our fingers. Almost immediately, intelligence and military planning resources were transferred to begin planning the next war in Iraq."

Futile Appeals

The CIA and Special Forces teams, calling for reinforcements to finish off bin Laden and al-Qaeda, "did not know what was happening back at CentCom, the drain in resources and shift in attention would affect them and the future course of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan," the report said.

Henry Crumpton, who was in charge of the CIA's Afghan strategy, made direct appeals to Franks to move more than 1,000 Marines to Tora Bora to block escape routes to Pakistan. But the CentCom commander rebuffed the request, citing logistical and time problems, the report said.

"At the end of November, Crumpton went to the White House to brief President Bush and Vice President [Dick] Cheney and repeated the message that he had delivered to Franks," the report said. "Crumpton warned the president that the Afghan campaign's primary goal of capturing bin Laden was in jeopardy because of the military's reliance on Afghan militias at Tora Bora. ...

"Crumpton questioned whether the Pakistani forces would be able to seal off the

escape routes and pointed out that the promised Pakistani troops had not arrived yet.”

Crumpton also told Bush that the Afghan militia were not up to the job of assaulting al-Qaeda’s bases at Tora Bora and warned the President, “we’re going to lose our prey if we’re not careful,” the report said, citing journalist Ron Suskind’s *The One Percent Doctrine*.



But the Iraq-obsessed Bush still didn’t act. Finally, in mid-December 2001, the small U.S. Special Forces team convinced the Afghan militia fighters to undertake a sweep of the mountainous terrain, but they found it largely deserted.

The Senate report said bin Laden and his bodyguards apparently departed Tora Bora on Dec. 16, 2001, adding: “With help from Afghans and Pakistanis who had been paid in advance, the group made its way on foot and horseback across the mountain passes and into Pakistan without encountering any resistance.

“The Special Operations Command history (of the Afghan invasion) noted that there were not enough U.S. troops to prevent the escape, acknowledging that the failure to capture or kill ... bin Laden made Tora Bora a controversial battle.”

Though excluding those details from his memoir, Bush tries to rebut the criticism that he bungled the battle of Tora Bora. He wrote:

“Years later, critics charged that we allowed bin Laden to slip the noose at Tora Bora. I sure didn’t see it that way. I asked our commanders and CIA officials about bin Laden frequently. They were working around the clock to locate him, and they assured me they had the troop levels and resources they needed. If we had ever known for sure where he was, we would have moved heaven and earth to bring him to justice.”

The reality, however, was that the neocons, who saw Iraq as a more serious threat to Israel, and the oil men, who lusted after Iraq’s petroleum reserves, persuaded Bush to concentrate more on getting rid of Saddam Hussein than Osama bin Laden.

Macho Talk

To do that, some advisers played on Bush’s macho self-image. In his memoir, Bush recalled one of his weekly lunches with Vice President Cheney (the former head

of the Halliburton oil-drilling company), who was urging him to get on with the business of eliminating Saddam Hussein.

“Dick asked me directly, ‘Are you going to take care of this guy, or not?’ That was his way of saying he thought we had given diplomacy enough time. I appreciated Dick’s blunt advice. I told him I wasn’t ready to move yet. ‘Okay, Mr. President, it’s your call,’ he said.”

However, even as he was being prodded by Cheney and the neocons to act, Bush was using similar macho rhetoric – about having “the balls” to go to war – to ensure that Prime Minister Blair would commit British forces when the time came. In one melodramatic passage in *Decision Points*, Bush recounts a discussion with Blair:

“We both understood what the decision meant. Once we laid out our position at the UN, we had to be willing to follow through with the consequences. If diplomacy failed, there would be only one option left. ‘I don’t want to go to war,’ I told Tony, ‘but I will do it.’

“Tony agreed. After the meeting, I told Alastair Campbell, one of Tony’s top aides, ‘Your man has got cojones.’ I’m not sure how that translated to the refined ears of 10 Downing Street. But to anyone from Texas, its meaning was clear.”

