

The Unending Failure of the Afghan War

Afghanistan has been a disaster for U.S. policymakers since Presidents Carter and Reagan started funding Islamists almost four decades ago and then the U.S. began fighting them post-9/11, a failure that needs ending, says Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

Sixteen years have passed and we are still fighting a war in Afghanistan which is not only the longest in American history (at a cost approaching \$1 trillion and the blood of thousands of brave soldiers), but one which is morally corrupting from which there seems to be no exit with any gratification but shame.

It was necessary to invade Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda following 9/11, but once it was defeated we should have departed, leaving behind some residual forces to clean up the mess. Instead, we decided to introduce democracy, a totally alien concept to a land historically governed by tribes, and which no foreign power has ever been able to govern or fully conquer for long.

Today, we are still discussing the best course of action to bring this war to some form of a satisfactory conclusion. Before we discuss prospective solutions, however, we should take a hard look at the real cost of the war and its implications that will startle many to their core.

Nearly 2,400 American soldiers have been killed and 20,000 wounded; over 33,000 Afghani civilians have lost their lives. A record number of civilians—1,662—were killed in the first six months of 2017 alone, and over 3,581 civilians were wounded. Overall, Afghani casualties are estimated at 225,000, with 2.6 million Afghani refugees and more than one million internally displaced.

Thus far, the cost of the war to date is approximately \$783 billion; the cost for each soldier is \$3.9 million per year. If we were to divide the war's cost among Afghanistan's 30 million citizens, it would amount to \$33,000 per head, from which the ordinary Afghan has derived zero benefit in a country where the average annual per capita income was only \$670 in 2014.

While we are spending these sums of money on an unwinnable war, 15 million U.S. children (21 percent) live in households below the federal poverty threshold. Hundreds of thousands go to sleep hungry, and many are living in squalid conditions, with infrastructure and homes on the verge of collapsing.

To understand the travesty of these expenditures on the war, just think of the cost to America, not only in human lives and money, but our moral standing in

the world and the pervasive, corrosive thinking that the war can still be won with military muscle.

It is naïve to think that after 16 years of fighting, dispatching an additional military force of 4,000 soldiers (as recommended by Secretary of Defense James Mattis) will change anything, when at its peak over 140,000 soldiers were unable to win and create a sustainable political and security structure that would allow us to leave with dignity.

No Win in Sight

No one in the Trump administration, including the Pentagon, is suggesting that additional forces would win the war. At best, they can arrest the continuing advances of the Taliban, which is now in control of more than one third of the country – and then what?

After a visit to Afghanistan, Sen. John McCain was asked to define winning: “Winning is getting major areas of the country under control and working toward some kind of ceasefire with the Taliban.”

But as Robert L. Borosage of The Nation points out, “we’ve had major areas under control before, and the Taliban continued to resist, while corruption and division continued to cripple the Afghan government.” Beyond this resurgent Taliban threat, Al Qaeda is back in full force and is successfully spreading its wings far beyond the Afghani borders.

If anything, the situation today is even worse both in the political and security spheres, and the prospects of developing sustainable conditions on the ground and a functioning government in Kabul are next to zero. Sadly, Defense Secretary Mattis resembles a gambling addict pouring money into a slot machine, but ends up leaving depressed and frustrated for having lost every dollar, hoping against hope to win a jackpot that never pays out.

One might ask Secretary Mattis, what is our goal now in Afghanistan, and what is our exit strategy? For the past 16 years, no Defense Secretary provided a clear answer, and now we are asked to gamble again with the lives of our soldiers, with no hope of ever winning this debilitating war, which has now become a war of choice.

To be sure, there will not be a military solution to the Afghan war. The sooner we accept this reality, however bitter it may be, the better so we can focus on a practical outcome that can emerge only through negotiations with moderate elements of the Taliban.

The second option of conducting the war, which is championed by Trump’s chief

strategist Steve Bannon, is to hire private contractors in lieu of American troops to fight a proxy war on our behalf. There is nothing more disdainful than such a proposal. If we were to choose this route – sending mercenaries to foreign lands to do our killing – will there be anything more morally decadent than this breach of our humanity?

The fact that we used mercenaries in the past to act as security guards or manage detention centers was bad enough, in that they abused their mandate and committed egregious crimes while making billions of dollars.

We should never repeat such a practice which is morally reprehensible. This scheme, not surprisingly, comes from the self-serving master manipulator Bannon, whose advice to Trump so far has got the President in more trouble than he cares to handle. A war for which we are not prepared to sacrifice the life of a soldier for a worthy cause must never be fought.

A Way Out

In a series of conversations I had with Ajmal Khan Zazai, tribal leader and Paramount Chief of Paktia province in Afghanistan, he spoke with deep frustration about the American military approach that has never had a chance of succeeding.

He said, “Afghanistan is a tribal country, the tribes are the past, present, and the future. To win this hard fight against the Taliban and their associates [including Al Qaeda and ISIS] without the support and backing of the tribes would be a miracle and I doubt a miracle is happening these days.”

He was emphatic about the naivete of successive American administrations, saying that government officials in the Departments of State and Defense going back to the Bush era appeared to be “either obsessed with their version of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ or believe only in a U.S. military solution. They don’t believe in homegrown or Afghan local solutions led by the tribes, or even winning hearts and minds.”

It is time for the U.S. to realize that the long-term solution lies, as Zazai said, with the full backing and support of the tribes. He told me that he is prepared to gather the chiefs of all the tribes to seek commitment from top U.S. officials to empower them by providing \$400 million to \$500 million dollars, over a few years (which is a fraction of what we spend today). The purpose would be to recruit and train their own militia to fight their own battles – not mercenaries for hire, who want to prolong the war only to enrich themselves.

The solution to the Afghanistan debacle lies with the Afghani tribes, who must take the lead in fighting the insurgency. The tribes will be fighting for their

country because they want an end to outrageous foreign interventions that did nothing but cause havoc in the name of pursuing an illusionary democracy.

In the end, the solution lies in peace negotiations with moderates in the Taliban, who are Afghani nationals and will not be dislodged from their own land, and no one is better equipped to achieve that than the tribal chiefs. They want to take matters into their hands and end the decades-long suffering, death, and destruction they have and continue to endure.

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The Bloody ‘Liberation’ of Mosul

Official Washington deemed Syria’s defeat of jihadists occupying Aleppo a “war crime” but called the U.S.-backed defeat of ISIS in Mosul, Iraq, a “liberation,” yet it too killed civilians and destroyed an ancient city, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The Iraqi and U.S. governments have declared Mosul as liberated from its ISIS occupiers. But author Vijay Prashad says it’s not so simple: the “liberation” included the slaughter of civilians by both sides and left large swaths of the ancient city – the second largest in Iraq – in rubble and ruins. And ISIS is still entrenched in other parts of the war torn country.

Prashad is a professor of International Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He is the author of some eighteen books, including *Arab Spring*, *Libyan Winter*, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*, and *The Death of the Nation and the Future of the Arab Revolution*.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, Professor Prashad, the prime minister of Iraq calls it a liberation. How would you characterize what we’re seeing continuing to unfold in Mosul?

Vijay Prashad: It’s a complicated situation. The city of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, a city with great history and character, has been under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The group took Mosul some

two years ago. It has taken nine months of concerted fighting to remove the Islamic State group from Mosul. In that respect, of course, it is liberation from the Islamic State.

On the other hand, this war of nine months has been a war of very significant aerial bombardment and immense use of artillery fire. The US Air Force has pummeled the city, particularly Western Mosul, and destroyed large parts of it. There are a million refugees out of Mosul in 19 emergency camps that the United Nations is struggling to maintain. The city has been utterly destroyed. It is very unlikely that the million-plus people will be able to return to their homes. But most strikingly, the nature of the bombardment was so brutal that within a year or two years we are going to see something like the revival of the Islamic State group.

After all, the brutal US military destruction of Fallujah and Ramadi in 2004-2005—which included the use of depleted uranium and perhaps white phosphorous—is what produced the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. The savage form of warfare used to eject the Islamic State from Mosul this time is not going to mean the end of that group. Instead, I believe it will lay the ground for its reemergence again in a few years.

DB: You refer to the groups Airwars and Amnesty International, who discuss the disproportionate use of weaponry and the extensive, unnecessary killing of civilians.

VP: This is a very important piece of the equation. There are photographs across the internet showing the quite serious devastation in Mosul. But what has already begun to happen is that the Western corporate media have started to indicate that this destruction was caused by ISIS. It is true that ISIS did at first destroy many sites of historical importance in the city, but ISIS doesn't have the capacity for aerial bombardment. Much of the physical destruction of the city has taken place as a consequence of US aerial bombardment.

Amnesty looked at a series of important bombing raids and concluded in a report published on July 11 that there was needless loss of civilian lives and even claimed to have evidence of so-called "unlawful attacks" in Mosul. The reaction from the US military was swift. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend very quickly announced that "the United States rejects any notion that the coalition targeted civilians." What is very interesting about that statement is that a few days later Townsend told the New York Times that in Raqqa, Syria, the United States is bombing bridges, targeting civilians trying to flee the city.

So in the case of Mosul he said that the United States does not ever target civilians and in the case of Raqqa he very cavalierly explains that we are

bombing bridges because we don't want people to flee the city. In other words, we are committing a war crime by trapping civilians in a city that we are now going to bomb very aggressively in order to "annihilate" ISIS.

DB: I believe the exact wording the general used was: "We shoot every boat we find. If you want to get out of Raqqa right now you've got to build a poncho raft."

