

Learning to Love the 'Drone War'

The mainstream U.S. news media is so in the tank on the "war on terror" that it ignores critical information that the American people should know, such as the public complaint from four former Air Force drone operators that the lethal program is killing innocents and creating terrorists, writes John Hanrahan.

By John Hanrahan

The polls show it and commentators of all political stripes often cite the figures: Killer drone attacks by the U.S. military and the CIA in the Greater Middle East and Africa have strong U.S. public support.

According to the Pew Research Center's most recent poll in May, 58 percent, up slightly from 56 percent in February 2013, approve of "missile strikes from drones to target extremists in such countries as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia." The numbers of Americans disapproving of drone attacks actually increased from 26 percent to 35 percent over that two-year period, a hopeful sign, but still very much a minority view.

But how well informed can U.S. citizens be on this subject when the major news media time and again ignore or under-report drone-strike stories, as we have discussed [here](#) and [here](#) in recent weeks? Stories, such as *The Intercept's* October series based on a trove of classified materials provided by a national security whistleblower, that would likely raise serious questions about the drone program in many more Americans' minds if they were actually given the information?

And now, in the latest example of journalistic negligence, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other mainstream news organizations in late November continued their apparent policy of no-bad-news-reporting-about-drones.

This time, the major media chose to ignore four former Air Force drone-war personnel who went public with an [open letter](#) to President Barack Obama. The letter urged the President to reconsider a program that killed "innocent civilians," and which "only fueled the feelings of hatred that ignited terrorism and groups like ISIS, while also serving as a fundamental recruiting tool [for extremists] similar to Guantanamo Bay."

In strong, dramatic language, the four men, in the letter and subsequent press appearances, challenged the official Obama White House/Pentagon/CIA public view that civilians are rarely killed by drones, and that drones make Americans safer and are helping defeat terrorists. Rather, they said that the U.S. drone war plays right into the hands of ISIS and other extremist groups by terrorizing

local populations and killing innocent civilians, resulting in heightened anti-U.S. feeling and more recruits for ISIS.

Now it's not every day that four former drone operators go public with their anguish-filled stories of the drone program killing innocent people and creating blowback against the United States.

In fact, there has not been any day like that. Until now, that has never happened. You would think that this would meet some textbook definition of news, something new, uncommon, dramatic and consequential. When President Obama or a proven liar about the drone program, CIA Director John Brennan, propagandize about drones and how wonderful and precise and well-nigh infallible they are in crushing extremists, not killing civilians and making us safe, that is what the mainstream media dutifully reports as news.

But when four drone whistleblowers, who sat at the very heart of the system guiding Hellfire missiles from Predator drones to human targets in Afghanistan and Iraq, come forward to undermine that tidy little story, those same news outlets turn their collective back.

Voicing such sharp criticism of a top-secret program with which they were all involved is an especially risky move given that the Obama administration has shown itself to be the most anti-whistleblower administration ever. Obama's Justice Department has prosecuted more than twice as many whistleblowers under the Espionage Act as all previous presidents combined since the passage of the law in 1917.

The letter to Obama, also addressed to Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter and CIA Director Brennan, said that the Bush and Obama administrations "have built a drone program that is one of the most devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world." They expressed guilt, and are experiencing PTSD, as a result of "our roles in facilitating this systematic loss of innocent life."

In a pointed reference to the Obama administration's statements in support of the drone program, the letter stated: "We witnessed gross waste, mismanagement, abuses of power, and our country's leaders lying publicly about the effectiveness of the drone program."

And, drawing a link between the recent Paris attacks and drone killings creating more terrorists and blowback, the whistleblowers added: "We cannot sit silently by and witness tragedies like the attacks in Paris, knowing the devastating effects the drone program has overseas and at home. Such silence would violate the very oaths we took to support and defend the Constitution."

These former Air Force personnel, three former Predator sensor operators (Staff Sergeant Brandon Bryant, Senior Airman Stephen Lewis and Senior Airman Michael Haas), and one former drone program infrastructure technician (Senior Airman Cian Westmoreland), had a combined 20-plus years of remotely operating drone strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq from Creech Air Force Base, Nevada.

All had Afghanistan drone experience, and all but Westmoreland also had Iraq experience. This gave them special, first-hand insight into a program whose operators, in Haas's words, viewed targeted human beings as "ants just black blobs on a screen" and considered children who came into view on their screens as "fun-sized terrorists."

Haas and other whistleblowers expanded on the points in their letter in an interview with *Guardian* reporters, which resulted in two eye-opening articles by Ed Pilkington and Ewen MacAskill. This was followed by a lengthy appearance on *Democracy Now!* and a news conference in connection with the premiere in New York of a new documentary, "Drone," in which two of the whistleblowers (Bryant and Haas) make appearances. Agence France-Press (AFP), *Reuters* and Newsweek all carried stories, as did The Intercept, Shadowproof and other online news sites.

Did you read about any of that whistleblower criticism in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, or see a segment about it on television news? No, you did not. If you know about it at all, it's probably because of *The Guardian*, *Democracy Now!*, and online political and progressive blogs and websites.

This marked the second time in just the last two months that mainstream news outlets have given a thumbs-down to a significant drone story. In October, *The Washington Post* ignored it and *The New York Times* ran two paragraphs at the end of a 25-paragraph piece about a series of significant drone articles posted in *The Intercept*. The articles were derived from documents, referred to as the "Drone Papers," that were provided to *The Intercept* by an anonymous intelligence whistleblower. (We wrote about that here.)

As ExposeFacts has previously noted, mainstream news organizations make only occasional forays once or twice a year into reporting that is critical of the drone program (for example, this *New York Times* article from 2012 and one earlier this year).

What many Americans see or hear most of the time from the self-censoring mainstream media is superficial reporting on the latest drone strike that killed a certain number of what are almost always described in sketchy news stories as militants of one type or another. They also get frequent doses of propaganda and

soothing assurances from the President and other Obama administration officials that the program of drones and other aerial bombardments is precise, takes special precaution not to kill civilians, but most importantly is making America safer by killing militants while keeping U.S. troops out of harm's way.

Typical was Obama's speech in May 2013 at the National Defense University, where he said this: "And before any [drone] strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured the highest standard we can set." He said civilian deaths constituted "a risk that exists in all wars."

But as Commander-in-Chief, he went on, "I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties not just in our cities at home and facilities abroad, but also in the very places like Sana'a and Kabul and Mogadishu where terrorists seek a foothold."

And who, if they were paying attention at the time, can ever forget major-league truth abuser John Brennan, when he was Obama's top counterterrorism adviser, saying in June 2011 that for almost a year, "there hasn't been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities we've been able to develop."

In reporting that whopper, *The New York Times* in August 2011 further reported this: "Other officials say that [Brennan's] extraordinary claim still holds: since May 2010, C.I.A. officers believe, the drones have killed more than 600 militants including at least 20 in a strike reported Wednesday and not a single noncombatant."

Given the Obama administration's control of the drone narrative and the paucity of mainstream press coverage, the 35 percent opposition figure shown in the Pew Research Center's poll in May is a bit surprising for being as high as it is. Especially given that so many Americans buy into the notion that the nation is in a war against terrorism, that drones make us safe, and that killing remotely by drones is preferable to sending U.S. soldiers into combat areas and risking their lives.

Curiously, that same Pew Research Center poll, in addition to showing 35 percent opposition, found that 48 percent said "they are very concerned that U.S. drone strikes endanger the lives of innocent civilians." This higher figure suggests that even some Americans currently favoring drone attacks have doubts about how well civilians are protected, and thus might be open to opposing drone use if the mainstream media would let them know what the four whistleblowers said.

Or if the mainstream press would let them know what was contained in *The*

Intercept's "Drone Papers" articles, such as the revelation that during one five-month period of Operation Haymaker in northeastern Afghanistan, "nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. In Yemen and Somalia where the U.S. has far more limited intelligence capabilities to confirm the people killed are the intended targets, the equivalent ratios may well be much worse."

It's worth noting that *The Guardian*, *AFP* and *Reuters*, outlets that did cover the four drone whistleblowers, are all headquartered outside the United States and are not part of the inside-the-Beltway media crowd that influence what is and isn't news at the national and U.S. governmental level.

Also, because those news outlets all have high levels of newspaper and Internet-based circulation in numerous countries, what they report can make citizens of other countries better informed than Americans about certain aspects of U.S. life. This meant, for example, that Singapore readers of *The Straits Times* and the Dublin, Ireland readers of *TheJournal.ie* got to read about the four whistleblowers via an *AFP* article online. Meanwhile, sadly and ironically, readers of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were left in the dark.

Across the waters in the drone-deploying United Kingdom, public opinion on drone use appears to be the direct opposite of the United States. A Pew Research Center poll in July 2014 found that the U.K. public opposed the use of drones by a 59-33 percent margin.

With *The Guardian* and others providing more critical coverage of drones than U.S. mainstream media, and with the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism regularly pumping out information that challenges U.S. government claims about limited civilian drone-strike deaths, it's a good bet that U.K. citizens are more exposed to criticisms of the drone programs than are their U.S. counterparts.