But Bush’s memoir also has indications that he was not just swept up by the manly excitement of blasting apart some nearly defenseless nation, but he was carried along by intelligence reports which were themselves being manipulated by a combination of Cheney/neocon pressure and CIA analysts who cared more for their jobs than the truth. Bush wrote:

“One intelligence report summarized the problem: ‘Since the end of inspections in 1998, Saddam has maintained the chemical weapons effort, energized the missile program, made a bigger investment in biological weapons, and has begun to try to move forward in the nuclear area.’”

The Zarqawi Myth

The memoir also contains references in which it’s ambiguous whether Bush is the manipulator or the one being manipulated.

For instance, Bush cites the case of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a brutal terrorist who was operating in an area of Iraq that was protected by the U.S. and British “no-fly zone,” which prevented Saddam Hussein’s ruthless counter-terror operations from targeting anti-government Islamic militants like Zarqawi.

Though U.S. intelligence knew that the secular Sunni Saddam Hussein was a bitter

enemy of these Islamic fundamentalists, the Bush administration exploited for propaganda purposes the fact that Zarqawi was located inside Iraq and had slipped into Baghdad for some medical treatment.

In his memoir, Bush cites the Zarqawi case to defend his decision to invade, but it's unclear whether the existence of the known terrorist in Iraq was also used to bait Bush.

"In the summer of 2002, I received a startling piece of news. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist who had experimented with biological weapons in Afghanistan, was operating a lab in northeastern Iraq.

"Suspect facility in this area may be producing poisons and toxins for terrorist use,' the briefing read. 'Al-Zarqawi is an active terrorist planner who has targeted U.S. and Israeli interests: Sensitive reporting from a [classified] service indicates that al-Zarqawi has been directing efforts to smuggle an unspecified chemical material originating in northern Iraq into the United States.'

"We couldn't say for sure whether Saddam knew Zarqawi was in Iraq. We did have intelligence indicating that Zarqawi had spent two months in Baghdad receiving medical treatment and that other al Qaeda operatives had moved to Iraq.

"The CIA had worked with a major Arab intelligence service to get Saddam to find and extradite Zarqawi. He refused." [It was later revealed that Saddam Hussein's police had searched for Zarqawi in Baghdad but failed to locate him.]

At another point in the memoir, Bush portrays himself as something of an innocent victim, deceived by erroneous intelligence in late 2002. He wrote:

"I asked George Tenet and his capable deputy, John McLaughlin, to brief me on what intelligence we could declassify to explain Iraq's WMD programs. A few days before Christmas, John walked me through their first effort. It was not very convincing.

"I thought back to CIA briefings I had received, the NIE that concluded Saddam had biological and chemical weapons, and the data the CIA had provided for my UN speech in September. 'Surely we can do a better job of explaining the evidence against Saddam,' I said. George Tenet agreed. 'It's a slam dunk,' he said.

"I believed him. I had been receiving intelligence briefings on Iraq for nearly two years."

No More Delays

By March 2003, Bush claims he had exhausted all peaceful efforts to resolve the

issues regarding Iraq's WMD and was left with only one choice, to invade Iraq:

"For more than a year, I had tried to address the threat from Saddam Hussein without war. We had rallied an international coalition to pressure him to come clean about his weapons of mass destruction programs. We had obtained a unanimous United Nations Security Council resolution making clear there would be serious consequences for continued defiance.

"We had reached out to Arab nations about taking Saddam into exile. I had given Saddam and his sons a final forty-eight hours to avoid war. The dictator rejected every opportunity. The only logical conclusion was that he had something to hide, something so important that he was willing to go to war for it."

Of course, the other logical conclusion would be that Iraq had no WMD stockpiles, that it had done its best to convince the outside world of that fact, and that it trusted that the international community would uphold the principles enshrined at the post-World War II Nuremberg Tribunals and in the UN Charter, making aggressive war the supreme international crime.

Instead, recognizing that the Security Council was overwhelmingly opposed to an invasion, Bush withdrew a second resolution seeking explicit authorization to use force, got the UN inspectors to flee Iraq, and turned to his "coalition of the willing."

In his memoir, Bush describes what happens next in the most heroic and melodramatic terms.

"On Wednesday, March 19, 2003, I walked into a meeting I had hoped would not be necessary," he wrote. "I turned to [Defense Secretary] Don Rumsfeld. 'Mr. Secretary,' I said, 'for the peace of the world and the benefit and freedom of the Iraqi people, I hereby give the order to execute Operation Iraqi Freedom. May God bless the troops.'