VP: After Stephen Townsend made his claim that the United States doesn't commit war crimes, Airwars—a very important group that monitors aerial bombardment—showed there has indeed been extensive bombing of civilian infrastructure in Mosul and in Raqqa, including things like internet cafes, swimming pools, mosques, etc. The destruction of civilian infrastructure is meant to create despair among the population. If this very serious allegation by Airwars is true, we are indeed looking at a violation of the Geneva Convention.

DB: We are talking about what has been characterized by the prime minister of Iraq as a liberation of Mosul but, as you say, there has been great suffering there. Maybe we could step back a little bit and consider the kinds of policies of the Iraqi prime minister and the US that might foster another ISIS in a couple years.

VP: One of the things that American nationals should not forget is that the United States, in an illegal war in 2003, began to systematically destroy Iraq. This is where the conversation should always begin. It is very easy to attribute these conflicts to some pathologies in Islam or to say, well, it's that part of the world, they have always been fighting, it has nothing to do with us.

The fact is that the author of this particular set of tragedies is absolutely the illegal war perpetuated by George W. Bush's government in 2003. That war not only destroyed the Iraqi state and significant elements of Iraqi society, it also destroyed agriculture and sent many farmers into deep distress. When there was an uprising against these policies in Anbar Province, the crackdown by US forces, led by Jim Mattis, now secretary of defense, was extraordinarily brutal. There was use of depleted uranium, which has produced radiation in parts of Ramadi and Fallujah that is many times higher than the radiation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was out of this immense destruction of Iraq and the targeted destruction of Fallujah and Ramadi that ISIS emerged in the first place.

When, afterwards, the exiled Islamic Dawa Party emerged in Iraq, it was sidelined and rejected by the Iraqi people. At this point there was an attempt inside Iraq to create a sort of patriotic agenda which was fostered by civil society groups. They emerged in force in 2011 and at this time there was a crackdown against this kind of peaceful patriotic platform. When this crackdown

occurred, many people became disillusioned with the Iraqi project and went over to ISIS.

The harsh destruction of Iraq by the United States, combined with the current government's very sectarian politics and its rejection of the people's patriotic platform which was put forward in 2011, created a combustible situation which gave energy to the resurfacing of ISIS in 2013-2014.

The current war in Mosul and in Raqqa is not going to destroy ISIS. Instead, it is creating immense civilian suffering. Unless there is a political project that integrates people into some kind of civil nationalism, we are going to see the emergence of very extreme groups in the future. This kind of brutal warfare rarely results in a positive outcome. It has always produced something quite ugly.

DB: I think it is important to take an even broader view of the history of the United States in Iraq and in the region. Let's start with the very cynical policy of the United States to support both sides in the Iraq/Iran war: Let them kill each other and then we'll move in and take the resources. The kinds of wars that we have conducted, the kinds of actions that have destroyed this ancient city, the embargo that cost hundreds of thousands of children their lives, the epidemics that stem from our use of depleted uranium...

VP: Depleted uranium is one piece of it, white phosphorous is another. There is just a much higher level of munitions used in Iraq than in other comparable conflicts. I was surprised to read the other day how more weapons were used against Vietnam than in all World War II. It is the stunning volume of weapons used against these societies, with absolute impunity, no sense that they will be censured by anybody! So if the United States uses this kind of weaponry against people whose spirits are broken and whose political projects are rendered hopeless, it is not surprising that they turn to extremism.

Let me give you a parallel example. It is not that, for instance, the Palestinian people have not suffered great indignity, have not been the victims of the worst kind of occupation and oppression. But because there is a unifying political project, the eventual creation of some sort of homeland, that movement has achieved a very great maturity and you don't see the kind of extremism that one might imagine.

In other words, you would think that after sixty-odd years of the conditions faced by the Palestinians there would be near anarchy in Palestinian politics. But that is not what you see. Wretched conditions in themselves do not lead necessarily to extremist politics. It is the destruction of hope. This is where the character of the American occupation of Iraq has to be brought before an

international tribunal. It is not just the bombing or the use of depleted uranium.

The character of the American occupation destroyed Iraqi history, the development of its national identity, the character of its political project. It has set Iraq off the rails of its own historical development. The campaign in Mosul further underscores the tragedy. And the mainstream corporate media seems oblivious to this. They are reporting the battle in Mosul as if they were stenographers of the State Department or the Pentagon.

DB: We're hearing it is the end of ISIS but we know that ISIS still holds other parts of Iraq and the war continues in Syria. Does the war move now into these other parts of Iraq, do the survivors head into Syria for the final battle?

VP: I want to emphasize two points here: First, Mosul was very definitely not the final battle. In Iraq there will be battles along the road to Syria. ISIS is still quite entrenched in parts of Anbar Province. It is along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. So there are still fights in Iraq.

In Syria, ISIS is quite spread out. It is not just in Raqqa. It has holdouts around the major eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, it is in Al-Hasakah, it is in various places. Also, ISIS has become a kind of brand. And so there are ISIS outfits in Afghanistan, in Tunisia, in Libya. We haven't seen the end of ISIS yet.

The second issue is that this is not just about ISIS. The question is what this kind of war is going to produce in five or ten years. That's what I am more concerned about. Because there is no political cohesion in Iraq, because there is no plan to integrate this section of Iraqi society, I fear that new forms of extremism are going to emerge. Whatever emerges will certainly be alienated from the government in Baghdad and decidedly alienated from the United States, which they will certainly see as one of the authors of the great destruction.

DB: The BBC is investigating at least one video showing government troops assassinating detainees by handcuffing them and throwing them over the side of a cliff. Human rights groups are receiving numerous accounts of tortures and executions in Mosul. So this is the beginning of the next phase, isn't it?

VP: Yes, this is already a problem, not only in Iraq but in Syria as well. The national armies in these countries have deteriorated quite significantly. In fact, in Iraq the army was destroyed during the American occupation. These governments have had to rely more on irregular groups and militias, often organized along very sectarian lines. These groups don't have the training or the discipline and they have little concern for human rights.

Secondly, they have lived through the decade of American occupation, where they have seen US troops performing night raids, driving detainees into factories like Abu Ghraib, etc. It is not merely a question of irregular armies which are misbehaving because they haven't attended a seminar on the Geneva Convention. The example of the United States has not provided any instruction in respecting human rights.

This is entirely the legacy of three sources: One, that there is no regular army with a strong chain of command. Two, the horrible example of the US military. And three, the Iraqi army during the war against Iran was hardly trained to be a kind and decent army, it was a vicious, harsh army, using chemical weapons against the enemy, for example. These are the sources of the violence and people should not be surprised to see this level of retribution.

DB: As you've undoubtedly noticed, there's a new administration in the United States. Do you think there is any more hope under Trump than under Obama?

VP: Not really. Mr. Trump has said that he wants to see military action "with the gloves off." He immediately congratulated Iraq on the "liberation" of Mosul and there won't be any concern about human rights violations or things like that. The United States government is now using the phrase "the annihilation of ISIS." This is a dangerous phrase which declares open season for people like Duterte in the Philippines authorizing the assassination of people in slums, or the government of Mr. Abadi in Iraq essentially authorizing the assassination of detainees in Mosul. This is a world that Mr. Trump is quite comfortable in.

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Trump's Slide into Endless-War Syndrome

Much like President Obama, President Trump was elected as the relative "peace candidate" but – once in office – has veered into Official Washington's neocon "logic" of endless war, as Ivan Eland describes.

By Ivan Eland

During his campaign for the presidency, Donald Trump touted his nationalist "America First" foreign policy, which implied that he wanted to stay out of foreign brushfire wars. Even before that, he tweeted his disapproval of American

involvement of the Afghan War.

Yet now he has delegated the authority to his Secretary of Defense to send several thousand more troops to Afghanistan to join the almost 9,000 that remain there advising and assisting Afghan forces and hunting Islamist terrorists. And that is not the only instance in which the Trump administration has gone against his original inclination or is contemplating it.

Trump appears to be delegating the troop re-escalation decision for Afghanistan to Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, because the president wants to be able to dodge responsibility in case that policy is ultimately unsuccessful, just as he blamed the botched Special Operations raid in Yemen on the military. Re-escalation is likely to fail, because the administration has no strategy for turning the already-lost conflict around. Adding 3,000 to 5,000 troops, according to a U.S. military that never wants to admit losing a war, would allow American troops to "advise" Afghan troops in battlefield areas, instead of remaining at higher headquarters, and also to call in U.S. air and artillery strikes in support of those local forces.

Yet the Afghan War is the longest conflict in American history, and no conception of "success" can be realistically imagined. How can an augmented force of 13,000 or 14,000 American advisers have success helping a still pathetic Afghan military (even after 16 years of U.S. training), when 100,000 much more potent U.S. combat troops could not defeat the Taliban during all those prior years of conflict?

And if the Taliban's gains on the battlefield aren't enough, the continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan has caused some Islamist militants to pledge allegiance to the even more radical and brutal ISIS group. One can easily see that when the 3,000 to 5,000 troops have little effect on the battlefield, which is the probable outcome, the military will begin demanding a more sizeable re-escalation of the endless conflict.

Should we give the U.S. military a blank check for perpetual war until it comes up with a face-saving way to exit with honor? Such a ruse didn't fool anyone in the Vietnam War.

India's Interests

The original U.S. enemy, Al Qaeda, is already a spent force in that part of the world. In addition, the Indian government is assisting Afghanistan economically and Afghan forces militarily and would have an incentive to do much more if the United States withdrew from the fight. India doesn't want its arch rival Pakistan's support of the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan to result in a

Taliban-controlled or influenced Afghan government that will augment Pakistan's power in the South Asian region. Thus, the United States could let India, which has greater strategic interest in this local war than does the United States these days, take over countering the Taliban and ISIS in the region.