Additionally, many members of Parliament are much more critical of Britain's drone policies than are members of Congress critical of U.S. policies, and they are often in the news with their criticisms and concerns. Not so in the United States where, with no serious congressional oversight or debate about drones, there is seldom any anti-drone news generated in the House or Senate, which means citizens hear nothing from the legislative branch to counter the White House views.

As long as major U.S. news organizations continue to ignore, downplay or under-report drone stories, much of the American public will remain under-informed or ill-informed about what our drone strikes are doing to the citizens of many other countries, while at the same time turning ever more people against the

United States.

[Disclosure: The four drone whistleblowers are represented by attorney Jesselyn Radack, who is national security and human rights director of the ExposeFacts WHISPeR program.]

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Global Angst over US Secrecy Fetish

With the reach of U.S. surveillance now global and with the U.S. military deployed all over the world anger at President Obama's unprecedented crackdown on whistleblowers who disclose the U.S. government's abuses and crimes has gone international, as this Norwegian opinion piece by Victor Wallis shows.

By Victor Wallis

The more extreme the crimes of state, the more the state seeks to shroud them in secrecy. The greater the secrecy and the accompanying lies, the more vital becomes the role of whistleblowers and the more vindictive becomes the state in its pursuit of them.

Whistleblowers are people who start out as loyal servants of the state. Their illusions about the state's supposed moral agenda and the wholeheartedness of their own patriotic commitment make them all the more shocked when they discover evidence of the state's wrongdoing.

Given the extreme concentration of weaponry (as well as surveillance capabilities) in the hands of the state, and given the disposition of the state to apply such resources even against nonviolent mass movements, the type of defection practiced by whistleblowers an option available to military and intelligence operatives at all levels is crucial to any eventual triumph of popular forces over the ruling class.

Whistleblowers thus not only embarrass the government, disrupt its policies, and (assuming adequate diffusion) educate the citizenry; they also are harbingers of a broader crumbling of the capitalist state and the order it defends. Acting largely in isolation and at great risk to themselves, they embody the conviction or at least the hope that basic decency has a more universal grounding than does any possible scheme of oppression.

Whistleblowing's principal near-term function is educational. It demonstrates the undemocratic character of the regime whose secrets it lets out; it is thus an essential ingredient of investigative journalism. The documents it brings to light reach the public through those who practice such journalism, whom the government then threatens with prosecution unless they disclose their sources.

The novelty of Wikileaks is that it provided a new form of protection for the anonymity of sources. This, together with the facility of electronic transmission, has made the potential for disclosure greater than ever before. It accounts for the extraordinary fact that the U.S. government has been pursuing draconian charges against someone who not merely is only the recipient rather than the "leaker" of sensitive information, but someone who is not even a citizen or resident of the United States Julian Assange.

Disclosure is particularly embarrassing when it documents the fact that government officials have lied. The Director of Central Intelligence lied under oath to the U.S. Congress a felony for which he was never prosecuted when he denied that the National Security Agency monitors the communications of the entire U.S. population.

This lie was the culminating event in Edward Snowden's decision to blow the whistle. As we all know, of course, it is Snowden who was then criminalized by the government. This parallels the experience of John Kiriakou, who publicly confirmed, on the basis of his first-hand knowledge, that the CIA practiced torture by waterboarding. Kiriakou then became the only government official to be prosecuted and imprisoned in connection with CIA and military practices of torture.

The debate over whistleblowers reached tens of millions of viewers when the presidential candidates of the Democratic Party were asked (on Oct. 13) their views about Snowden. Hillary Clinton falsely asserted that he could have used established channels to transmit his disclosures of excessive surveillance, presumably at no risk to himself.

This claim is refuted by the experience of previous whistleblowers who had taken just that approach. One of them, Thomas Drake, retold his story two days later, at a news conference ignored by most of the corporate media ([video](#)), which was

organized on behalf of yet another whistleblower, Jeffrey Sterling, who recently began a 42-month prison term on a conviction of “espionage.”

What Sterling had done was report to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence about a counterproductive CIA attempt (in 2000) to feed misleading technological data to Iranian scientists. What he was prosecuted for was his subsequent conversations with *New York Times* journalist James Risen, although no evidence was available as to the content of those conversations, since Risen refused to testify.

Sterling’s story is recounted in a letter from his wife, seeking presidential clemency from Obama. Sterling had been fired from the CIA in 2002 after filing a complaint against the agency for racial discrimination (an episode on which Risen wrote a news story). After Risen’s book *State of War* (2006) came out, the FBI raided Sterling’s home, but it was not until more than four years later under President Obama that he was arrested (2011).

The latest whistleblower, who documents the “normalization of assassination” via drone warfare, is wisely seeking to remain anonymous. The U.S. government will surely take all possible steps to track him down.

The work of whistleblowers, as well as their personal safety, is obviously an issue that cuts across national borders. Support for U.S. whistleblowers will need to be as global as the reach of the policies and the weapons that they expose.

Victor Wallis is managing editor of the journal Socialism and Democracy. [This is the original text of a column (written on Oct. 20) posted on the Norwegian website radikalportal.no.]

In the Dark on the ‘Dark Side’

The “War on Terror” now more than 14 years long has trapped the U.S. and other nations in the “dark side” of human behavior, a dilemma that is both moral and practical because the continued use of brutal methods has only made the crisis worse, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

France and Russia’s military responses to mass murders in Paris and Egypt echo the United States’ response to mass murders in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania in 2001. As Oxford University researcher Lydia Wilson told

Democracy Now on Nov. 17, Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) is “seemingly delighted” by this warlike response to its latest atrocities.

In several interviews, Lydia Wilson has cited Abu Bakr Naji’s *The Management of Savagery* as a “playbook” that ISIS appears to be following closely. Naji called for mass murders in foreign cities and tourist destinations as part of a strategy to draw foreign powers into unwinnable wars that would spread chaos, fuel jihadism and leave Muslim fundamentalist groups in control of more and more of the Muslim world.

This builds on Al Qaeda’s original strategy, which counted on an aggressive response to the 9/11 attacks to expose the iron fist inside the velvet glove of U.S. “soft power” and the hollowness of the U.S. government’s commitment to civil liberties, human rights and the rule of law. Al Qaeda astutely turned its enemy’s military superiority into a liability by provoking the U.S. to unleash disastrous wars on Muslim countries.

The U.S. invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and the concentration camp at Guantanamo became the most valuable assets in Al Qaeda’s propaganda and recruiting campaigns, now complemented by the terror of drone strikes and bombing campaigns in Syria and Iraq.

As the UN Human Rights Commissioner, Prince Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein of Jordan, told the Council on Foreign Relations on Nov. 16, “it seems that the defenses against chaos and bloodshed that states erected at the close of the Second World War, the laws they wrote and swore to abide by, the agreements and treaties they signed, are giving way to increasing action bound by no principle or any foresight. ... Much of the Middle East and North Africa is gripped in deadly conflict with constant, now almost routine, violations of the norms that should protect civilians, and even proxy warfare with greater powers engaged in combat rather than in making peace.”

To briefly take stock of 14 years of war, which our leaders launched and continue to justify as a response to terrorism:

–The U.S. and its allies have conducted over 120,000 air strikes against seven countries, exploding fundamentalist jihadism from its original base in Afghanistan to an active presence in all seven countries and beyond.

–The U.S. and its allies have invaded and occupied Afghanistan for 14 years, Iraq for over eight years, and destroyed Libya, Syria and Yemen for good measure.

–By conservative estimates, U.S.-led wars have killed about 1.6 million people, mostly civilians. That is 500 times the number of people killed by the original

crimes in the United States. Disproportionate use of force and geographic expansion of the conflict by our side has ensured an endless proliferation of violence on all sides.

–War, occupation and human rights abuses have driven 59.5 million people from their homes, more than at any time since the Second World War.

–Since 2001, the U.S. has borrowed and spent \$3.3 trillion in additional military spending to pay for the largest unilateral military build-up in history, but less than half the extra funding has been spent on current wars. (See Carl Conetta’s 2010 paper, “An Undisciplined Defense”, for more analysis of the Pentagon’s “spending surge.”)

When U.S. support for Muslim fundamentalist jihadis in Afghanistan led to the most catastrophic blowback in our history on Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. government declared a “global war on terror” against them. But less than a decade later, it once again began recruiting, training and arming Muslim fundamentalists to fight in Libya and Syria.

The U.S. also made the largest arms sale in history to Saudi Arabia, which is already ruled by a dynasty of Muslim fundamentalists whose role in the 9/11 crimes remains a closely guarded secret. It was only when ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014 that the U.S. government was finally forced to rethink its covert support for such groups in Syria. It has yet to seriously reconsider its alliances with their state sponsors: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other Arab monarchies.

Throughout the past 14 years, whenever the fear of terrorism has temporarily receded, the U.S. government has quickly redirected its threats and uses of military force, covert operations and propaganda to a completely different purpose: destabilizing and overthrowing a laundry-list of internationally recognized governments, in Venezuela, Iraq, Honduras, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and around the world.