"Tommy [Franks] snapped a salute. 'Mr. President,' he said, 'may God bless America.'"

Within three weeks, the invasion had ousted Saddam Hussein's government. A few weeks later, Bush flew onto the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and gave his infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech. Eventually, Bush even had the satisfaction of having U.S. troops deliver Hussein to the scaffold where he was hanged in late 2006. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Bush Silences a Dangerous Witness](#)."]]

But the war also drove Iraq into seven years (and counting) of a living hell,

with the death toll now estimated in the hundreds of thousands, with many more maimed, and with millions of Iraqis displaced from their homes and living in degradation and squalor.

Losing Afghanistan

The consequences for Afghanistan – from Bush’s premature pivot away from that war to the one ardently desired by the neocons – were also devastating. Rather than stabilizing Afghanistan and ensuring that al-Qaeda and its allies could not reestablish bases there, Bush watched as the Taliban mounted a comeback and the U.S. military remained bogged down in Iraq. He wrote:

“My CIA and military briefings included increasingly dire reports about Taliban influence. The problem was crystallized by a series of color-coded maps I saw in November 2006. The darker the shading, the more attacks had occurred in that part of Afghanistan.

“The 2004 map was lightly shaded. The 2005 map had darker areas in the southern and eastern parts of the country. By 2006, the entire southeastern quadrant was black. In just one year, the number of remotely detonated bombs had doubled. The number of armed attacks had tripled. The number of suicide bombings had more than quadrupled.”

The situation also was deteriorating in Iraq, with various Iraqi nationalist forces taking up arms against the U.S. military occupation and a sectarian civil war breaking out between the Sunnis, who represented the previous ruling elite, and the Shiites, who had risen to power since the invasion.

Though Bush had suggested before the war that the presence of Zarqawi and a few al-Qaeda operatives was a key justification for invading Iraq, he acknowledges in his memoir that it was only after the invasion that al-Qaeda began focusing on Iraq. He wrote:

“When al Qaeda lost its safe haven in Afghanistan, the terrorists went searching for a new one. After we removed Saddam in 2003, bin Laden exhorted his fighters to support the jihad in Iraq. In many ways, Iraq was more desirable for them than Afghanistan. It had oil riches and Arab roots.

“Over time, the number of extremists affiliated with al Qaeda in Afghanistan declined to the low hundreds, while the estimated number in Iraq topped ten thousand.”

Bush also confirms some key facts about his decision to beef up U.S. forces in 2007, the “surge.” His account demonstrates how wrong the U.S. press corps and the congressional Democrats were in their interpretation of events in late 2006,

when – after the Democratic victory in congressional elections – Bush fired Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and replaced him with former CIA Director Robert Gates.

The immediate conventional wisdom was that the shakeup represented a victory for the realist doves over the ideological hawks, that the pragmatic Gates would oversee a rapid drawdown of U.S. forces and that Rumsfeld had remained an unrepentant hardliner on the war.

Consortiumnews.com was one of the few outlets that reported that the conventional wisdom was upside down, that the reality was that Rumsfeld was backing U.S. commanders who wanted to dramatically reduce the U.S. “footprint” in Iraq and that Gates was so eager to resume a prominent position in Washington that he had acquiesced to an escalation.

Neocons Push the Surge

That is essentially the account that Bush offers in his memoir, in the context of presenting the “surge” as one of his finest hours as the Decider, albeit with the guidance of leading neocons.

In June 2006, Bush wrote, he received a special briefing from outside experts:

“Fred Kagan, a military scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, questioned whether we had enough troops to control the violence. Robert Kaplan, a distinguished journalist, recommended adopting a more aggressive counterinsurgency strategy.

“Michael Vickers, a former CIA operative who helped arm the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s, suggested a greater role for Special Operations. Eliot Cohen, the author of *Supreme Command*, a book about the relationship between presidents and their generals ..., told me I needed to hold my commanders accountable for results.”

In other words, the seeds of the “surge” came from neocons, including “journalist” Robert Kaplan, who took it upon themselves to advise the commander-in-chief on escalating the killing in Iraq.