In addition to re-escalating an already unsuccessful Afghan War, some in the Trump administration want to ramp up the fight in Syria and assistance to the Saudi Arabian-led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are loosely aligned with Saudi-rival Iran.

Trump, seemingly only to prove he was tougher than President Obama was in Syria, mounted a for-show cruise missile attack on a Syrian air base after an alleged chemical weapons attack by the Bashar al-Assad regime. Before the U.S. attack, the Trump administration warned the Russians and the thus the Syrians that it was coming, thus severely mitigating its effect.

Lately, however, some in the Trump administration want to widen the war against ISIS in Syria to include Iranian-sponsored militias that are also fighting ISIS. Yet the perils of escalation in Syria became apparent when a Syrian government plane dropped bombs near U.S.-sponsored rebels, U.S. aircraft shot down the plane, and then the Russians declared that any American aircraft flying over Syrian government-controlled areas would be tracked as potential targets. Russian downing of an American aircraft or vice versa would be an unneeded and dangerous escalation between two nuclear-armed great powers over the outcome of a civil war in a country that is not strategic to the United States.

The desire of some Trump administration officials to go after Iranian-sponsored militias in Syria is part of a larger Trump inclination to support Saudi Arabia in its regional rivalry with Iran in the Persian Gulf. That regional rivalry is also playing out in the destitute country of Yemen, with the United States selling the despotic Saudis a fresh batch of expensive military equipment, some of which will probably be used to kill Houthis in Yemen, including lots of civilians. Yet if Syria is not strategic to the United States, the poor nation of Yemen is certainly not either.

In the Syrian civil war, the United States should sit back and watch its adversaries fight each other – ISIS and other radical Sunni Islamists versus Iran, Iranian-sponsored militias, the autocratic Syrian government, and Russia. In the internecine conflict in Yemen, the Saudi coalition, which has already killed many civilians, is hardly better than Iran. In the Afghan civil war, the United States should accept defeat, withdraw its forces – instead of re-escalating the war – and let India fully take over assisting the Afghan military in its fight against the Taliban and ISIS.

In sum, Trump should avoid getting co-opted by the U.S. military and honor his campaign rhetoric, which implied staying out of non-strategic brushfire wars.

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Farmworkers Protest EPA's Pesticide Ruling

As part of President Trump's campaign against President Obama's environmental regulations, Trump's EPA has rejected a proposed rule banning a brain-damaging pesticide, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The decision by President Trump's Environmental Protection Agency to rebuff the advice of its own scientists to ban the brain-damaging pesticide chlorpyrifos has prompted protests from California's farm worker communities, now demanding an immediate statewide ban of the dangerous chemical.

A delegation delivered more than 167,000 petition signatures along with a letter signed by 75 organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Californians. The petition was also co-signed by Care2, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Environmental Health, Center for Food Safety, Courage Campaign, CREDO, Friends of the Earth, and Pesticide Action Network.

EPA scientists have documented that chlorpyrifos can cause serious and profound neurological and respiratory damage, as well as developmental delays, autism and IQ loss for children – even in very small doses, say the activists.

They maintain that the use of chlorpyrifos is particularly problematic in California, “where more than one million pounds of the neurotoxic organophosphate pesticide are used each year, much of it in close proximity to schools and residences. Accounting for roughly 10% of the nationwide total, this chemical is applied on dozens of crops in the state. In the Monterey Bay Area, chlorpyrifos is most heavily used on wine grapes, Brussels sprouts, and apple orchards. In 2016, the air monitor at the Salinas Airport registered average air levels of chlorpyrifos three times higher than the EPA's target risk level.”

According to Californians for Pesticide Reform (CPR), a statewide coalition of

more than 190 organizations, “after years of stalling, EPA was set to implement a ban on chlorpyrifos use on food crops in March. But under intense pressure from Dow Chemical, the largest manufacturer of the neurotoxic pesticide, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt reversed the agency’s plan and announced he was allowing continued agricultural use of chlorpyrifos.”

The group’s statement went on to say “just last November, the EPA announced that it intended to revoke all food tolerances of chlorpyrifos, calling exposure to any amount unsafe. Underscoring the importance of this proposed ban, the agency cited the serious dangers of chlorpyrifos exposure and added that young children risk exposure from food residues alone that are 14,000 percent higher than the level EPA currently believes is safe.”

I spoke with Lucia Calderon, an organizer with Safe Ag Safe Schools and Californians for Pesticide Reform, about the battle against chlorpyrifos.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us exactly what it is – what’s the chemistry we’re talking about here? And then we’ll talk about how dangerous it is.

Lucia Calderon: Chlorpyrifos is an organophosphate insecticide, and its main action is to harm the brains of the insects that the agricultural industry is trying to kill. And, incidentally, it has been shown to really, really harm brains, especially children’s developing brains.

DB: Children’s developing brains – say a little bit more about that. Are there cases? Are there studies being conducted now? Are there examples of kids being hurt? What can you say about that?

LC: Yeah, well this is a really historical issue. Chlorpyrifos was actually banned for residential use. It started being phased out in 2000, because of its proven association with developmental harm. And UC Berkeley and Columbia University both had big parts in these studies. In 2000 the science was known that chlorpyrifos was extremely harmful to developing brains and bodies, and it was banned for residential use.

But nowadays it is not banned for agricultural use, and it’s still being used in our fields, especially in California fields. We account for a fifth of the entire nation’s use of this chemical pesticide. And so, what we’re looking at is science that has been established, and is continuing to come out, showing these really detrimental effects of this chemical. And there is complete inaction on the federal level.

DB: So the EPA was set to pass a ban on this, right? Until the new folks came in?

LC: Yes, exactly. The EPA was set on a deadline to revoke the tolerances of this chemical on March 31, 2017, and just a couple of days before that date our new EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt, reversed that ban. So what we're doing now is going to the State of California. As a big user of chlorpyrifos, we are demanding that the State of California impose a ban on this chemical. And, as I mentioned the science before, a lot of it is coming out of California. We have the UC Berkeley CHAMACOS study, which stands for the Center for Health of Mother and Children of the Salinas Valley, right where Safe Ag Safe Schools is located. That study has been going on for almost 20 years, showing the connections between prenatal organophosphate chlorpyrifos exposure and lowering IQ, and respiratory issues as well.

DB: Tell us a little bit about who's involved. Your group is working with the Pesticide Action Network: are there community groups or teachers involved? How are you bringing in the families?

LC: Californians for Pesticide Reform is a statewide coalition, and Safe Ag Safe Schools is only one of the organizations involved. And we represent the communities of the front line. We are from the affected communities, and we all get to come together through this statewide coalition, and then demand improvements and better protections for people living on the front lines of pesticide exposure – those working in the fields and living and attending school very close to the fields.

DB: Are there still problems in terms of schools? Does that come into it?

LC: Yes, definitely. And even regarding chlorpyrifos, we have a city in Monterey County, Greenfield, and two schools there – the middle school and the high school – rank 9th and 4th in the state for chlorpyrifos use within a quarter of a mile. We're seeing issues with chlorpyrifos being applied around schools and we're also just seeing issues with pesticide use in general around schools.

The most recent action we've had on that was establishing buffer zones around schools where pesticides could not be applied. We have been demanding for years a full mile buffer zone at all times around schools, where pesticides cannot be applied. And what we got were quarter mile buffer zones for parts of the day – from 6am to 6pm Monday through Friday. So we're still fighting on that front as well. Right now we're really trying to get chlorpyrifos banned, because it's one of the nastiest chemicals out there.

DB: This is incredibly important because it affects children and their ability to learn. I understand that some of this, depending upon how you're doused with this, could cause permanent damage, particularly in pregnant women and young, formative kids.

LC: Yes, one of the reasons that the federal EPA was going to ban the chemical was that the U.S. EPA found that for pregnant women and developing babies and for some children just the amount of chlorpyrifos they were consuming on food as food residue was way too high. The reason that the EPA was banning it was not only for food residues, but for how much is in the air. There's also no safe amount of chlorpyrifos in drinking water, and it has contaminated a lot of our water supplies as well. So the danger is on all fronts, but especially for women of childbearing age and young children.

DB: And I'm gonna spell that because the name is a little bit unclear: it's c-h-l-o-r-p-y-r-i-f-o-s – that's the brain-harming chemistry that we're talking about?

LC: Exactly, and it is produced by Dow AgroSciences.

DB: Dow?

LC: Yes, Dow Chemical. The CEO of Dow Chemical [Andrew Liveris] is the head of the American Manufacturing Council. Dow Chemical contributed a million dollars to Trump's inauguration dinner. We're now hearing reports that Scott Pruitt met with Dow right before he decided to reverse the ban of chlorpyrifos. So they're a really big actor in this fight right now.

DB: Yeah, and they certainly have the reputation, shall we say, for doing terrible things to people. We thank you for this important information.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Holding onto Nuclear Weapons

Despite longstanding promises to work toward nuclear disarmament, the nuclear states continue their hostility toward abandoning these existentially dangerous weapons, Dr. Ira Helfand tells Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

For months now there has been a frustrating hunt for "collusion" between the Trump administration and Russia, but there is one clear example of collusion – along with the other half dozen or so nuclear weapons states – in opposing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Passed on July 7 by 122 nations at the United Nations, the ban states in part that each cosigner “undertakes never under any circumstances to develop, test, produce, manufacture, or otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”

Following the signing of the treaty at the U.N., I spoke to Dr. Ira Helfand, past president of Physicians for Social Responsibility and currently co-president of that group’s global federation, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. The group received the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize for their work in the field of nuclear disarmament.