In these operations, the U.S. government has never balked at allying with violent groups whom it would be quick to condemn as “terrorists” if they were on the other side. The American people are being treated to a new version of President Ronald Reagan’s comical division of violent groups into “terrorists” and “freedom fighters” based on their relationship to U.S. policy.

In more recent years, patriotic Iraqis who resisted the illegal invasion of their country were “terrorists” and armed neo-Nazis in Ukraine were first noble “protesters” and are now part of a new “National Guard.”

Each new U.S. military operation is justified as a response to some new crisis, while the U.S. role in creating these crises in the first place is obscured

(with increasing difficulty) behind funhouse mirrors of secrecy and propaganda.

This pattern of opportunistic uses of force was exactly the strategy outlined by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld within hours of the mass murders on Sept. 11, 2001. CBS News obtained a copy of Undersecretary Stephen Cambone's notes from a meeting amid the ruins of the Pentagon at 2:40 p.m. that day. Cambone quoted Rumsfeld saying, "Judge whether good enough hit S.H. (Saddam Hussein) at same time – not only UBL (Usama Bin Laden) ... Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not."

In a recent article about the record U.S. military budget, I explained that President Obama's annual military budgets have (on average and after adjusting for inflation) been higher than George W. Bush's, 60 percent higher than President Bill Clinton's and 2½ times what bipartisan experts recommended to the Senate Budget Committee at the end of the Cold War. The U.S. military is now more generously funded than the rest of the ten largest militaries in the world combined.

Investing our nation's wealth in military forces and deadly weapons and deploying them all over the world is not just a tragic waste in terms of all the unmet human needs in our country and the world. It's dangerous. By building a global war machine designed to fight anybody anywhere, while rejecting all legal and political constraints on how it may be used, U.S. leaders have set the stage for endless, unwinnable, global war.

As Prince Zeid suggested, the U.S. government has turned its back on the legitimate infrastructure of collective security enshrined in the UN Charter and international law, and reverted to something more primitive: the law of the jungle or "might makes right."

By fostering the dangerous illusion that illegal threats and uses of U.S. military force can replace the collective will of humanity and the rule of international law as the ultimate arbiter of international affairs, U.S. leaders have set us on a collision course with history.

When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia and China remained on the sidelines. Their oil companies even bid for contracts on new oilfields in Iraq, and Russia allowed the U.S. to ship war supplies through its territory to Afghanistan. In 2011, Russia and China both abstained from a UN Security Council resolution for a "no fly zone" supposedly to protect civilians in Libya when they could have simply vetoed it.

But when the U.S. and its allies abused that resolution to depose and butcher Muammar Gaddafi and plunge Libya into chaos, then transitioned quickly to launch

an even bloodier proxy war in Syria, China and Russia finally accepted that the U.S. war machine was really out of control. The U.S. was treating their efforts at appeasement as a green light for aggression that would sooner or later threaten them directly.

In 2012, Russia increased its military budget by 15 percent, the largest annual increase since Vladimir Putin was elected President in 2000. After the destruction of Libya, Russia concluded that it was essential to face down U.S. aggression and that the catastrophic failures of U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya provided an opening for Russian diplomacy to start pushing back.

The U.S. responded to Russia's support for the Syrian government by engineering a coup against an even more strategic Russian ally in Ukraine. The Western-backed coup threatened to roll NATO expansion right up to Russia's border and sail NATO warships into its most strategic naval base at Sevastopol.

Russia responded by accepting Crimea's request to restore its 230-year-old ties with Russia (94 percent of Crimeans had already voted for independence from Ukraine in 1991). Russia also supported the "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" in their resistance to the new Western-backed government in Kiev.

U.S. allies in Europe initially supported the U.S. campaign to isolate and sanction Russia over the chaos in Ukraine, but now France and Germany are working with Russia and Ukraine to implement the Minsk agreements, which are gradually restoring peace to Ukraine.

Until recently, Russia played a deft diplomatic hand without being directly drawn into combat in Syria or Ukraine. But now Russia has joined the free-for-all bombing of Syria. ISIS has responded by blowing up a Russian airliner over Egypt's Sinai. Russia has in turn escalated its aerial bombardment of jihadist targets inside Syria. Last week, Turkey shot down an Su-24 warplane along the Syrian border.

It seems that Russia is being drawn into the same escalating cycle of violence as the U.S. and its allies. Much depends on the results of the diplomatic process in Vienna and on the willingness of all the external powers involved in the war in Syria to allow the people of Syria to decide their own political future. That includes the U.S. and its allies just as much as Russia and Iran.

On a larger scale, it is vital for us to recognize that the United States, by authorizing the use of military force in 2001, became a party to this open-ended conflict and shares the responsibility for escalating or resolving it. Demonizing America's "enemies" is not a responsible or legitimate pretext for endlessly escalating an ill-defined war that has killed far more civilians

than combatants.

But by declaring that we are at war with “terror,” “Muslim extremism,” “associated forces” or whoever our leaders decide we’re at war with from one week to the next, the U.S. government has foreclosed many of the ways that wars are usually brought to an end. We cannot meet “terror” at the negotiating table.

The international military competition to “destroy” ISIS at whatever cost in civilian death and destruction, is an irresistible chance for the U.S., Russia, France and the U.K. to display and market their latest weapons technology. But it will not end the “war on terror.” Even a superficially successful military campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq will instead hasten the next mutation of jihadism and drive even more Muslims from around the world into its ranks.

Even President Obama has acknowledged that there is no military way out of the trap that he and other U.S. officials have unwittingly collaborated with the “terrorists” to set for us. Yet he still soldiers on blindly as if there are no non-military alternatives either.

But there are and always have been specific policy changes that the U.S. government could make if it were serious about ending this horrific cycle of violence:

–Repeal the 2001 and 2002 Congressional Authorizations for the Use of Military Force, which have become blank checks for endless war. Reps. Lee (D), Amash (R) and Massie (R) have introduced bills in Congress to do that: HR 1303 (to repeal the 2001 AUMF) and HR 1304 (to repeal the 2002 AUMF).

–Close the U.S. concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Every prisoner must either be released or be granted a free and fair trial in a real court.

–Stop threatening, bombing and attacking Muslim countries – and other ones too.

–Stop destabilizing and overthrowing internationally-recognized governments.

–End drone strikes and comply with long-standing executive orders prohibiting assassination as an instrument of U.S. policy.

–Shut down the “rat-line” of U.S. weapons to jihadi groups everywhere.

–Enforce existing U.S. laws that prohibit arms sales to governments that commit war crimes or human rights abuses, with no exceptions for U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia, Israel or Iraq.

–Stop using the U.S. veto to block majority decisions of the UN Security Council

on Israel and Palestine.

–Publicly recommit to full compliance with the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions and the rule of international law.

–Restore command accountability under U.S. law for war crimes ordered or sanctioned by senior U.S. military and civilian officials.

If these steps seem radical or “politically impossible,” that is only a measure of how far the United States has strayed from the basic standards of international behavior that we and other countries are committed to. But if the U.S. government refuses to take such steps, then we must recognize that we share the responsibility for perpetuating the horrors of this conflict.

As the late historian and former U.S. Air Force bombardier Howard Zinn wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* in 2007, “The terrorism of the suicide bomber and the terrorism of aerial bombardment are indeed morally equivalent. To say otherwise (as either side might) is to give one moral superiority over the other, and thus serve to perpetuate the horrors of our time.”

On the other hand, if we can restore some legitimacy to U.S. policy, we can begin to regain the moral and legal ground from which to respond effectively to terrorism. If or when there is another mass murder like the ones in the U.S. in 2001 or the recent ones in Egypt, Lebanon and France, we must respond to it as a heinous crime rather than as an act of war, as former Nuremberg prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz insisted in the aftermath of 9/11.

Those responsible must be identified, pursued, arrested and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, with only as much help from the military as is needed to bring them to justice. But as Ferencz warned in 2001, their crimes must not be allowed to become a pretext for wreaking misdirected vengeance on other countries and innocent lives.

This is how we will defeat terrorism – theirs and ours.

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

Turkey Provokes Russia with Shoot-down

Exclusive: Turkey appears to have deliberately shot down a Russian warplane as a provocation designed to escalate tensions between NATO and Russia, a ploy that seems to have sucked in President Obama as he tries to look tough against Russia to appease his neocon critics, writes Robert Parry. (Update: Russia says one airman saved.)

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama always sensitive to neocon criticism that he's "weak" continues to edge the world closer to a nuclear confrontation with Russia as he talks tough and tolerates more provocations against Moscow, now including Turkey's intentional shoot-down of a Russian warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Rather than rebuke Turkey, a NATO member, for its reckless behavior or express sympathy to the Russians Obama instead asserted that "Turkey, like every country, has a right to defend its territory and its airspace."

It was another one of Obama's breathtaking moments of hypocrisy, since he has repeatedly violated the territorial integrity of various countries, including in Syria where he has authorized bombing without the government's permission and has armed rebels fighting to overthrow Syria's secular regime.