This neocon advice clashed with the judgment of the commanders in the field, whose recommendations Bush famously pronounced he would follow.

By mid-2006, the commanders were seeing a turning point in the violence that was ripping Iraq apart. Sunni militants had begun rejecting al-Qaeda extremists; Zarqawi was killed in an air raid; the sectarian violence had caused a de facto ethnic cleansing with Sunni and Shiites retreating to safer enclaves; a

classified program was targeting and killing insurgents in greater numbers.

The field commanders, including the senior general in Iraq, George Casey, favored an accelerated drawdown of U.S. forces and an exit plan for combat troops, rather than an expanded and open-ended stay. The commanders had Rumsfeld's support.

Bush wrote: "General [George] Casey told me we could succeed by transferring responsibility to the Iraqis faster. We needed to 'help them help themselves,' Don Rumsfeld said. That was another way of saying that we needed to take our hand off the bicycle seat.

"I wanted to send a message to the team that I was thinking differently. 'We must succeed,' I said. 'If they can't do it, we will. If the bicycle teeters, we're going to put the hand back on. We have to make damn sure we do not fail.'"

To impose this new strategy, Bush sought new leadership both in Iraq and at the Pentagon, sounding out Gates as a replacement for Rumsfeld.

"The weekend before the midterms, I met with Bob Gates in Crawford to ask him to become secretary of defense. Bob had served on the Baker-Hamilton Commission, a panel chartered by Congress to study the situation in Iraq. He told me he had supported a troop surge as one of the group's recommendations."

Sealing the Deal

Once Rumsfeld was dumped and Gates was appointed (to the misguided acclaim of Official Washington), Bush and the neocons pressed ahead with the escalation. Bush wrote:

"Over weeks of intense discussion in November and December, most of the national security team came to support the surge. Dick Cheney, Bob Gates, Josh Bolten, and Steve Hadley and his NSC warriors were behind the new approach."

Though Bush credits his decision to order the "surge" as the turning point in Iraq, he also includes facts that support the opposite conclusion, that the tide was already turning against al-Qaeda extremists before the 30,000 extra U.S. troops arrived in 2007. He wrote:

"The people of Anbar [province] had a look at life under al Qaeda, and they didn't like what they saw. Starting in mid-2006, tribal sheikhs banded together to take their province back from the extremists. The Awakening drew thousands of recruits."

Nevertheless, the neocons – who remain extraordinarily influential in Washington to this day – spun the "surge" as the singular explanation for the gradual

decline in violence in Iraq. This new conventional wisdom was enthusiastically pushed by the Bush administration and accepted by the Washington press corps. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Gen. Petraeus and the Surge Myth.](#)"]

Not surprisingly, Bush's memoir also embraces the "surge-did-it" conventional wisdom. After all, it finally made him out to be the great war-time Decider that he always envisioned, a self-image that the neocons and his other advisers carefully nurtured and exploited as the key to their own influence.

Yet, after finishing *Decision Points*, I still wasn't sure where the line was between Bush being the one getting manipulated and the one manipulating the rest of us. Had he drunk his own Kool-Aid or had he cynically instructed his ghost writer to fashion some old talking points into a memoir designed to rehabilitate himself and his powerful family?

The only certainty is that within the many miscalculations of his presidency, many people died unnecessary deaths, many more faced severe personal hardships that didn't need to happen, and the United States was left in a fiscal, economic and strategic mess.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and *Newsweek*, and since 1995 has published Consortiumnews.com. His books, including *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, [can be purchased here.](#)

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A National Defense Strategy of Sowing Global Chaos

In the new U.S. National Defense Strategy, military planners bemoan the erosion of the U.S.'s "competitive edge," but the reality is that they are strategizing to maintain the American Empire in a chaotic world, explains Nicolas J.S. Davies.

By Nicolas J.S. Davies

Presenting the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States on Friday at the Johns Hopkins University, Secretary of Defense James Mattis painted a picture of a dangerous world in which U.S. power – and all of the supposed "good" that it does around the world – is on the decline.

“Our competitive edge has eroded in every domain of warfare – air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace,” he said. “And it is continually eroding.”