“Two things were most notable in the overwhelming vote for this treaty,” Dr. Helfand said. “One was the urgency felt by the representatives of 122 countries who voted for it. The other was the rather crude and revealing statement put out by the ‘P3’ – the U.S., Britain and France,” said Dr. Helfand, that “they intend to maintain their policy of mutually assured destruction forever, even though they are legally required to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear arsenals under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”

Dennis Bernstein: First of all, say something about the treaty – how important it is, what exactly it’s meant to do.

Ira Helfand: Well this treaty is an attempt by the non-nuclear weapon states around the world to tell the nuclear-armed states that they’ve got to stop behaving the way they have been. The nuclear-armed states are, for the most part, committed under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to undertaking good faith negotiations to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. And they’re not doing it, they haven’t been doing it and they don’t appear to have any intention to do it. And the non-nuclear weapon states have lost patience, essentially, and have said, “Look, your nuclear weapons are posing an existential threat to our citizens as well as your own, and you need to start living up to your obligations to protect the world from the terrible consequences of nuclear weapons.”

The treaty does not in and of itself create a situation where these weapons are going to be dismantled. It does provide a very strong weapon, I think, for people to use to put pressure on the nuclear-armed states to do what they’re supposed to do, and to actually abolish their weapons.

DB: And it’s really important that it be the possession, right?

IH: Absolutely, this is not a treaty about use. That is also included, but this goes far beyond that. This treaty says that the mere possession of nuclear weapons constitutes an existential threat to human survival and cannot be

tolerated, that we need to get rid of these things, to dismantle them and make sure that they're never built again.

DB: All right, give us your assessment: how dangerous is our world today? Are we at Cuban Missile Crisis Two? How would you assess that?

IH: I don't think we're quite to the Cuban Missile Crisis, but we're pretty close. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has us at two and a half minutes to midnight, where midnight is the end of the world. Certainly we're at the most dangerous moment since the early 1980s. There is increasing tension between the United States and Russia, with potential flashpoints in Syria and Ukraine. There's increased tension between the United States and China, with a potential flashpoint in the South China Sea. There's the situation which everyone is following, with North Korea vs. the rest of the world. There's the ongoing fighting between India and Pakistan, which is almost daily, on their border in Kashmir. These countries now have between them some 260 nuclear warheads. So we're in a very, very dangerous moment.

And in addition to these geopolitical potential flashpoints, there's the ongoing danger of an accidental nuclear war, or a terrorist-triggered nuclear war. We know of six or seven instances since the 1960s, where either Moscow or Washington actually began the preparation of launching nuclear weapons, in the mistaken belief that the other side had already done so. And that potential for an accident – an unintended nuclear war – remains with us today, and will, until these weapons are eliminated. So it's an extremely dangerous time, and we really need to be paying more attention to this danger than we are, frankly.

DB: Who are the nuclear powers?

IH: The United States and Russia have between them about 90-95% of the world's nuclear weapons. And then after that, France, China, the U.K., India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel. And it's not just the P3 – the U.S., France and the U.K. – that have refused to sign it – all of those countries have refused to sign it.

DB: [...] These are very frightening times. It's really troubling to see that not only do these nuclear powers reject the agreement, they do it with vigor, and some swagger, as if the other solution – mutually assured destruction – is a good one!

IH: Well I think that was what was particularly striking about the statement that the U.S., the U. K. and France – the so-called P3 – issued on Friday. In the past, the nuclear weapons states at least had the political sense to couch their opposition to this treaty in terms of, "Well, we share your vision of getting rid of nuclear weapons, but the time isn't right, and so this treaty

isn't the best tactic."

In the statement that was released on Friday, the United States, Britain and France said, "We will never sign this treaty. We will never eliminate our nuclear weapons." And it was a very bald statement, which has always been the truth, but was really quite a departure from their normal diplomatic attempts to cover up what they're doing. And it was quite striking in that way.

DB: You know, people go on about Donald Trump – and there's a lot to go on about – but these western progressive nations are still talking insanely in 2017. They're as crazy as any of the politicians who are on the scene now, and this decision demonstrates it.

IH: I think that's true. You know, we've argued for a long time that nuclear weapons are so destructive, and the chance of their use is so great, that no one should ever have possession of them. I think the "Trump Factor" is a real phenomenon. This is the first time that a large arsenal of a major nuclear power has been in the control of someone who is judged by the security experts in his own party to lack the judgment, the temperament and the knowledge base to command a nuclear arsenal. And there are implications in that – not the least, if it happens once, it can happen again.

DB: But you know what, I have to just say something about all the politicians... I'm no defender of Trump, but before that with Hillary Clinton and her policy – in terms of foreign policy – Syria was a no-fly zone. That's a road to World War 3 – that's insane!

All these politicians are willing to talk in the context of everything being on the table – you know that phrase, everything's always on the table with these folks. [...] I've never trusted the CIA. And all those folks advising Trump, they've got some serious problems. A bunch of them have been liars. They've been bugging all of us. I mean there's a lot to question across the board, and that to me is what makes nuclear weapons extremely troubling in the hands of all these folks.

IH: Oh, there's some truth to that. Nobody should have their finger on the button. The solution is not to get Donald Trump's finger off the button, it's to get rid of the button altogether. Having said that, there is something different about having Donald Trump in charge of the nuclear arsenal, and we cannot turn our backs on that fact.

DB: [...] What do you suggest? What do you think people can do about this? What are the realities in terms of what you would recommend if people are interested in standing up and making a difference?

IH: Well, a couple of intermediate steps. First of all, there's legislation before Congress introduced by Senator Markey and Congressman Lieu, that requires that Congress give prior authorization before nuclear weapons can be used. This is exactly as it should be. The Constitution says only Congress can declare war. Certainly only Congress should be able to declare a nuclear war. And this is a useful, small step in the right direction. That legislation should be passed.

Secondly, we should be demanding that the United States take its nuclear weapons off its hair-trigger alert. There's no excuse for maintaining these arsenals in a configuration where they can be launched in 15 minutes. It merely creates an increased danger that there will be an accidental or unauthorized use. It's not necessary to blow up the world in 15 minutes' time. If we decide that that's what we're going to do, we can do it in 24 hours. So the weapons should be taken off this hair-trigger alert.

But more fundamentally, we need to be demanding that the United States completely change its nuclear policy: stop insisting that we're going to maintain a nuclear arsenal as a way of protecting our security, and acknowledge that, in fact, nuclear weapons are the greatest threat to our security, and that what we need to do is aggressively pursue, in agreement with the other nuclear weapon states, to eliminate all of these weapons.

Now, we may not be successful in this effort, we may not be able to get other countries to join with us, but we need to try. And the United States has not been trying. In fact it's been doing just the opposite: it's been planning to spend a trillion dollars to make heinous nuclear arsenals over decades to come. And that has to change.

It is urgently in the interest of U.S. national security, as well as the security of everybody on the planet, that we actively pursue the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons – not just at the rhetorical level like President Obama did, but really in our actual policy. And that we seek to begin negotiations with the other nuclear weapons states, for a treaty amongst them that provides a specific timetable, and enforcement and verification measures, so that we can, with confidence, eliminate all the nuclear weapons that are being held. And this can be done, the only thing that is lacking is the political will to do it.

DB: Before we say goodbye, can you give us maybe a doctor's perspective on this? You know, you take an oath to save lives – how do you come at this from that perspective?

IH: Well, I think Physicians for Social Responsibility views nuclear weapons as primarily a public health problem. They are the greatest threat to public health

that's ever existed, and we see this as an extension of our responsibility as physicians to protect our patients. We talk to our patients about why they shouldn't drink excessively, why they shouldn't smoke at all, why they should watch their weight and so on. We also need to talk to them about other threats to their health, and this is the greatest threat of all.

And that's really been the motivation, I think, for the physicians' movement – to bring this message of grave danger to our patients, in the hopes that we'll be able to mobilize them to take the necessary political action to force our government to get rid of these weapons once and for all.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

The Price for Criticizing Israel

Israel is well-known for having a potent U.S. lobby that not only influences Congress and the mainstream media but intimidates Americans who dare criticize its policies toward the Palestinians, as Dennis J Bernstein describes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

There are very few journalist in the U.S. or Europe who have the courage to report fairly on Israel's seemingly endless illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. Personally, as a Jewish-American, and the grandson of a revered Rabbi, I have been roundly denounced by pro-Israeli representatives and their Zionist lobbyists in the U.S.

I've stopped counting the number of vicious personal attacks that have labeled me a self-hating Jewish anti-Semite. Here's one that got my attention and the attention of journalist Robert Fisk of the Independent of London, who I introduced one night for a lecture in Berkeley, California, and who then wrote an article about the plight of Jewish journalists and activists in the U.S. who dare to write or speak honestly about Israel's brutal and illegal occupation of the Palestinians:

"You mother-fucking-asshole-self-hating Jewish piece of shit. Hitler killed the wrong Jews. He should have killed your parents, so a piece of Jewish shit like you would not have been born. God willing, Arab terrorists will cut you to pieces Daniel Pearl-style, AMEN!!!" The latter reference to the late Wall Street

Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was kidnapped and decapitated in Pakistan.

And at another level, the Israeli consulate in San Francisco has complained to my managers at KPFA/ Pacifica Radio repeatedly about my “pro-Palestinian terrorist” and “anti-semitic” reporting, and my apparent “hatred” for the Jewish State.

Emmy award-winning filmmaker and investigative reporter John Pilger is one of the rare exceptions who has plowed head-first into this crucial story of our time. Pilger has made two documentaries 25 years apart about Palestine, with almost the same name, *Palestine is the Issue* and then *Palestine is Still the Issue*.