Obama's comment on Turkey's right to shoot down planes – made during a joint press conference with French President Francois Hollande on Tuesday – was jarring, too, because there was no suggestion that even if the SU-24 jetfighter had strayed briefly into Turkish territory, which the Russians deny, that it was threatening Turkish targets.

Russian President Vladimir Putin angrily called the Turkish attack a "stab in the back delivered by the accomplices of terrorists." He warned of "serious consequences for Russian-Turkish relations."

Further provoking the Russians, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels then killed the Russian pilot riddling his body with bullets as he and the navigator parachuted from the doomed plane and were floating toward the ground. (Update: On Wednesday, the Russian defense minister said the navigator was alive and was rescued by Syrian and Russian special forces.)

Another Russian soldier was killed when a U.S.-supplied TOW missile brought down a Russian helicopter on a search-and-rescue mission, according to reports.

But Obama, during the news conference, seemed more interested in demonstrating his disdain for Putin, referring to him at one point by his last name only, without the usual use of a courtesy title, and demeaning the size of Putin's

coalition in helping Syria battle the jihadist rebels.

“We’ve got a coalition of 65 countries who have been active in pushing back against ISIL for quite some time,” Obama said, citing the involvement of countries around the world. “Russia right now is a coalition of two, Iran and Russia, supporting [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad.”

However, there have been doubts about the seriousness of Obama’s coalition, which includes Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have been covertly supporting some of the jihadist elements, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham.

Syrian rebels, including jihadists fighting with Ahrar al-Sham, have received hundreds of U.S. TOW anti-tank missiles, apparently through Sunni regional powers with what I’ve been told was Obama’s direct approval. The jihadists have celebrated their use of TOWs to kill tank crews of the Syrian army. Yet Obama talks about every country’s right to defend its territory.

Obama and the U.S. mainstream media also have pretended that the only terrorists that need to be fought in Syria are those belonging to the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh), but Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham, which was founded in part by Al Qaeda veterans, make up the bulk of the Turkish-and-Saudi-backed Army of Conquest which was gaining ground with the help of those American TOW missiles until Russia intervened with air power at the request of Syrian President Assad in late September.

The SU-24 Shoot-down

As for the circumstances surrounding the Turkish shoot-down of the Russian SU-24, Turkey claimed to have radioed ten warnings over five minutes to the Russian pilots but without getting a response. However, the New York Times reported that a diplomat who attended a NATO meeting in which Turkey laid out its account said “the Russian SU-24 plane was over the Hatay region of Turkey for about 17 seconds when it was struck.”

How those two contradictory time frames matched up was not explained. However, if the 17-second time frame is correct, it appears that Turkey intended to shoot down a Russian plane whether over its territory or not to send a message that it would not permit Russia to continue attacking Turkish-backed rebels in Syria.

After shooting down the plane, Turkey sought an emergency NATO meeting to support its attack. Though some NATO members reportedly consider Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a loose cannon, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared that the allies “stand in solidarity with Turkey.”

Further increasing the prospect of a dangerous escalation, NATO has been conducting large-scale military exercises near the Russian border in response to the Ukraine crisis.

Erdogan's government also appears to have dabbled in dangerous provocations before, including the alleged role of Turkish intelligence in helping jihadist rebels stage a lethal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, with the goal of blaming Assad's military and tricking Obama into launching punitive airstrikes that would have helped clear the way for a jihadist victory.

Obama only pulled back at the last minute amid doubts among U.S. intelligence analysts about who was responsible for the sarin attack. Later evidence pointed to a jihadist provocation with possible Turkish assistance, but the Obama administration has never formally retracted its allegations blaming Assad's forces.

One motive for Erdogan to go along with the sarin "false flag" attack in 2013 would have been that his two-year campaign to overthrow the Assad government was sputtering, a situation similar to today with the Russian military intervention hammering jihadist positions and putting the Syrian army back on the offensive.

By shooting down a Russian plane and then rushing to NATO with demands for retaliation against Russia, Erdogan is arguably playing a similar game, trying to push the United States and European countries into a direct confrontation with Russia while also sabotaging Syrian peace talks in Vienna all the better to advance his goal of violently ousting Assad from power.

The Neocon Agenda

Escalating tensions with Russia also plays into the hands of America's neoconservatives who have viewed past cooperation between Putin and Obama as a threat to the neocon agenda of "regime change," which began in Iraq in 2003 and was supposed to continue into Syria and Iran with the goal of removing governments deemed hostile to Israel.

After the sarin gas attack in 2013, the prospect for the U.S. bombing Syria and paving the way for Assad's military defeat looked bright, but Putin and Obama cooperated to defuse the sarin gas crisis. The two teamed up again to advance negotiations to constrain Iran's nuclear program an impediment to neocon hopes for bombing Iran, too.

However, in late 2013 and early 2014, that promising Putin-Obama collaboration was blasted apart in Ukraine with American neocons playing key roles, including National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman, Sen. John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland.

The neocons targeted the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich, recognizing how sensitive Ukraine was to Russia. The Feb. 22, 2014 coup, which was spearheaded by neo-Nazis and other extreme Ukrainian nationalists, established a fiercely anti-Russian regime in Kiev and provoked what quickly took on the look of a new Cold War.

When the heavily ethnic Russian population of Crimea, which had voted overwhelmingly for Yanukovich, reacted to the coup by voting 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, the neocon-dominated U.S. mainstream media pronounced the referendum a “sham” and the secession a Russian “invasion.” Cold War hysteria followed.

However, in the nearly two years since the Ukraine coup, it has become increasingly clear that the new regime in Kiev is not the shining light that the neocons and the mainstream media pretended it was. It appears to be as corrupt as the old one, if not more so. Plus, living standards of average Ukrainians have plunged.

The recent flooding of Europe with Syrian refugees over the summer and this month’s Paris terror attacks by Islamic State jihadists also have forced European officials to take events in Syria more seriously, prompting a growing interest in a renewed cooperation with Russia’s Putin.

That did not sit well with ultranationalist Ukrainians angered at the reduced interest in the Ukraine crisis. These activists have forced their dispute with Russia back into the newspapers by destroying power lines supplying electricity to Crimea, throwing much of the peninsula into darkness. Their goal seems to be to ratchet up tensions again between Russia and the West.

Now, Turkey’s shoot-down of the SU-24 and the deliberate murder of the two Russian pilots have driven another wedge between NATO countries and Russia, especially if President Obama and other NATO leaders continue taking Turkey’s side in the incident.

But the larger question indeed the existential question is whether Obama will continue bowing to neocon demands for tough talk against Putin even if doing so risks pushing tensions to a level that could spill over into a nuclear confrontation.

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](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The

trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Hitting Saudi Arabia Where It Hurts

Exclusive: Though faced with a global terrorism crisis, Official Washington can't get beyond its neocon-led "tough-guy-gal" rhetoric. But another option financial sanctions on Saudi Arabia might help finally shut down the covert supply of money and arms to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the Islamic State and Al Qaeda enter a grim competition to see who can kill more civilians around the world, the fate of Western Civilization as we've known it arguably hangs in the balance. It will not take much more terror for the European Union to begin cracking up and for the United States to transform itself into a full-scale surveillance state.

Yet, in the face of this crisis, many of the same people who set us on this road to destruction continue to dominate and indeed frame the public debate. For instance, Official Washington's neocons still insist on their recipe for "regime change" in countries that [they targeted 20 years ago](#). They also [demand a new Cold War with Russia](#) in defense of [a corrupt right-wing regime in Ukraine](#), further destabilizing Europe and disrupting U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria.

Given the stakes, you might think that someone in a position of power or one of the many candidates for U.S. president would offer some pragmatic and realistic ideas for addressing this extraordinary threat. But most Republicans from [Marco Rubio](#) to Carly Fiorina to Ted Cruz only offer more of "more of the same," i.e. neocon belligerence on steroids. Arguably, Donald Trump and Rand Paul are exceptions to this particular hysteria, but neither has offered a coherent and comprehensive counter-analysis.

On the Democratic side, frontrunner Hillary Clinton [wins praise](#) from the neocon editors of The Washington Post for breaking with President Barack Obama's hesitancy to fully invade Syria. Former Secretary of State Clinton wants an invasion to occupy parts of Syria as a "safe area" and to destroy Syrian (and presumably Russian) planes if they violate her "no-fly zone."

Much like the disastrous U.S. invasions of Iraq and Libya, Clinton and her

neocan allies are pitching the invasion of Syria as a humanitarian venture to remove a “brutal dictator” in this case, President Bashar al-Assad as well as to “destroy” the Islamic State, which Assad’s army and its Iranian-Russian allies have also been fighting. Assad’s military, Iranian troops and Russian planes have hit other jihadist groups, too, such as Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, which receives U.S. weapons as it fights side-by-side with Nusra in the Army of Conquest.

Clinton’s strategy likely would protect jihadists except for the Islamic State – and thus keep hope alive for “regime change” – explaining why the Post’s neocan editors, who were enthusiastic boosters of the Iraq War in 2003, hailed her hawkish approach toward Syria as “laudable.”