What he could have said instead is that the United States military is overextended in every domain, and that much of the chaos seen around the world is the direct result of past and current military adventurism. Further, he could have acknowledged, perhaps, that the erosion of U.S. influence has been the result of a series of self-inflicted blows to American credibility through foreign policy disasters such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

There were also two important words hidden between the lines, but never mentioned by name, in the new U.S. National Defense Strategy: “empire” and “imperialism.”

It has long been taboo for U.S. officials and corporate media to speak of U.S. foreign policy as “imperialism,” or of the U.S.’s global military occupations and network of hundreds of military bases as an “empire.” These words are on a long-standing blacklist of “banned topics” that U.S. official statements and mainstream U.S. media reports must never mention.

The streams of Orwellian euphemisms with which U.S. officials and media instead discuss U.S. foreign policy do more to obscure the reality of the U.S. role in the world than to describe or explain it, “hiding imperial interests behind ever more elaborate fig leaves,” as British historian A.J.P. Taylor described European imperialists doing the same a century ago.

As topics like empire, imperialism, and even war and peace, are censored and excised from political debate, U.S. officials, subservient media and the rest of the U.S. political class conjure up an illusion of peace for domestic consumption by simply not mentioning our country’s 291,000 occupation troops in 183 other countries or the 39,000 bombs and missiles dropped on our neighbors in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan since Trump took office.

The 100,000 bombs and missiles dropped on these and other countries by Obama and the 70,000 dropped on them by Bush II have likewise been swept down a kind of real time “memory hole,” leaving America’s collective conscience untroubled by what the public was never told in the first place.

But in reality, it’s been a long time since U.S. leaders of either party resisted the temptation to threaten anyone anywhere, or to follow through on their threats with “fire and fury” bombing campaigns, coups and invasions. This is how empires maintain a “credible threat” to undergird their power and discourage other countries from challenging them.

But far from establishing the “Pax Americana” promised by policymakers and

military strategists in the 1990s, from Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney to Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton, the results have been consistently catastrophic, producing what the new National Defense Strategy calls, “increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing, rules-based international order.”

Of course the drafters of this U.S. strategy document dare not admit that U.S. policy is almost single-handedly responsible for this global chaos, after successive U.S. administrations have worked to marginalize the institutions and rules of international law and to establish illegal U.S. threats and uses of force that international law defines as crimes of aggression as the ultimate arbiter of international affairs.

Nor do they dare acknowledge that the CIA’s politicized intelligence and covert operations, which generate a steady stream of political pretexts for U.S. military intervention, are designed to create and exacerbate international crises, not to solve them. For U.S. officials to admit such hard truths would shake the very foundations of U.S. imperialism.

Opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran – the so-called nuclear deal – from Republicans and Democratic hawks alike seems to stem from the fear that it might validate the use of diplomacy over sanctions, coups and war, and set a dangerous precedent for resolving other crises – from Afghanistan and Korea to future crises in Africa and Latin America. Iran’s success at bringing the U.S. to the negotiating table, instead of falling victim to the endless violence and chaos of U.S.-backed regime change, may already be encouraging North Korea and other targets of U.S. aggression to try to pull off the same trick.

But how will the U.S. justify its global military occupation, illegal threats and uses of force, and trillion-dollar war budget once serious diplomacy is seen to be more effective at resolving international crises than the endless violence and chaos of U.S. sanctions, coups, wars and occupations?

From Bhurtpoor to Baghdad

Major Danny Sjursen, who has fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and taught history at West Point, is a rare voice of sanity from within the U.S. military. In a poignant article in Truthdig, Major Sjursen eloquently described the horrors he has witnessed and the sadness he expects to live with for the rest of his life. “The truth is,” he wrote, “I fought for next to nothing, for a country that, in recent conflicts, has made the world a deadlier, more chaotic place.”

Danny Sjursen’s life as a soldier of the U.S. Empire reminds me of another

soldier of Empire, my great-great-great grandfather, Samuel Goddard. Samuel was born in Norfolk in England in 1793, and joined the 14th Regiment of Foot as a teenager. He was a Sergeant at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. During 14 years in India, his battalion led the assault on the fortress of Bhurtpoor in 1826, which ended the last resistance of the Maratha dynasty to British rule. He spent 3 years in the Caribbean, 6 years in Canada, and retired as Commandant of Dublin Castle in 1853 after a lifetime of service to Empire.