I spoke recently with Pilger about Palestine and the brutality of the continuing occupation, and also about the responsibility for empowering and sustaining the occupation that falls at the feet of the Western press, based on its misreporting and, in some cases, not reporting at all the brutal realities of Israel’s iron-fisted occupation of Palestinians, which many critics, as well as several UN officials, have labeled as a form of ethnic cleansing that borders on genocide.

I also spoke with Pilger about the recent G-20 meetings in Germany, where President Trump held his first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid the Russia-gate frenzy. John Pilger’s latest film is *The Coming War on China*. He recently gave a moving talk at the Palestine Expo in London on the ongoing battle for the liberation of Palestine, excerpts of which have been published by Consortiumnews.

Dennis Bernstein: Let’s start with some current events. We just had the G20 meeting in Europe with a big deal made about the meeting between Trump and Putin and a lot of action in the streets. Your thoughts on what happened there and some of the goings-on?

John Pilger: I think it was very interesting on two levels. First of all, it was a clear demonstration of the continuing rebellion against remote governments, governments often justifiably referred to as oligarchic. The number of people in the streets of Hamburg accurately represented that rebellion.

The interesting thing about the G20 itself was that Germany clearly set out to determine the agenda. Merkel wanted to put her country forward as the undisputed leader now of Europe. Some would say it has been for quite a while and with Britain on the way out the opportunity does exist. But that didn’t happen.

The discussion was appropriated by the meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Putting aside all the grotesque, cartoon qualities of Trump, the one

thing that he has been consistent about is doing some deal with Russia. This has gotten him in a lot of trouble because the Democratic Party and, in fact most of the beltway institutions in Washington, don't want this to happen. They would like Russia to remain a perennial enemy.

Without Moscow there as the demon, it is very difficult to justify a lot of the infrastructure of power in the United States, particularly the massive armament and military industries. Trump openly challenged this, virtually from the beginning. Although he seemed to have to prove himself to the pillars of power in Washington by firing missiles at Syria, this element in his presidency has remained pretty much constant.

This was of course the first meeting between Trump and Putin. They spoke for two hours and twenty minutes and, by all accounts, some kind of rapport was developed. In previous times that would be good news. It used to be called "detente." These days this is not good news, either in the US political establishment and corporate media or, to a large degree, here in Britain.

The ridiculous allegations that the Russians helped to elect Trump by directly interfering in the great American democratic process have converged with the news that Trump and Putin may well have struck some kind of deal. Whether Trump is allowed to pursue whatever arrangements he has made toward normalizing relations with Russia, given the institutions of power in the United States, is rather doubtful.

DB: Of course, the corporate press is not at all interested in detente in Syria. Their main story ever since Trump's meeting with Putin has been that his son may be guilty of treason.

JP: I've never heard something so absurd in my life, especially as the United States has intervened so aggressively in post-Soviet Russia. All through the 1990's the open and quite successful intervention was blatant. And for these powerful forces in the United States to obsess with Russian meddling in our election process demonstrates a kind of double standard that is difficult to comprehend.

DB: In light of your new film, *The Coming War on China*, this is a time when detente at all levels is crucial because the dangers of staying the course are so huge. It is interesting to see that right-wing hawks in Washington are helping to foster a new relationship between Russia and China. But detente is the only answer at this point, isn't it?

JP: Yes, it is. What's needed is a diplomatic settlement. Unfortunately, the United States doesn't do that anymore. It doesn't have "diplomats" in the real

sense of the word. To now see the presidents of two of the major nuclear-armed powers in the world seemingly forging some kind of political arrangement—agreeing, apparently, that they shouldn't go to war with nuclear weapons. This is a throwback to a time before George W. Bush abolished the START treaties and others that were put together so painstakingly over so many years between the Soviet Union and the United States. It demonstrates how far the world—at the level of its political elite—has regressed. The United States is a very frightening vision for most of us because nuclear weapons are in the background all the time. The chance of a mistaken launch of nuclear weapons is high.

Consider the case of Korea, where the United States has installed its very aggressive THAAD so-called “defense” system which threatens China. No one believes for a minute that these missiles are pointed at North Korea, which could be dealt with in many other ways by the United States. The long-term strategy of an ascendant Pentagon is the balkanization of the Russian Federation and the intimidation of China. And if there is any glint of some kind of pullback from that position, as there might have been in the meeting between Trump and Putin, then that is good news.

DB: And of course it is so bizarre that you have America talking about the role that China should be playing and how we are so disappointed that they are not doing all they can to facilitate THAAD, which is part of a strategy to surround their country in what we know is shaping up to be “the Chinese century.”

John, I'd like you to talk about how you first began to report on Palestine and then I'd like to fast forward to current issues.

JP: I first went to Palestine in the 1960's and stayed on a kibbutz. I probably came with the popular assumption that Israel's myths about itself were true, that Israel was a good idea. I conflated the horror of the Holocaust with the new Jewish state. The people on the kibbutz regarded themselves as both socialists and Zionists.

I came to understand the doublespeak or the contemporary amnesia that is so pervasive in Israel. We had some very lively discussions but rarely mentioned the majority people. I saw them one evening and they were referred to as “them,” as silhouettes beyond the limits of the kibbutz. I asked about them and was told, well, they're the Arabs. One man called them nomads. By just asking the question I was crossing a line, and a disturbed silence followed. I was with good people on the kibbutz, they had principles, many had memories of the horrors in Europe. They knew, of course, that they were on stolen land.

The word “Palestinian” was almost never used, rather echoing Golda Meir's later

remark that “there’s no such thing as Palestinians.” Because once the term “Palestinian” was recognized, the state of Palestine had to be recognized. For me it was a very interesting introduction to the extraordinary situation in Palestine. I learned a lot from a wonderful photographer named Dan Hidani who lost all his family in Germany during the War. We talked out this subject of the so-called Arabs and I learned a lot from him about the guilt of the colonizers that can never quite be covered up. These early experiences really alerted me to the huge injustice the Palestinians were suffering and of course still suffer today.

DB: Could I ask you to tell the story of the novelist Liana Badr, because it really does speak to what has happened to many Palestinians and the way they have been treated?

JP: In 2002, when Ariel Sharon was prime minister and several times sent the Israeli army and tanks into the West Bank, I arrived in Ramallah just when the Israeli army was withdrawing. Ramallah was devastated and one of the places I visited was the Palestinian Cultural Center. There I met the center’s director, the renowned Palestinian novelist Liana Badr, who teaches at Columbia University now. Her manuscripts were torn and scattered across the floor. The hard drive containing her fiction and a whole library of plays and poetry had been stolen by the Israeli soldiers. Not a single book had survived. Master tapes of one of the best collections of Palestinian cinema were lost.

This was an assault on a people’s culture. The soldiers had urinated and defecated on the floors and on the desks and smeared feces on children’s paintings. It was the most vivid and telling symbol of what a colonial power does to the people whose country it occupies.

It was an attempt to dehumanize, that is what this assault on the Palestinian Cultural Center represented. What struck me, as well, was the determination of the Palestinians in this situation not to comply with what was expected of them as victims. That is the most astonishing thing about the Palestinians. As you walk through the rubble of Gaza, where the Israelis have attacked so many times, all of a sudden you see in the distance a group of school girls beautifully turned out in their starched and pressed uniforms and their hair done. It is a vision of defiance and determination to keep going. So the occupation may have worked physically but it hasn’t worked spiritually. And perhaps in the near future it may not work politically.

Jaffa oranges are famous around the world. Actually, Jaffa is a Palestinian town taken by Israel. Jaffa oranges form part of the mythical history of modern Israel, the idea that the desert of Palestine would be made green by the arriving Jews, who would make the desert bloom. But the oranges and grapes were

in fact grown by Palestinian farmers and the oranges had been exported to Europe since the eighteenth century. At one time, a rather melancholy name for the town of Jaffa used by its former inhabitants was “the place of sad oranges.”

DB: I want to talk to you about Palestine and journalism. Maybe we could compare and contrast Mohammed Omer, on the one hand—who is dodging bombs and trying to get food for his family as the drones are flying past his window, trying to get as best he can the truth from the ground—compare Mohammed Omer with the people at CNBC and the BBC.

JP: Well, we know that most of mainstream journalism is simply an extension of the state. We’ve talked about the extraordinary McCarthy-like propaganda campaign that wants to blame everything including the weather on Russia. That happens because the media is the propaganda wing of the institutions that form power in the West.

The one that produces the most refined propaganda is the BBC. CNN and the others are just cruder versions. Any truth about Israel/Palestine or, more generally, the Middle East is not going to come from the mainstream media. Those of us who know this should rather stop beating our heads against a brick wall, asking why they don’t tell the truth. That’s not what they’re there for.

Fortunately, there are now many independent sources, such as your program. You mentioned Mohammed Omer. We saw how brilliant and objective his reporting was from Gaza during the last terrible attack in 2014. His own family was under attack, they had very little food and water and so on, but every day he would produce these concise reports of no more than maybe 800 words, together with his photographs that would tell you what was happening as he witnessed it. It was about how people were still leading their lives in the most extraordinary ways, despite all the grief and suffering.

In other words, he did what the official media in the West rarely does: He put faces and names on people, he described their lives. He has collected those pieces together in a book. And there have been other journalists, particularly Palestinian photographers and camera people, who have done similar work. They make me proud to be a journalist.

DB: I only bring up the corporate journalists because they sustain these kinds of conditions by not reporting them or misreporting them.

JP: From my own point of view, I find it unwatchable, unless I am either monitoring it or deconstructing it. It is their censorship by omission, by distortion, by demonology. General Petraeus once said he spent most of his time with the media because that mattered more than trying to defeat the Taliban.