To Clinton’s left, Sen. Bernie Sanders has punted on the issue of what to do in either Syria or the Middle East, failing to offer any thoughtful ideas about what can be done to stabilize the region. He opted instead for a clever but vacuous talking point, arguing that the Saudis and other rich oil sheiks of the Persian Gulf should use their wealth and militaries to bring order to the region, to “get their hands dirty.”

The problem is that the Saudis, the Qataris and the Kuwaitis along with the Turks are a big part of the problem. They have used their considerable wealth to finance and arm Al Qaeda and its various allies and spinoffs, including the Islamic State. Their hands are already very dirty.

Saudi ‘Hard Power’

What we have seen in the Middle East since the 1980s is Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states creating “hard power” for their regional ambitions by assembling paramilitary forces that are willing and even eager to lash out at “enemies,” whether against Shiite rivals or Western powers.

While the wealthy Saudis, Qataris and other pampered princes don’t want to become soldiers themselves, they’re more than happy to exploit disaffected young Sunnis, turn them into jihadists and unleash them. Al Qaeda (dating back to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s) and the Islamic State (emerging in resistance to the U.S.-installed Shiite regime in Iraq after 2003) are Saudi Arabia’s foot soldiers.

This reality is similar to how the Reagan administration supported right-wing paramilitary forces in Central America during the 1980s, including “death squads” in El Salvador and Guatemala and the drug-tainted “Contras” in Nicaragua. These extremists were willing to do the “dirty work” that Reagan’s CIA considered necessary to reverse the tide of leftist revolution in the

region, but with “deniability” built in so Official Washington couldn’t be directly blamed for the slaughters.

Also, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration’s hardliners, including CIA Director William J. Casey, saw the value of using Islamic extremism to undermine the Soviet Union, with its official position of atheism. The CIA and the Saudis worked hand in hand in building the Afghan mujahedeen an Islamic fundamentalist movement to overthrow the Soviet-backed secular government in Kabul.

The “success” of that strategy included severe harm dealt to the struggling Soviet economy and the eventual ouster (and murder) of the Moscow-backed president, Najibullah. But the strategy also gave rise to the Taliban, which took power and installed a medieval regime, and Al Qaeda, which evolved from the Saudi and other foreign fighters (including Saudi Osama bin Laden) who had flocked to the Afghan jihad.

In effect, the Afghan experience created the modern jihadist movement and the Saudis, in particular, understood the value of this paramilitary force to punish governments and political groups that the Saudis and their oil-rich friends considered threats. Officially, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni oil states could claim that they weren’t behind the terrorists while letting money and arms slip through.

Though Al Qaeda and the other jihadists had their own agendas and could take independent action the Saudis and other sheiks could direct these paramilitary forces against the so-called “Shiite crescent,” from Iran through Syria to Lebanon (and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, against Iraq’s Shiite government as well).

At times, the jihadists also proved useful for the United States and Israel, striking at Hezbollah in Lebanon, fighting for “regime change” in Syria, collaborating in the 2011 ouster (and murder) of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, even joining forces with the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government to kill ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

Israeli Role

Since these Sunni jihadists were most adept at killing Shiites, they endeared themselves not only to their Saudi, Qatari and Kuwaiti benefactors, but also to Israel, which has identified Shiite-ruled Iran as its greatest strategic threat. Thus, the American neocons, who collaborate closely with Israel’s right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had mixed attitudes toward the Sunni jihadists, too.

Plus, high-profile terrorism, including the 9/11 attacks, enabled the tough-

talking neocons to consolidate their control over U.S. foreign policy, diverting American fury over Al Qaeda's killing nearly 3,000 people in New York and Washington to implement the neocons' "regime change" agenda, first in Iraq though it had nothing to do with 9/11, with plans to move on to Syria and Iran.

As the Military-Industrial Complex made out like bandits with billions upon billions of dollars thrown at the "War on Terror," grateful military contractors kicked back some profits to major think tanks where neocon thinkers were employed to develop more militaristic plans. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"]

But the downside of this coziness with the Sunni jihadists has been that Al Qaeda and its spinoff, the Islamic State, perceive the West as their ultimate enemy, drawing from both [historic and current injustices](#) inflicted on the Islamic world by Europe and the United States. The terrorist leaders cite this mistreatment to recruit young people from impoverished areas of the Middle East and the urban slums of Europe and get them to strap on suicide-belts.

Thus, Al Qaeda and now the Islamic State not only advance the neocon/Israeli/Saudi agenda by launching terror attacks in Syria against Assad's government and in Lebanon against Hezbollah, but they strike out on their own against U.S. and European targets, even in Africa where Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for last week's murderous assault on an upscale Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali.

It also appears that Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have entered into a competition over who can stage the bloodiest attacks against Westerners as a way to bolster recruitment. The Bamako attack was an attempt by Al Qaeda to regain the spotlight from the Islamic State which boasted of a vicious string of attacks on Paris, Beirut and a Russian tourist flight in the Sinai.

The consequence of these murderous rampages has been to threaten the political and economic cohesion of Europe and to increase pressures for a strengthened surveillance state inside the United States. In other words, some of the most treasured features of Western civilization personal liberty and relative affluence are being endangered.

Yet, rather than explain the real reasons for this crisis and what the possible solutions might be no one in the U.S. mainstream political world or the major media seems able or willing to talk straight to the American people about how we got here.

Sanders's Lost Opportunity

While you might have expected as much from most Republicans (who have surrounded

themselves with neocon advisers) and from Hillary Clinton (who has cultivated her own ties to the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks), you might have hoped that Sanders would have adopted a thoughtful critique of Official Washington's neocon-dominated "group think."

But instead he offers a simplistic and nonsensical prescription of demanding the Saudis do more when that would only inflict more death and destruction on the region and beyond. Arguably, the opposite would make much more sense impose tough financial sanctions against Saudi Arabia as punishment for its continued support for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Freezing or confiscating Saudi bank accounts around the world might finally impress on the spoiled princes of the Persian Gulf oil states that there is a real price to pay for dabbling in terrorism. Such an action against Saudi Arabia also would send a message to smaller Sunni sheikdoms that they could be next. Other pressures, including possible expulsion from NATO, could be brought to bear on Turkey.

If the West finally got serious about stopping this financial and military support for Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and their jihadist allies in Syria, the violence might finally abate. And, if the United States and Europe put pressure on the "moderate" Syrian opposition whatever there is of it to compromise, a political solution might be possible, too.

Right now, the biggest obstacle to a political agreement appears to be the U.S. insistence that President Assad be barred from elections once Syria achieves some stability. Yet, if President Obama is so certain that the Syrian people hate Assad, it seems crazy to let Assad's presumed defeat at the polls obstruct such a crucial deal.

The only explanation for this U.S. stubbornness is that the neocons and the liberal hawks have made "regime change" in Syria such a key part of their agenda that they would lose face if Assad's departure was not mandated. However, with the future of Western civilization in the balance, such obstinate behavior seems not only feckless but reckless.

From understanding how this mess was made, some U.S. politician could fashion an appeal that might have broad popular support across the political spectrum. If Sanders took up this torch for a rational plan for bringing relative peace to the Middle East, he also might shift the dynamics of the Democratic race.

Of course, to challenge Official Washington's "group think" is always dangerous. If compromise and cooperation suddenly replaced "regime change" as the U.S. goal, the neocons and liberal hawks would flip out. But the stakes are extremely

high for the planet's future. Maybe saving Western civilization is worth the risk of facing down a neocon/liberal-hawk temper tantrum.

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](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

A 'See-No-Evil' Drone War

The mainstream U.S. news media has failed miserably in holding the U.S. government to account for the killing of civilians in its drone strikes during the 14-year-old "war on terror," rarely supplying such unpleasant facts even when they become available, writes John Hanrahan.

By John Hanrahan

By now you know the drill: The CIA or U.S. military forces unleash a drone strike or other aerial bombardment in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia or any other country that the United States claims the right to attack.

A U.S. government spokesperson reports 5 or 7 or 17 or 25 or whatever number of "militants" killed, Taliban, or Al Qaeda or ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State fighters, according to its fill-in-the-blanks press release. Wire services, mainstream newspapers, television newscasters dutifully report in brief fashion on another successful drone or missile strike, fulfilling minimal journalistic standards by attributing it to the Pentagon, or intelligence or U.S. government sources, sometimes even naming the spokesperson who issued the news release.

And then, usually nothing. Yes, sometimes someone with a little clout raises a stink, say the Afghan president, or some prominent local official who was an eyewitness to the attack, or Doctors without Borders after the U.S. attack on their Afghanistan hospital in October. (* See footnote.) In such challenges to the Americans' claims of killing only "militants," these pesky eyewitnesses contend that many of those killed were actually noncombatants, even women and children.

But on those occasions when U.S. officials are confronted with too-strong evidence of civilian casualties, they typically issue an apology (while not

usually admitting civilians were actually killed), promise an investigation, and then that's the last we ever seem to hear of it in the mainstream press.