Danny's and Samuel's lives have much in common. They would probably have a lot to talk about if they could ever meet. But there are critical differences. At Bhurtpoor, the two British regiments who led the attack were followed through the breach in the walls by 15 regiments of Indian "Native Infantry." After Bhurtpoor, Britain ruled India (including Pakistan and Bangladesh) for 120 years, with only a thousand British officials in the Indian Civil Service and a few thousand British officers in command of up to 2.5 million Indian troops.

The British brutally put down the Indian Mutiny in 1857-8 with massacres in Delhi, Allahabad, Kanpur and Lucknow. Then, as up to 30 million Indians died in famines in 1876-9 and 1896-1902, the British government of India explicitly prohibited relief efforts or actions that might reduce exports from India to the U.K. or interfere with the operation of the "free market."

As Mike Davis wrote in his 2001 book, Late Victorian Holocausts, "What seemed from a metropolitan perspective the nineteenth century's final blaze of imperial glory was, from an Asian or African viewpoint, only the hideous light of a giant funeral pyre."

And yet Britain kept control of India by commanding such loyalty and subservience from millions of Indians that, in every crisis, Indian troops obeyed orders from British officers to massacre their own people.

Danny Sjursen and U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and other post-Cold War U.S. war zones are having a very different experience. In Afghanistan, as the Taliban and its allies have taken control of more of the country than at any time since the U.S. invasion, the U.S.-backed Afghan National Army has 25,000 fewer troops under its command than it did five years ago, while ten years of training by U.S. special operations forces has produced only 21,000 trained Afghan Commandos, the elite troops who do 70-80% of the killing and dying for the corrupt U.S.-backed Afghan government.

But the U.S. has not completely failed to win the loyalty of its imperial subjects. The first U.S. soldier killed in action in Afghanistan in 2018 was Sergeant 1st Class Mihail Golin, originally from Latvia. Mihail arrived in the U.S. in November 2004, enlisted in the U.S. Army three months later and has now

given his life for the U.S. Empire and for whatever his service to it meant to him. At least 127 other Eastern Europeans have died in occupied Afghanistan, along with 455 British troops, 158 Canadians and 396 soldiers from 17 other countries. But 2,402 – or 68%, over two-thirds – of the occupation troops who have died in Afghanistan since 2001, were Americans.

In Iraq, an American war that always had even less international support or legitimacy, 93% of the occupation troops who have died were Americans, 4,530 out of a total of 4,852 “coalition” deaths.

When Ben Griffin, who later founded the U.K. branch of Veterans for Peace, told his superiors in the U.K.’s elite SAS (Special Air Service) that he could no longer take part in murderous house raids in Baghdad with U.S. special operations forces, he was surprised to find that his entire chain of command understood and accepted his decision. The only officer who tried to change his mind was the chaplain.

The Future of Empire

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff have explicitly told Congress that war with North Korea would require a ground invasion, and the same would likely be true of a U.S. war on Iran. South Korea wants to avoid war at all costs, but may be unavoidably drawn into a U.S.-led Second Korean War.

But besides South Korea, the level of support the U.S. could expect from its allies in a Second Korean War or other wars of aggression in the future would probably be more like Iraq than Afghanistan, with significant international opposition, even from traditional U.S. allies. U.S. troops would therefore make up nearly all of the invasion and occupation forces – and take nearly all of the casualties.

Compared to past empires, the cost in blood and treasure of policing the U.S. Empire and the blame for its catastrophic failures fall disproportionately – and rightly – on Americans. Even Donald Trump recognizes this problem, but his demands for allied countries to spend more on their militaries and buy more U.S. weapons will not change their people’s unwillingness to die in America’s wars.

This reality has created political pressure on U.S. leaders to wage war in ways that cost fewer American lives but inevitably kill many more people in countries being punished for resistance to U.S. imperialism, using air strikes and locally recruited death squads instead of U.S. “boots on the ground” wherever possible.