The good news is that a lot of people don't believe it anymore. One of the elements in the rebellion rolling across Western societies is an anger with the media. This is certainly true in Britain. I've never known the media to be so popular a subject for debate. And it's being discussed with a great deal of resentment. Reporters find themselves now having to account for their actions. That's a new development.

Yesterday, The Guardian ran a rather defensive front-page article about journalists being called to account by the survivors of the terrible Grenfell Tower fire here in London. Well, that was emblematic of the media being called to account over a wide range of issues. People are becoming aware, they understand now. They're no longer simply consumers of this sort of nonsense.

Certainly, the power of the media remains. But one of my favorite stories is that, on the night that Jeremy Corbyn almost won the election here, there was a party at the Times newspaper, which of course is run by Rupert Murdoch. When the first results came in and it became clear that Labor was doing so well, Murdoch stormed out. That was a very symbolic moment because it meant that his media and the media like his no longer had the power to ensure that certain politicians were elected. Two days before the election, The Daily Mail devoted thirteen pages to an attempted character assassination of Corbyn. It had no effect whatsoever.

DB: We just had on our show Arab Barghouti, the son of Mustafa Barghouti, who hasn't touched his father for two years. Mustafa Barghouti has been in prison for fifteen years and just led a major hunger strike. Strong, articulate, he can't be silenced. Or you mentioned Dr. Mona El-Farra, a medical director on the ground who had a good part of her extended family wiped out in 2014. She is still ministering to the people and telling the truth to anyone who will listen. It's amazing.

JP: Yes, these are amazing people and it's quite inspiring to be in their company. Even amidst all the carnage in the world, they make you feel good about being human.

DB: Why do you think Nelson Mandela said Palestine is the greatest moral issue of our time?

JP: There is a lot to criticize about Mandela but one of the things that was interesting and admirable about Mandela was that he was loyal to those who had supported and given solidarity to the people in South Africa struggling for their freedom. Certainly, right through his time in prison he always stressed the importance of that solidarity. In other words, of people standing together. It was a rather old-fashioned internationalist view of struggle.

He associated the struggle of the majority people of South Africa against the apartheid regime with the plight of the Palestinians who were struggling with their own form of apartheid. In the same way, Desmond Tutu has been to the West Bank and has been very outspoken in echoing what Mandela said. Tutu is on the record as saying that he regards the structures of apartheid in Israel/Palestine as in some respects even worse than those in South Africa.

I suppose Mandela considered Palestine the greatest moral issue because it was about a people wronged. The Palestinians were not the Germans, they didn't do terrible things to the Jewish people. In fact, they had lived peacefully with the Jewish people for a very long time. They were the majority people in their country. Jews, Muslims, Christians lived together in peace, generally speaking, until the state of Israel was imposed on them.

As Mustafa Barghouti put it, "The Zionists wanted a state at the expense of the Palestinians." That's what Mandela meant. Palestine is a classic colonial injustice. [Israel] is the fourth largest military power in the world backed by the largest military power, the European Union and other Western countries, taking away the freedom and imposing oppression on the people of Palestine.

DB: And the idea of a free Palestinian people is one that is very troubling to the Arab world that is aligned with the United States. It seems nobody wants to think about the liberation of Palestine because then they have to think about their own corrupt and vicious dictatorships. Palestine really is the issue of war and peace. Whether there will ever be peace depends on whether these people will ever have a place to call their home again.

JP: Certainly, until the Palestinians have justice—in a way that they recognize it—there will be no peace in the region. In a sense, all roads of conflict in this troubled region lead back to Palestine. If the Palestine issue were resolved, that would mean that Israel would be a normal country. Not armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons and intimidating and oppressing the indigenous people, but a normal country living with equality within its own sphere. If that happened, if that were resolved, I'm not saying that peace would suddenly break out all over the Middle East, but it would be the beginning.

DB: Do you see the boycott/divestment movement as a hopeful light? Clearly, people who have supported it in the US, students and teachers, have suffered great repression. But do you see this as a viable movement? In some ways it is modeled on the South African anti-apartheid movement.

JP: All you have to do is look at the reaction in Israel. They are terrified of it. They have brought all kinds of pressure to bear on governments, particularly the British government, to stop the BDS movement having an influence. Just the

other day, a court judgment found that local councils in Britain could indeed boycott, dis-invest and sanction whoever they please. The British government had told them they couldn't. Well, they can.

The BDS movement really worries the Israeli regime because it's popular. In Norway, the biggest trade union has endorsed it. Student bodies in the United States are going along with it. People have had their say and they have voted for it. It represents a kind of local democracy. It's much more widespread in the United States than people realize and it certainly is across Europe.

BDS on its own is not going to bring about freedom for the Palestinians. In South Africa, the sanctions did undoubtedly have an effect. But White South Africa managed to get around the sanctions. It was when it lost a powerful friend, when the Reagan administration decided that South Africa was causing more trouble than it was worth and finally withdrew its support, that the system fell.

I'm afraid that that is the way power works. But there is no doubt that power is always influenced by popular movements such as BDS. Ultimately, I believe that the solution is in the United States. Without US backing in all its forms, Israel would have no choice but to become a normal country.

DB: It is interesting to see how strong the reaction has been to the boycott/divestment movement. Professors have lost their jobs, kids have been beaten up. Below the corporate media surface, it has really been reverberating out there in the grassroots.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Netanyahu Pushes Trump Toward Wider Wars

Exclusive: Russia-gate is empowering Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to strong-arm President Trump into escalating the Syrian war by abandoning a recent cease-fire and challenging Iran and Russia, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A weakened, even desperate President Donald Trump must decide whether to stand up to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or to repudiate the Syrian

partial ceasefire, which Trump hammered out with Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 7.

Whether intentionally or not, this crossroads is where the months of Russia-gate hysteria have led the United States, making Trump even more vulnerable to Israeli and neoconservative pressure and making any cooperation with Russia more dangerous for him politically.

After meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Sunday, Netanyahu declared that Israel was totally opposed to the Trump-Putin cease-fire deal in southern Syria because it perpetuates Iranian presence in Syria in support of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Netanyahu's position increases pressure on Trump to escalate U.S. military involvement in Syria and possibly move toward war against Iran and even Russia. The American neocons, who generally move in sync with Netanyahu's wishes, already have as their list of current goals "regime changes" in Damascus, Tehran and Moscow – regardless of the dangers to the Middle East and indeed the world.

At the G-20 summit on July 7, Trump met for several hours with Putin coming away with an agreed-upon cease-fire for southwestern Syria, an accord that has proven more successful than previous efforts to reduce the violence that has torn the country apart since 2011.

But that limited peace could mean failure for the proxy war that Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other regional players helped launch six years ago with the goal of removing Assad from power and shattering the so-called "Shiite crescent" from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut. Instead, that "crescent" appears more firmly in place, with Assad's military bolstered by Shiite militia forces from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah.

In other words, the "regime change" gambit against Assad's government would have backfired, with Iranian and Hezbollah forces arrayed along Israel's border with Syria. And instead of accepting that reversal and seeking some modus vivendi with Iran, Netanyahu and his Sunni-Arab allies (most notably the Saudi monarchy) have decided to go in the other direction (a wider war) and to bring President Trump along with them.

Neophyte Trump

Trump – a relative neophyte in global intrigue – has been slow to comprehend how his outreach to Netanyahu and Saudi King Salman runs counter to his collaboration with Putin on efforts to defeat the Sunni jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda and Islamic State, which have served as the point of the spear in the war to overthrow Assad.

Al Qaeda and Islamic State have received direct and indirect support from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Turkey, Israel and even the Obama administration, albeit sometimes unwittingly. To block Assad's overthrow – and the likely victory by these terror groups – Russia, Iran and Hezbollah came to Assad's defense, helping to turn the tide of the war since 2015.

In his nearly half year in office, Trump has maintained an open hostility toward Iran – sharing a position held by Washington's neocons as well as Netanyahu and Salman – but the U.S. President also has advocated cooperation with Russia to crush Islamic State and Al Qaeda inside Syria.

Collaboration with Russia – and indirectly with Iran and the Syrian military – makes sense for most U.S. interests, i.e., stabilizing Syria, reversing the refugee flow that has destabilized Europe, and denying Al Qaeda and Islamic State a base for launching terror strikes against Western targets.

But the same collaboration would be a bitter defeat for Netanyahu and Salman who have invested heavily in this and other “regime change” projects that require major U.S. investments in terms of diplomacy, money and military manpower.

So, in last weekend's trip to Paris, Netanyahu chose to raise the stakes on Trump at a time when Democrats and the U.S. mainstream media are pounding him daily with the Russia-gate scandal, even raising the possibility that his son, Donald Trump Jr., might be prosecuted and imprisoned for having a meeting in June 2016 with a Russian lawyer.

If Trump wants the Russia-gate pain to lessen, he will be tempted to give Netanyahu what he wants and count on the savvy Israeli leader to intervene with the influential neocons of Official Washington to pull back on the scandal-mongering.

The problem, however, would be that Netanyahu really wants the U.S. military to complete the “regime change” project in Syria – much as it did in Iraq and Libya – meaning more American dead, more American treasure expended and a likely wider war, extending to Iran and possibly nuclear-armed Russia.

That might fulfill the neocon current menu of “regime change” schemes but it runs the risk of unleashing a nuclear conflagration on the world. In that way, liberals and even some progressives – who have embraced Russia-gate as a way to remove the hated Donald Trump from office – may end up contributing to the end of human civilization as well.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon

The Lost Liberalism of Netanyahu's Israel

Under Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel continues to become more and more intolerant both in its treatment of Palestinians and its attitude toward more liberal tendencies in Judaism, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

In recent weeks, the Israeli government has taken measures that have exacerbated tensions within world Jewry. Each measure has reflected the political power of ultra-Orthodox parties within the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

One of the government's moves was to suspend a plan to provide space for non-Orthodox men and women to pray together at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Currently the main prayer plaza at this holy site is run in accordance with Orthodox practice and has separate men's and women's sections.