Now, an American University (A.U.) academic, Jeff Bachman, has documented what some readers may have surmised in reading drone news coverage over the years, but didn't have the data to back it up. In examining articles by *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the immediate aftermath of U.S. drone strikes between 2009 and 2014, Bachman concluded:

"Both papers have substantially underrepresented the number of civilians killed in drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen, failed to correct the public record when evidence emerged that their reporting was wrong and ignored the importance of international law."

Bachman's research dovetails with *The Intercept's* recently published "Drone Papers" articles, which among other things document the U.S. government's lying to the press and public about the number of noncombatants killed in drone strikes.

Bachman, professional lecturer in human rights and the co-director of Global Affairs M.A. Program at A.U.'s School of International Service, examined a sample of 81 *Times* articles and 26 *Post* articles published within two days of particular drone strikes between 2009 and 2014. He then compared the two papers' reporting to the research and tracking of drone strikes by the London-based The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ). He said he considered TBIJ's data authoritative "because they used a methodology that has been endorsed by the Center for Civilians in Conflict and Human Rights" at Columbia University's Law School.

In the drone attacks reported on by *The Times*, TBIJ found civilians killed in 26 of the 81 attacks. *The Times*, though, reported civilians killed in only two of those attacks, Bachman wrote.

Looking at *The Post's* coverage of drone attacks, Bachman found that TBIJ reported civilians killed in seven of the 26 attacks, while *The Post* reported civilians killed in only one attack.

In the 33 strikes that produced civilian casualties, TBIJ found that between 180 and 302 civilians were killed, yet *Times* and *Post* articles reported on the deaths of only nine civilians in the three stories in which they noted that there were civilian casualties.

"This trend of underreporting of civilian casualties means readers are not being informed of the real consequences of drone strikes in Yemen and Pakistan," Bachman wrote. "It represents a failure by journalists at these papers to view

critical government claims regarding who is killed in particular strikes.”

Even worse, Bachman reports what happened when he contacted both newspapers to question them “about the inaccuracies in their reporting on civilian casualties, and to see whether either newspaper published corrections” about civilian deaths from drone strikes. “The answer from both was that they had not,” he wrote.

Read Bachman’s [article](#) to see the full summary of his findings and the exact comments he reports receiving from *Times* and *Post* representatives. But for one sample of mainstream media indifference to this issue, consider what Bachman reported he was told by Sylvester Monroe, *The Post*’s assistant managing editor.

Monroe, wrote Bachman, “stated that when using ‘official sources’ it is impossible to ‘independently verify which of the dead were members of militant groups and which might have been innocent civilians.’”

According to Bachman, Monroe added this amazing disclosure: “Even if the CIA were to acknowledge that its count was inaccurate, it would not be up to us to run a correction.” Let that sink in: *The Post* will apparently not make corrections of a spy agency’s lies and misrepresentations even in the unlikely event the agency itself admits them.

Bachman also noted that the term “human rights”, and various equivalents, showed up in only five of *The Times*’s 81 drone attack stories, and in only one of the 26 *Post* articles. The term “laws of war” or “laws of armed conflict”, needed to “place the drone strikes in their international legal context”, were not mentioned in any of the articles.

“Without government transparency and accurate reporting, whistleblowers, like the source of *The Intercept*’s ‘Drone Papers,’ are the only source for information that will allow us to understand the real consequences of the drone strikes,” Bachman concluded.

*The Oct. 2 multiple U.S. bombings on the Doctor Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, where at least 30 staff, patients and others were killed, might prove to be that unique case that events will force to be seriously investigated. But don’t count on it. In the Kunduz hospital case, eyewitnesses, Westerners/doctors from a highly respected international humanitarian medical organization making allegations that the bombings were deliberate, could not be so easily written off by the Pentagon and our usually incurious mainstream media.

Doctors without Borders has called the multiple bombardments on the hospital a possible war crime and wants the attack investigated by an international inquiry under the Geneva Conventions. Instead, General John F. Campbell, the American

commander in Afghanistan, has appointed a two-star general from another command to head what Campbell termed an independent investigation, a far cry from what Doctors Without Borders has called for.

Keeping the investigation within the military's own house makes it much more likely that we may be heading for one of those mistakes-were-made Pentagon reports, rather than a war-crimes-were-committed report. Even this inadequate, conflicted investigative step, though, is far more than usually happens when ordinary civilians are killed by U.S. attacks and there are no Westerners or credentialed people to witness them.

John Hanrahan, currently on the editorial board of ExposeFacts, is a former executive director of The Fund for Investigative Journalism and reporter for *“The Washington Post,” “The Washington Star, UPI and other news organizations. He also has extensive experience as a legal investigator. Hanrahan is the author of* *“Government by Contract”* *and co-author of* *Lost Frontier: The Marketing of Alaska.* **He wrote extensively for NiemanWatchdog.org, a project of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. [This article was originally published by ExposeFacts.org.]**

Rethinking ‘Assad Must Go’ Slogan

Official Washington's “Assad must go!” slogan is threatening to destroy hopes for a political settlement of the horrific Syrian conflict and for an end to the chaos cascading from it finally prompting some U.S. officials to rethink the “group think,” as Gareth Porter reported for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

In the wake of the ISIS terrorist attack on Paris, President Barack Obama declared that his administration has the right strategy on ISIS and will “see it through.” But the administration is already shifting its policy to cooperate more closely with the Russians on Syria, and an influential former senior intelligence official has suggested that the administration needs to give more weight to the Assad government and army as the main barrier to ISIS and other jihadist forces in Syria.

Obama's European allies as well as U.S. national security officials have urged the United States to downgrade the official U.S. aim of achieving the departure of President Bashar al-Assad from Syria in the international negotiations begun last month and continued last weekend. Such a shift in policy, however, would

make the contradictions between the U.S. interests and those of the Saudis, who continue to support jihadist forces fighting with al-Qaeda's Syria branch, al-Nusra Front, increasingly clear.

Russia had proposed to the United States in September that the United States and Russia share intelligence on ISIS (also known as ISIL, Islamic State and Daesh) and exchange military delegations to coordinate on joint steps against ISIS. The initial Obama administration response was to reject either intelligence sharing or joint planning with Russia on Syria out of hand.

The reasoning was that the Russians were engaged primarily, if not exclusively, to shore up the Assad regime, which was unacceptable to Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry declared on Oct. 1: "What is important is Russia has to not be engaged in any activities against anybody but ISIL. That's clear. We have made that very clear."

But that was before Paris. The fallout from that attack has changed the political vectors pushing and pulling Obama administration policy. The most obvious shift came two days after the attacks and just hours after Obama announced new intelligence arrangements with France.

CIA Director John Brennan reversed the earlier U.S. decision to reject intelligence sharing with Russia on Islamic State. Revealing that he had had several conversations with his Russian counterpart since the beginning of Russia's air offensive in Syria, Brennan said the ISIS threat "demands" an "unprecedented level of cooperation" among international intelligence services. Brennan said he and his Russian counterpart had begun exchanging intelligence focused primarily on the flow of terrorists from Russia into Iraq and Syria but that now U.S.-Russian cooperation needed to be "enhanced".

At the G-20 summit in Antalya, Turkey on Nov. 15-16, Obama acknowledged for the first time in his meeting with Putin that Russia was indeed combating ISIS, according to a White House official. In fact, the Russians had been hitting ISIS targets regularly during October, including what it said was a command center in the ISIS capital, Raqqa. The Obama administration had refused to acknowledge that fact in October and instead focused on the Russian targeting of non-ISIS groups. But the White House press leak about the Obama-Putin conversation did not repeat that complaint.

The issue of whether Assad must go as part of a settlement has been a fixture of U.S. Syria policy ever since 2011, although it has now been modified to allow the Syrian president to stay in power for a period of six months as part of a settlement. But the Paris attacks may well be sparking new debate within the Obama administration on whether that demand makes sense.

In an interview with CBS News on Nov. 15, the former deputy director of the CIA, Michael Morell, suggested that the exclusion of Assad may need to be revised. "I do think the question of whether President Assad needs to go or whether he is part of the solution here, we need to look at it again," Morell said. "Clearly he's part of the problem. But he may also be part of the solution."

It is not likely that Morell, who was acting CIA director twice in 2011 and again from 2012 to 2013, was merely reflecting a personal view on the matter. Statements by U.S. intelligence officials since 2012 have emphasized the importance of the Syrian administration and military as the primary buttress against both ISIS and al-Qaeda and its jihadist allies seizing power in the country a point that the Obama and Kerry chose not to make. Since the "moderate" forces have all but disappeared in late 2014 and early 2015, and al-Qaeda and its jihadist allies have become the only rivals to Islamic State, that point became even more critical.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said this week, "I cannot agree with the logic that Assad is the cause of everything" in Syria. That contrasts with John Kerry's argument that unless Assad leaves Syria, "this war will not end."

But Kerry's position is based on the assumption that the major forces fighting against the regime would end the war and enter into peaceful competition if Assad could be induced to leave. In reality, of course, those forces are committed to using force to achieve the destruction of the old "secular" political order in Syria and establish an extremist conservative Islamic State.