The U.S. conducts a sophisticated propaganda campaign to pretend that U.S. air-launched weapons are so accurate that they can be used safely without killing large numbers of civilians. Actual miss rates and blast radii are on the

“banned topics” blacklist, along with realistic estimates of civilian deaths.

When former Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari told Patrick Cockburn of the U.K.’s Independent newspaper that he had seen Iraqi Kurdish intelligence reports which estimated that the U.S.- and Iraqi-led destruction of Mosul had killed 40,000 civilians, the only remotely realistic estimate so far from an official source, no other mainstream Western media followed up on the story.

But America’s wars are killing millions of innocent people: people defending themselves, their families, their communities and countries against U.S. imperialism and aggression; and many more who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time under the onslaught of over 210,000 American bombs and missiles dropped on at least 7 countries since 2001.

According to a growing body of research (for example, see the UN Development Program study, Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping-Point for Recruitment), most people who join armed resistance or “terrorist” groups do so mainly to protect themselves and their families from the dangers of wars that others have inflicted on them. The UNDP survey found that the final “tipping point” that pushes over 70% of them to take the fateful step of joining an armed group is the killing or detention of a close friend or family member by foreign or local security forces.

So the reliance on airstrikes and locally recruited death squads, the very strategies that make U.S. imperialism palatable to the American public, are in fact the main “drivers” spreading armed resistance and terrorism to country after country, placing the U.S. Empire on a collision course with itself.

The U.S. effort to delegate war in the Middle East to Saudi Arabia is turning it into a target of global condemnation as it tries to mimic the U.S. model of warfare by bombing and starving millions of innocent people in Yemen while blaming the victims for their plight. The slaughter by poorly trained and undisciplined Saudi and Emirati pilots is even more indiscriminate than U.S. bombing campaigns, and the Saudis lack the full protection of the Western propaganda system to minimize international outrage at tens of thousands of civilian casualties and an ever-worsening humanitarian crisis.

The need to win the loyalty of imperial subjects by some combination of fear and respect is a basic requirement of Empire. But it appears to be unattainable in the 21st century, certainly by the kind of murderous policies the U.S. has embraced since the end of the Cold War. As Richard Barnett already observed 45 years ago, at the end of the American War in Vietnam, “At the very moment the number one nation has perfected the science of killing, it has become an impractical instrument of political domination.”

Obama's sugar-coated charm offensive won U.S. imperialism a reprieve from global public opinion and provided political cover for allied leaders to actively rejoin U.S.-led alliances. But it was dishonest. Under cover of Obama's iconic image, the U.S. spread the violence and chaos of its wars and regime changes and the armed resistance and terrorism they provoke farther and wider, affecting tens of millions more people from Syria and Libya to Nigeria and Ukraine.

Now Trump has taken the mask off and the world is once again confronting the unvarnished, brutal reality of U.S. imperialism and aggression.

China's approach to the world based on trade and infrastructure development has been more successful than U.S. imperialism. The U.S. share of the global economy has declined from 40% to 22% since the 1960s, while China is expected to overtake the U.S. as the world's largest economy in the next decade or two – by some measures, it already has.

While China has become the manufacturing and trading hub of the global economy, the U.S. economy has been financialized and hollowed out, hardly a solid basis for future growth. The neoliberal model of politics and economics that the U.S. adopted a generation ago has created even greater wealth for people who already owned disproportionate shares of everything, but it has left working people in the U.S. and across the U.S. Empire worse off than before.

Like the "next to nothing" that Danny Sjursen came to realize he was fighting for in Iraq and Afghanistan, the prospects for the U.S. economy seem ephemeral and highly vulnerable to the changing tides of economic history.

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

In his 1987 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, historian Paul Kennedy examined the relationship between economic and military power in the histories of the Western empires who colonized the world in the past 500 years. He described how rising powers enjoy significant competitive advantages over established ones, and how every once-dominant power sooner or later has to adjust to the tides of economic history and find a new place in a world it can no longer dominate.

Kennedy explained that military power is only a secondary form of power that wealthy nations develop to protect and support their expanding economic interests. An economically dominant power can quickly convert some of its resources into military power, as the U.S. did during the Second World War or as China is doing today. But once formerly dominant powers have lost ground to new, rising powers, using military power more aggressively has never been a successful way to restore their economic dominance. On the contrary, it has

typically been a way to squander the critical years and scarce resources they could otherwise have used to manage a peaceful transition to a prosperous future.