The other development was Netanyahu's endorsement of a bill that gives the ultra-Orthodox religious establishment a monopoly in determining what conversions to Judaism should be recognized in Israel.

Most critical commentary in the United States about these developments has focused on them as an affront to Jews in the United States. American Jews, a large proportion of whom belong to Reform or Conservative branches of the faith, constitute one of the two largest concentrations, along with the population of Israel, of Jews worldwide.

A theme of the commentary has been that the Israeli government's moves might weaken support for Israel among American Jews, and that such weakening could lead in turn to a lessening of the large, automatic, material and diplomatic support that the United States provides to Israel. A further theme is an assumption that such lessening would be bad.

Non-Jews who do not live in Israel have no direct stake in the religious dimension of such controversies, and have little or nothing useful to say about that dimension. To try to say something about it would make as little sense as non-Muslims lecturing Muslims about whether violence and extremism conform with

Islam – although such lecturing often is attempted. But the moves in question do involve important dimensions for anyone concerned about U.S. foreign policy.

Stigmatizing Dissent

Set aside for the moment how commentary that speaks of the political clout of American Jews in determining U.S. policy strays into especially sensitive territory – where, if a non-Jew enters that territory, one is apt to hear accusations of anti-Semitism. There are, indeed, genuinely anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jews supposedly controlling all sorts of U.S. policies. In any event, the politics of U.S. backing for Israel is not just a function of American Jews, even insofar as religious motivations are involved. Evangelical Christians can be at least as conspicuous in offering zealous and unqualified support for Israel.

That still leaves two other dimensions of foreign policy concern. One involves the Israeli government's persistent efforts to conflate its own objectives with the interests of Jews worldwide. Netanyahu's presumption to speak and act on behalf of Jews everywhere serves at least a couple of politically useful purposes. It encourages the kind of support from the Jewish Diaspora that, although not the whole picture as far as support from the United States or other countries is concerned, is indeed a major part of such backing. The presumption also enables Netanyahu or others to play the anti-Semitism card in response to criticism of Israeli government policies.

The conflation is false. Israeli policies are the policies of a government, not the expression of a religious faith or an ethnic group or a global community with an identity forged by history. To categorize any criticism of those policies as a manifestation of anti-Jewish prejudice is to say that such policies should never be subject to criticism; that would be neither good for Israel nor good for the policies of other countries toward Israel.

To find fault with policies of Iran or Saudi Arabia – states that also define themselves in terms of a specific religion – is not necessarily anti-Islamic. To find fault with policies of Israel is not necessarily anti-Jewish.

The controversies about conversions and about prayer at the Western Wall place in stark relief the separation between the Israeli government's policies and the interests of Jews worldwide. Not only are the two not equivalent; the specific policies of the Israeli government have made the two contradictory in some respects. And this is true not only about the ability of non-Israeli Jews to pray at a holy site in accordance with their own customs or to be recognized as a Jew when in Israel.

Criticizing Soros

Netanyahu's posture toward attacks by the right-wing government of Hungary against the Jewish, Hungarian-born, American financier George Soros provides another illustration of Netanyahu's priorities. Netanyahu overturned an earlier Israeli foreign ministry statement that had condemned the attacks as contributing to anti-Semitism in Hungary, preferring instead to reaffirm his own government's attacks on Soros because of the financier's support for organizations critical of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and of its government's discrimination against non-Jewish citizens.

The implications of this divide include not only the one for Jews that their interests are not to be equated with the policies of Israel, but also the one for non-Jews that respect for Jews and Judaism does not require deference to those policies.

The other major dimension highlighted by the recent religious controversies in Israel concerns the basis and rationale for U.S. policy toward Israel. Much has been said through the past seven decades about shared values between the United States and Israel. The emphasis on values in constructing rationales for the unqualified U.S. support for Israel has become all the more necessary to the extent that non-value-laden ways of looking at U.S. interests involved – in terms of U.S. standing in the Muslim world, factors affecting instability in the Middle East, and motivations for anti-U.S. terrorism – make the unqualified support less defensible.

There were in fact some common values associated with the creation of the State of Israel. The commonality has lessened over time, especially with regard to fundamental values involving political and human rights, and especially in the half-century of occupation of Palestinian territory, which now constitutes more than two-thirds of Israel's history.

The subjugation of an entire nationality denied meaningful political rights, by a dominant population defined in terms of religion and ethnicity, is vastly at odds with American values. The United States has its own checkered history with such matters, of course, with the slavery of African-Americans and dispossession of Native Americans being among the biggest departures from what most Americans today would consider their political and social values.

But even taking the least favorable view of the American story – and saying that it wasn't until the civil rights advances of the 1960s, the same decade in which the Israeli occupation of the West Bank began, that those American values began to be realized – there is no comparison between modern American values and the Israel of today.

Religion and American 'Values'

The recent issues about conversions and prayer space underscore that there is a wide difference in values regarding religion as well. There always was going to be a substantial difference, with the American values from the beginning of the republic being based on the absence of an established religion and on law that would, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, "comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahomedan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination."

The gulf between this concept and idea of a Jewish state was not especially salient during Israel's early years, given the largely secular and Western orientation of some of Israel's founders and the political tone they set. But as with political values, this, too, has changed over time.

Israel's principal founding father, David Ben-Gurion, who described himself as irreligious, created the system in which ultra-Orthodox were exempted from military service and could devote themselves to full-time study of the Torah – a measure taken to obtain ultra-Orthodox support for creation of the state apparatus and justified to save a tradition of religious study that the Holocaust had almost wiped out. Ben-Gurion probably did not foresee how, thanks largely to differential birth rates, the ultra-Orthodox would acquire the greater political power they have today, with wide influence on life within Israel and even beyond.

The status of Israel as a post-Holocaust haven for Jews does not erase the significance of the gulf in values. Being a haven does not require being a theocracy, much less one with an increasingly narrow view of those worthy of receiving protection in the haven.

Part of the background to the increasing ambivalence about Israel among American Jews (not to mention European ones) that commentators lament is that, notwithstanding undeniable anti-Semitism, most of them feel relatively safe as well as integrated where they are right now. Net migration into Israel has been dropping over the past decade and was close to zero by 2015.

The Trump administration has indicated at times that it does not intend to be guided much by values in constructing its foreign policy. And yet the President, in his speech in Warsaw, talked about Western values. Applying this concept to the religious situation in Israel, a fair observation is that this situation exhibits Middle Eastern values at least as much as Western values.

The segregation of the sexes that is at the center of the controversy over prayer at the Western Wall resembles not what one sees in the overwhelming

majority of houses of worship in the West but rather what prevails in those parts of the Middle East dominated by fundamentalist versions of Islam.

The Netanyahu government's recent measures on religious matters are part of narrowing limits of acceptability and increasing intolerance in Israel. The Chief Rabbinate's blacklist of overseas rabbis whose authority it refuses to recognize in certifying as Jewish someone who wants to marry in Israel includes even many Orthodox rabbis in the United States. This sort of thing is strong food for thought not only for Jews but also for other Americans whose government has married itself to the Israeli theocracy.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

The Paradox of Tolerance/Intolerance

The issue of "tolerance" can be complicated, even paradoxical, such as extending tolerance to intolerance with the possibility that the intolerance will ultimately eliminate tolerance, explains Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

In case you haven't noticed, the United States is a country deeply divided on a large number of basic issues: racial issues, gender issues, issues of sexual preference, the role of government in society, the role of religious views in shaping laws, and so on. Influential Institutions, such as media outlets, are being labeled as "left" or "right" depending on how they report or relate on these issues.

Battles now rage on these topics in the halls of Congress. Finally, the Supreme Court's legal decisions on cases that reflect these questions have been trending toward the "conservative" end of the spectrum. All of this makes it quite difficult to have a meaningful discussion or debate about such issues in the public realm. Such attempts have often led to further divisiveness instead of reconciliation – reflecting what some might describe as an ongoing culture war.

The one place where thoughtful debates are usually encouraged is on the university and colleges campuses. This is particularly so in the "humanities" and "social sciences" classrooms, where you find courses in history, English,

foreign languages, sociology, anthropology, political science and the like. Such areas of study draw on diverse source material and examples. And so, running against the popular grain, so to speak, divisive issues often become legitimate aspects of study.

This process of study and discussion concerning controversial topics has been going on at U.S. campuses at least since the end of World War II. By the 1970s clear preferences as to how these issues should be thought about appeared. And, they consistently agreed with a tolerant stand that maximized the virtues of equality and social justice. It should come as no surprise that faculty in these areas are usually left of center on the political spectrum.

Thus, the campus consensus is that while an individual can privately feel as he or she likes about topics such as homosexuality or racial integration, and can choose their social circle accordingly, it is wrong to publicly act in an overtly discriminatory way. Until recently the courts have agreed with this position, but now things appear to be changing.

Such a trend in the direction of public intolerance has begun to isolate the campus environment while at the same time denigrating the tolerant position as “political correctness” – as if being correct and thus legitimate, appropriate and proper was a failing.

A Republican Attack on the University

This process of isolating one of the staunchest bastions of active public tolerance has recently been highlighted by a new (July 2017) report of the Pew Research Center entitled Sharp Partisan Divisions In Views of National Institutions.