The issue of whether to continue to demand Assad's departure arises just as the UN peace negotiations process on Syria – meaning negotiations among the outside powers intervening in the conflict – begin a new and highly political phase.

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond has revealed that the next phase will turn on bargaining among the international sponsors of anti-Assad groups about who would be allowed to join a new government. Those decisions, in turn, would depend on which of the groups are deemed by the foreign sponsors of those very groups to be "terrorists" and which are deemed acceptable.

As Hammond acknowledges, the Saudis are certainly not going to agree to call Ahrar al-Sham or other extremist jihadist groups allied with it and al-Nusra "terrorists." They may have to give up al-Nusra Front, which has expressed support for the Islamic State terrorist assault on Paris.

Unless Obama is prepared to face a rupture in the U.S. alliance with the Sunni Gulf Sheikdoms over the issue, the result will be that the very groups committed to overthrowing the remnants of the old order by force will be invited by the

United States and its Gulf allies to take key positions in the post-Assad government. It's the right time for Obama to rethink the administration's policy toward both Assad and his jihadist foes.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This story originally appeared at Middle East Eye, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/how-terror-paris-calls-revising-us-syria-policy-926574979>]

The Brutal Paris Terror Attack

As horrific as the Paris terror attack was, it was not a sophisticated operation engineered by some diabolical mastermind. It was a low-tech, brutal assault that has distracted from a more important debate how to give young, disaffected Muslim men more reason to live writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A strong tendency in the wake of major terrorist attacks is to associate the impact the event has on our own fears and thoughts (which generally are correlated with the number of Westerners who died in the incident) with the level of skill and sophistication of the attackers. The skill and sophistication in turn tend to be thought of as associated with the size and strength of some foreign organization that sponsored the attackers.

These presumed associations are false. The plain (and after such incidents, disturbing) fact is that the inherent vulnerabilities in our free and open Western societies are such that it does not require any noteworthy skill or sophistication to kill a lot of people. What it takes are extreme inclinations and a willingness to die in pursuit of malevolent ideas.

The terrorist attacks in Paris illustrate the point. Some organizational aptitude was needed to put together an operation that involved simultaneous dispatch of multiple attack teams, but this did not require organizing any more people than would be needed to put together a neighborhood soccer team.

The death toll for all of the Paris attacks, as shocking as it understandably was, nonetheless was much less than a more skillfully conducted operation involving a comparable number of attackers would have inflicted. The attack team that went after the most target-rich location, a sports arena with tens of

thousands of people, managed to kill only one other person besides themselves. The spraying of bullets in crowded places such as cafes or concert halls is not a high-skill endeavor, especially when the shooters have resigned themselves to being killed as well.

Jack Shafer at *Politico*, who criticizes mainstream media for giving alleged attack organizer Abdelhamid Abaaoud too much credit by labeling him a “mastermind,” observes that earlier failed shooting attacks that Abaaoud was suspected of being behind “took about as much imagination and skill as ordering a pizza.”

Shafer also has done the math to determine that the Paris terrorists inflicted fewer deaths per attacker than did one deranged individual at Sandy Hook Elementary School. That is an apt comparison given the nature of the counterterrorist task that the FBI and other U.S. authorities currently face in trying to prevent mass-casualty attacks in the United States.

Americans attempting to travel to ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq barely constitute a trickle: an average of only two persons a month since July. Battalions of radicals traveling to and from the ISIS mini-state clearly are not the core of any threat to American security.

As a *New York Times* article about these patterns aptly puts it, “thwarting an Islamic State-inspired attack in the United States” is “less like stopping a traditional terrorist plot and more like trying to prevent a school shooting.” *Washington Post* editorial cartoonist Tom Toles illustrates the same basic point in another way.

As debate rages on about U.S. policy toward Syria, the debate would be more focused and useful if it could dispense with two persistent misconceptions. One is that being a skilled terrorist requires being sponsored and trained by some organization that occupies a piece of land overseas. The other is that inflicting a lot of casualties in a terrorist attack requires being skilled and trained.

Ian Buruma provides a better insight in explaining why countering ISIS-inspired terrorism is more a matter of giving young men with a death wish a reason to live.

The future of the ISIS mini-state certainly is important for multiple reasons, many of which have much more to do with politics and stability in the Middle East than with terrorism in the West. A terrorist-related reason is that the fortunes of the ISIS enclave help determine how much inspiration it provides to already radicalized individuals and thus is an influence in determining the

likelihood of such individuals performing acts that are both suicidal and lethal to others.

It is a mistake to regard the ISIS entity as a font of critical skills needed to kill people.

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The 'War on Terror' Has Been Lost

After 14 years, trillions of dollars spent and hundreds of thousands of people dead with violence expanding, not abating perhaps it's finally time to admit that the Bush-Obama "War on Terror" has been lost and that a new strategy addressing root causes is required, as Nat Parry describes.

By Nat Parry

Last week's attacks in Paris offered a painful and tragic reminder that despite the unprecedented counterterrorism measures implemented since the attacks on New York and Washington 14 years ago, citizens in the West remain as vulnerable as ever to the threat of extremist violence. This may come as a bit of a shock to those who may have expected that the massive investment in fighting terrorism would have resulted in more safety and security by now.

With trillions of dollars spent on overseas military adventures, unprecedented "homeland security" and mass surveillance, and countless lives lost in U.S. wars, it's not unreasonable to have thought that perhaps more measurable progress would have been made in countering the terrorist threat against the United States.

But with transportation agencies, football stadiums and tourist destinations across the U.S. now [bolstering security](#) following the attacks in Paris and with the Islamic State, or ISIS, promising more attacks to come in New York and Washington it is clear how vulnerable Americans remain to the threat of jihadist terrorism, despite all these sacrifices over the past decade and a half.

Efforts to contain terrorism certainly had precedents before President George W. Bush [declared](#) a wide-ranging and open-ended "War on Terror" in an address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, but the groundwork that was set in the weeks and

months after 9/11 has come to define the overall approach to this Twenty-first Century challenge an approach that can now clearly be called an abject failure.

Despite some tactical differences between the Bush and Obama administrations in the way the war has been waged with a preference now on drone assassinations, for example, rather than full-scale invasions the “War on Terror” has essentially followed the same logic of pursuing something like total victory by eliminating every terrorist no matter where they are, with an unfortunately high tolerance for killing large numbers of innocent bystanders in the process.

Any honest appraisal of this effort would now conclude that the overall approach has borne out just as badly as the most pessimistic critics asserted back in 2001 and 2002, when the foundation was being laid for what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld later dubbed the “Long War.”

Early Critics

With new organizations forming in the days after 9/11 with slogans such as “war is not the answer,” voices were being raised to assert that defeating terrorism required first of all that the United States stop engaging in it, based on the Hippocratic principle of “First do no harm.” The U.S. was also urged to devote at least as much attention to addressing the root causes of violent extremism as it was to addressing the military aspect of defeating jihadists on the battlefield. Among the principal causes identified included fighting global poverty and promoting human rights.

While the Bush administration announced in March 2002 that weapons and U.S. military advisers were being sent to countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, Jordan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to mount proxy fights against terrorists, development advocates complained that no comparable effort was being made to alleviate the harsh economic conditions that provide the conditions in which extremism flourishes. Human rights organizations also warned that political repression carried out by some U.S. allies was doing more to fuel terrorism than to contain it.

In an open letter to Bush published on March 7, 2002, Human Rights Watch singled out Uzbekistan in particular as being an undeserving ally, urging the U.S. to reconsider its diplomatic and military support for the Central Asian dictatorship. The rights group warned, “In terms of human rights, Uzbekistan is barely distinguishable from its Soviet past, and [Uzbek] President [Islam] Karimov has shown himself to be an unreconstructed Soviet leader. You have to wonder whether this kind of record makes for a trusted ally or a foreign policy burden.”

Human Rights Watch also criticized expanding aid to Indonesia, where extra-judicial executions, torture and arbitrary detention were commonplace. It argued that increasing aid to Indonesia would “effectively reward the security forces for bad behavior.”

Yet, the Bush administration showed little interest in the correlation between human rights, political repression and militant extremism, a trend that has largely continued through today. In a visit to Central Asia earlier this month, for example, Secretary of State John Kerry met with autocratic rulers and officials from several countries considered some of the world’s worst rights offenders.

Although he had been urged by the human rights community to press the leaders on their records, Kerry largely downplayed human rights as he sought deeper U.S. ties with the region. As Reuters reported, “he took pains to avoid direct public criticism as he pursued security and economic concerns at the top of his agenda.”

Development Agenda

Back in 2002, when the “War on Terror” was being rolled out, calls for more engagement on development aid grew louder, with some of the strongest pleas coming directly from World Bank President James Wolfensohn.

In a speech at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, Wolfensohn argued that to combat terrorism, global poverty and other international problems must be addressed. “We will not create a safer world with bombs or brigades alone,” he said. Poverty “can provide a breeding ground for the ideas and actions of those who promote conflict and terror.”