As the U.K. found in the 1950s, using military force to try to hold on to its empire proved counter-productive, as Kennedy described, and peaceful transitions to independence proved to be a more profitable basis for future relations with its former colonies. The drawdown of its global military commitments was an essential part of its transition to a viable post-imperial future.

The transition from hegemony to coexistence has never been easy for any great power, and there is nothing exceptional about the temptation to use military force to try to preserve and prolong the old order. This has often led to catastrophic wars and it has always failed.

It is difficult for any political or military leader to preside over a diminution of his or her country's power in the world. Military leaders are rewarded for military strategies that win wars and expand their country's power, not for dismantling it. Mid-level staff officers who tell their superiors that their weapons and armies cannot solve their country's problems do not win promotion to decision-making positions.

As Gabriel Kolko noted in *Century of War* in 1994, this marginalization of critical voices leads to an "inherent, even unavoidable institutional myopia," under which, "options and decisions that are intrinsically dangerous and irrational become not merely plausible but the only form of reasoning about war and diplomacy that is possible in official circles."

After two world wars and the independence of India, the Suez crisis of 1956 was the final nail in the coffin of the British Empire, and the Eisenhower administration burnished its own anti-colonial credentials by refusing to support the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden was forced to resign, and he was replaced by Harold Macmillan, who had been a close aide to Eisenhower during the Second World War.

Macmillan dismantled the remains of the British Empire behind the backs of his Conservative Party's supporters, winning reelection in 1959 on the slogan, "You've never had it so good," while the U.S. supported a relatively peaceful transition that preserved Western international business interests and military power.

As the U.S. faces a similar transition from empire to a post-imperial future, its leaders have been seduced by the chimera of the post-Cold War "power dividend" to try to use military force to preserve and expand the U.S. Empire,

even as the relative economic position of the U.S. declines.

In 1987, Paul Kennedy ended *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* with a prescient analysis of the U.S. position in the world. He concluded,

“In all of the discussions about the erosion of American leadership, it needs to be repeated again and again that the decline referred to is relative not absolute, and is therefore perfectly natural; and that the only serious threat to the real interests of the United States can come from a failure to adjust sensibly to the newer world order.”

But after Kennedy wrote that in 1987, instead of accepting the future of peace and disarmament that the whole world hoped for at the end of the Cold War, a generation of American leaders made a fateful bid for “superpower.” Their delusions were exactly the kind of failure to adjust to a changing world that Kennedy warned against.

The results have been catastrophic for millions of victims of U.S. wars, but they have also been corrosive and debilitating for American society, as the perverted priorities of militarism and Empire squander our country’s resources and leave working Americans poorer, sicker, less educated and more isolated from the rest of the world.

When I began writing *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq* in 2008, I hoped that the catastrophes in Afghanistan and Iraq might bring U.S. leaders to their senses, as the Suez crisis did to British leaders in 1956.

Instead, eight more years of carefully disguised savagery under Obama have squandered more precious time and good will and spread the violence and chaos of U.S. war-making even farther and wider. The new National Defense Strategy’s implicit threats against Russia and China reveal that 20 years of disastrous imperial wars have done nothing to disabuse U.S. leaders of their delusions of “superpower status” or to restore any kind of sanity to U.S. foreign policy.

Trump is not even pretending to respect diplomacy or international law, as he escalates Bush’s and Obama’s wars and threatens new ones of his own. But maybe Trump’s nakedly aggressive policies will force the world to finally confront the dangers of U.S. imperialism. A coming together of the international community to stop further U.S. aggression may be the only way to prevent an even greater catastrophe than the ones that have already befallen the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Honduras, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

Or will it actually take a new and even more catastrophic war in Korea, Iran or somewhere else to finally force the United States to “adjust sensibly to the new

world order,” as Paul Kennedy put it in 1987? The world has already paid a terrible price for our leaders’ failure to take his sound advice a generation ago. But what will be the final cost if they keep ignoring it even now?

Nicolas J.S. Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.