According to the report, there has been “a dramatic attitude shift on higher education among Republicans and people who lean Republican.” It would seem that “Republicans have soured on higher education, with more than half [a reported 58 percent of them] now saying that colleges have a negative impact on the United States.”

The more conservative the Republican respondent described him- or herself, the more likely they are to have a negative view of higher educational institutions. This compares with 72 percent of Democrats who saw the contribution of colleges on society as positive. Of course, Democrats now have problems getting elected.

There is a link between those who hold a negative view of institutions of higher learning and those who confine themselves to watching or listening to the country’s right-wing media.

As it turns out, “Virtually every day Fox News, Breitbart and other conservative outlets run critical articles about free speech disputes on college campuses, typically with coverage focused on the perceived liberal orthodoxy and political correctness in higher education.” Now consider that Fox News is the most popular news (or shall we say, alleged news) show on U.S. television.

The success of right-wing news and other media is a good example of viewers practicing, perhaps unconsciously, *confirmation bias*. The criterion for the information you seek out is not accuracy or truth, but rather its ability to confirm an outlook you already hold.

Of course, one does not have to be right-wing to play this particular game but, ultimately it makes a difference if you are among the intolerant. Intolerant worldviews are closed systems. Once you have committed to them you have put on blinkers and become one of the faithful – no more debates, no more discussions, no more broadmindedness, no more tolerance. People without your blinkers start to appear as dangerous, heretical, unpatriotic. You are now bound to a “group think” that is starkly undemocratic.

Poisonous Sour Grapes

As intolerance under the leadership of Republicans and neo-Republicans (Trump, Bannon, Tea Party types, etc.) becomes more widespread, those institutions that value tolerance come under pressure. This sometimes comes from right-wing media, sometimes from special interest donors and lobbyists, and sometimes, in the case of college and universities, from pockets of students (both right and left) who have decided that some outlooks are so unacceptable that they must be silenced. Whenever reasonable this last action should be avoided.

If you don't like what campus speakers stand for or say, one's default position should not be to shut them down, but rather to use their presence as a teaching moment: here is how not to build a healthy society. However, in the midst of a culture war, the tolerant may ultimately find themselves painted into a corner.

We can legitimately ask how far the Republican Right is willing to push their campaign of intolerance against tolerant college campuses. Having lost the open campus debates on an array of divisive issues, they now react with a poisonous version of sour grapes. They declare that “colleges have a negative impact on the United States.”

If they take this charge to Congress or to the courts, we may come to a point where tolerance of extreme intolerance is no longer reasonable. Given that level of threat we should all be aware of Karl Popper's description of the paradox of tolerance: “unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If

we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.”

This is the dilemma that is forced upon us when war – in this case a culture war – takes over the public mind. The space for tolerance shrinks and it is the barbarians among us who start to define the rules of social interaction.

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

Moral Corrosion of Drone Warfare

Exclusive: The U.S. government uses drones to eliminate risk to its soldiers and thus domestic opposition to war, but that heightens the moral imperative to challenge the remote-controlled killings, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Required by court order to appear before a judge in Syracuse, New York, on July 12, some out-of-towners had already arrived there when the court granted the prosecution's last-minute request for more time to prepare its case against us, the Jerry Berrigan Brigade, for our nonviolent witness against drone warfare on Jan. 28, 2016. A trial date is likely to be set in a month or two, or perhaps three (so much for our Sixth Amendment right to a speedy trial).

Back in January 2016, we stood behind 30 larger-than-life-sized wooden silhouettes of Syracuse peacemaker Jerry Berrigan, who died at age 95 on July 26, 2015.

A widely loved and respected educator, Jerry – like his brothers Dan and Phil – was himself larger than life. Even in his early 90s, Jerry could be seen braving the elements, witnessing against the extrajudicial killings enabled by Hancock drone base in Syracuse.

Jerry was asked at one point if there were anything he would change in his life. “I would have resisted more often and been arrested more often,” he said.

On Jan. 28, 2016, we – the Jerry Berrigan Brigade – brought images of Jerry to

the gates of Hancock as a tangible reminder that this is where he would have been standing that day, putting his body on the line to say a clear, physical “NO” to killing. Jerry’s widow and daughter were there with us, cheering us on.

Most Americans are blissfully unaware that, from states-side drone bases like Hancock, drone “pilots” – with a push of the joystick, a click of a mouse, or simply a keystroke – can incinerate “suspected terrorists,” on the other side of the globe WITHIN THREE SECONDS.

Thanks to a media that is heavily influenced by what Pope Francis (speaking before Congress in 2015) called the “blood-drenched arms traders,” it’s largely a comfortable case of out-of-sight-out-of-mind. However, the more the killing is hidden, the more we feel a moral imperative to bring the killing out into the open and appeal to the consciences of U.S. citizens – including those of drone “pilots” many of whom have moral qualms about what they are being ordered to do and end up with bad cases of PTSD.

Many of us protesters – Catholic Workers and Jewish grandmothers alike – take our cue from anti-war activist Rabbi Heschel, who braced us all with this admonition: “When injustice takes place, few are guilty, but all are responsible. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.”

Rabbi Heschel got that right. And Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. reassured us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But how long and how to make it bend?

Seventeen-plus months since our Jerry Berrigan Brigade witness at Hancock, we cannot avoid wondering just how long it will take for our case to find justice. Nor are we sure what kind of “justice” will befall us. Whatever it is, though, it will be a small price to pay, when one considers the price paid by families who slip into the crosshairs of drone-fired Hellfire missiles.

Some well-meaning soul suggested we consider apologizing – a notion far from our minds. Were we to issue an apology, it would be patterned on the one given by Jerry Berrigan’s brothers Dan and Phil and the others of the Catonsville Nine, who burned draft cards with homemade napalm 50 years ago at the height of the war in Vietnam:

“Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children.”

Good Friday Witness, 2017

"Justice" is likely to be meted out more quickly to those of us who decided that Good Friday this year would be a fitting time to honor the memory of innocent victims of Empire, given what happened to Jesus of Nazareth when he challenged Empire. This time nine nonviolent resisters, including from Upstate Drone Action and Catholic Worker, were arrested at the main entrance to Hancock drone base witnessing against Hancock's role in drone killings.

Three hung on large wooden drone crosses representing victims of U.S. drone strikes in seven majority Muslim countries. Eleven others held smaller drone crosses headed by the phrase, "DRONES CRUCIFY," each followed by one of these: Children, Families, Love, Peace, Community, the US Constitution, UN Charter, Rule of Law, US Treaties, Due Process, or Diplomacy (in all, 14 "Stations of the Cross"). All the crosses were confiscated by Base personnel.

Perceiving a need to explain our Good Friday action we issued a statement, that includes the following:

"Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus. Recognizing that 70% of our nation identify as Christian, we come to the gates of the Hancock drone base to make real the crucifixion today. As Jesus and others were crucified by the Roman Empire, drones are used by the U.S. Empire in similar fashion.

"In Roman times, crosses loomed over a community to warn people that they could be killed whenever the Empire decided. So, too, our drones fly over many countries threatening extrajudicial killings upon whoever happens to be in the vicinity. On this Good Friday, we recall Jesus' call to love and nonviolence. We're asking this Air Force base and this nation to turn away from a policy of modern-day crucifixion.

"What if our country were constantly being spied upon by drones, with some 'suspected terrorists' killed by drones? What if many bystanders, including children, were killed in the process? If that were happening, we would hope that some people in that attacking country would speak up and try to stop the killing. We're speaking up to try and stop the illegal and immoral drone attacks on countries against which Congress has not declared war."

(A five-minute video of Nativity Scene Action at Hancock, the theme of which was: "If Herod Had Drones, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Would Have Been Incinerated.")

Several of those arrested on Good Friday, including me, were the same "perps" awaiting trial for the action of our Jerry Berrigan Brigade action a year and a half ago. But the judge hearing this more recent case told us when we appeared before him on July 13 that he will now set a trial date for us Good Friday

protesters.

Other Witness Against Drones

Over the last couple of years there have been many protest actions and arrests at one of the most important drone bases – Creech AFB in Nevada, where many from many parts of the U.S. and abroad have demonstrated against the brutality of drone killing.

Lesser known are actions in other parts of the country to raise awareness of the expansion of drone bases in localities like Des Moines, Iowa. There the Des Moines Catholic Worker and Veterans For Peace have launched a campaign to call attention to the drone assassinations in which the 132nd Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard plays a role from Des Moines airport. There have been several arrests, trials, and convictions.

The July issue of the Des Moines Catholic Worker community newspaper, *Via Pacis*, carries the words of Frank Cordaro, a Catholic priest, before his latest arrest in late May at the National Guard drone command in Des Moines. Frank reached back to the prophet Ezekiel to address the imperative to “blow the trumpet,” saying:

“This protest is an Ezekiel ‘Watchman’ witness. Ezekiel was a priest of the First Temple and only became a prophet after he was kicked out of Jerusalem and sent into captivity in Babylon. Once there, he started to have visions: ‘The Lord said to me, when the Watchman sees the sword coming against the land, he should blow the trumpet to warn the people.’

“The Des Moines Catholic Worker community has been a kind of Watchman for the city of Des Moines on the issues of war and peace for the past 40 years. It’s probably because we Catholic Workers have been protesting US-led wars for over 80 years nationally and 40 in Des Moines. And it’s very personal for me too. I grew up on the south side of Des Moines and this airport is just blocks away from the neighborhood I grew up in.”

Needed: more Watchmen and Watchwomen. A drone base may soon be coming to your own neighborhood.

Ray McGovern works for a publishing arm of the Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He has written about the moral imperative of activism and tries to heed it. He was an Army officer and then a CIA analyst for 30 years, and is now on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).