Yet, when it comes to fighting global poverty, the U.S. has continued to display a seeming indifference to making this a priority, whether as part of a larger campaign against violent extremism or simply on humanitarian grounds.

Despite pressure placed on the U.S. following 9/11 to make development aid a central plank in the broader campaign against terrorism, the Bush administration resisted calls to increase funding for aid to the world’s poorest nations. Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill insisted that foreign aid wasn’t proven to be effective, and so the U.S. blocked efforts by Great Britain and other countries to raise the level of aid going from international development organizations to poor nations.

After sustained criticism, the Bush administration reluctantly announced an increase in aid by \$5 billion spread over several years. This would represent only a modest rise, however, in the U.S. contribution as measured by its

percentage of GDP, which at that time was only 0.1 percent far short of the 0.7 percent that the United Nations had set for the minimal target of industrialized countries.

The UN has explained its 0.7 target as the minimum necessary towards promoting international security and stability, and has urged that meeting this target be considered a requisite for membership on the UN Security Council. For what it's worth, however, current development aid by the United States stands at just 0.19 percent of its GDP, far behind the global leaders of Norway and Sweden, which donate 1.07 percent and 1.03 percent of their GDPs, respectively.

Climate Change Connection

Besides poverty and human rights, tackling climate change also emerged as an issue related closely to countering the long-term terrorist threat, but for years this connection was essentially ignored by high-level policymakers. While President Obama has just recently prioritized climate change, the Council on Foreign Relations for one was warning as far back as 2007 that climate change was contributing significantly to the terrorist threat.

The report noted for example that “declining food production, extreme weather events, and drought from climate change could further inflame tensions in Africa, weaken governance and economic growth, and contribute to massive migration and possibly state failure, leaving ‘ungoverned spaces’ where terrorists can organize.”

These concerns have since been reiterated by everyone from the Pentagon, which calls climate change a “threat multiplier” because it “has the potential to exacerbate many of the challenges we are dealing with today from infectious disease to terrorism,” to Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who recently stated that “climate change is directly related to the growth of terrorism.”

Although Sanders was attacked for allegedly overstating a “direct” relationship between global warming and terrorism, there is indeed a mountain of evidence to support the assertion that there is at least a very strong correlation between these two trends.

In fact, it is well-documented that the current conflict in Syria, which has facilitated the rise of ISIS, was triggered by a series of socio-economic, political and environmental factors, including climate change. According to a recent report called “A New Climate for Peace,” an independent study commissioned by the foreign ministers of the G7 nations, a severe drought that hit Syria in 2006 was exacerbated by resource mismanagement and the impact of

climate change on water and crop production.

“Herders in the northeast lost nearly 85 percent of their livestock, affecting 1.3 million people,” the report explained. “Nearly 75 percent of families that depend on agriculture suffered total crop failure.”

The widespread loss of livelihoods and food sources compelled farmers and rural families to migrate to overcrowded cities, stressing urban infrastructure and basic services, and increasing urban poverty. “More than 1 million people were food insecure, adding substantial pressure to pre-existing stressors, such as grievances and government mismanagement,” the G7 report pointed out. “This food insecurity was one of the factors that pushed the country over the threshold into violent conflict.”

U.S. Interventions

This violent conflict in turn was aggravated by previous and ongoing American meddling in the region. As the U.S. intelligence community had warned in 2006, a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was spawned by the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The consensus view of 16 U.S. spy services was that “the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse.” Part of this problem becoming worse was the rise of ISIS, which emerged in Iraq as a direct result of the U.S. occupation.

The *Washington Post* reported in April 2015 that the core of ISIS is primarily made up of ex-Baathist military officials who were summarily disbanded from the Iraqi Army following the U.S. invasion. The organization grew largely thanks to the sectarian policies of U.S.-backed Prime Minister Nouri Maliki in stripping power from the Sunnis in favor of Shiite militias. The early growth of ISIS was further facilitated by the mass detentions of Iraqis in prisons such as Camp Bucca, which provided a fertile networking and recruiting opportunity.

As journalist Glenn Greenwald explained the process on Thursday’s episode of Democracy Now, “the reason there is such a thing as ISIS is because the U.S. invaded Iraq and caused massive instability, destroyed the entire society, destroyed all of the infrastructure, destroyed all order, and it was in that chaos that ISIS was able to emerge.”

After finally withdrawing from a devastated and traumatized Iraq in 2010, the U.S. then turned its attention to Libya, and decided to overthrow the government of Muammar Gaddafi through a massive bombing campaign. Following Gaddafi’s ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The U.S. also began directly arming groups attempting to overthrow Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, with these weapons

often ending up in the hands of jihadists such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS.

Some of this was done in the full expectation that the policies would result in emboldening the extremists of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. According to a classified 2012 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency memorandum, extremists were the driving forces in the Syrian civil war. As the memo stated, “the Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and [al-Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria.”

And yet, the U.S. was helping coordinate arms transfers to these same groups, leading directly to the rise of Islamic extremism there. These policies later morphed into efforts to promote “moderate rebels,” with no more success.

A \$500 million Pentagon program meant to train and support moderate fighters was abandoned earlier this year after news emerged that the first group of U.S.-trained Syrian fighters was handily defeated by al-Nusra in late July. The Islamists apparently attacked the group and took an unspecified number hostage, with the remaining fighters fleeing and still unaccounted for.

Congressional hawks like Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, withdrew their support for the program just a year after Congress authorized it. “It’s a bad, bad sick joke,” said McCain of the program, while Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Connecticut, called it “a bigger disaster than I could have ever imagined.”

‘Do You Realize What You’ve Done?’

These counter-productive strategies have not gone unnoticed by some world leaders, most of whom however are too polite to bring up the failures in public settings. One who does not play along by these unspoken diplomatic rules though is Russian President Vladimir Putin. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September, he directly challenged the architects of these policies, in what was surely seen in Washington as a major breach of etiquette.

“It would suffice to look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa,” Putin said before the world. “Certainly political and social problems in this region have been piling up for a long time, and people there wish for changes naturally.”

He continued: “But how did it actually turn out? Rather than bringing about reforms, an aggressive foreign interference has resulted in a brazen destruction of national institutions and the lifestyle itself. Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty and social disaster. Nobody cares a bit about human rights, including the right to life.”

He then issued a direct appeal to U.S. policymakers: “I cannot help asking those

who have caused the situation, do you realize now what you've done? But I am afraid no one is going to answer that. Indeed, policies based on self-conceit and belief in one's exceptionalism and impunity have never been abandoned."

As Putin suggested, there is little indication that much will change considering the recent past, with the central logic of the "War on Terror" having endured for 14 years now with no signs of it being revised in any substantial way.

In his address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, Bush declared that "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated" a general policy that seems to remain in place today.

What we have seen transpire since Bush laid out his plan is precisely what many warned would happen: as one terrorist group is "defeated," another one pops up to fill the void, a cycle that could conceivably go on forever, and by definition would doom the United States to a state of war and retribution for eternity. And although Obama has at times attempted to reassure Americans that the war was drawing to an end, his assurances often did more to confuse than to clarify.

Curious Memorial Day 'Victory' Speech

Last May, for example, Obama marked Memorial Day by noting that it was the first one since 9/11 that America was celebrating without being involved in a "major ground war."

"For many of us, this Memorial Day is especially meaningful," Obama said at Arlington National Cemetery on May 25. "It is the first since our war in Afghanistan came to an end. Today is the first Memorial Day in 14 years that the United States is not engaged in a major ground war."

The statement made headlines as a milestone in the U.S.'s post-9/11 war footing a de facto declaration by the U.S. president that, perhaps, the war is over. But, as some media outlets pointed out, there was an element of disingenuousness to the announcement.

"American troops remain mired and at risk in [Iraq and Afghanistan], training and advising Iraqi forces against the Islamic State and Afghan forces fighting the Taliban," noted the *Washington Post*.

Reuters pointed out that "U.S. forces are now involved in air campaigns against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria as well as training missions in Iraq and Afghanistan," noting however that Obama has been "reluctant to relaunch ground operations in Iraq."

Nevertheless, at the time Obama announced this milestone in winding down the "War on Terror," 3,000 American military personnel were in Iraq working with the Iraqi army and U.S. airstrikes continued to pound ISIS targets. About 14,000 bombs had been dropped on Iraq and Syria since Sept. 2014, killing an estimated 12,500 fighters, according to Pentagon sources and hundreds of civilians, according to independent monitors.

In Afghanistan, although the end of combat operations was formally announced last December, American forces "are playing a direct combat role" in secretive raids against al-Qaeda targets, *The New York Times* reported in February 2015.

In March 2015, it was announced that the United States will maintain nearly 10,000 service members in Afghanistan at least until 2016. This of course was revised again just last month, when Obama seemingly abandoned his longstanding goal of ending the war in Afghanistan, saying that he would leave 5,500 U.S. forces in the country beyond his departure from office in January 2017.

With all this in mind, Obama's statement on Memorial Day earlier this year may have raised more questions than it answered. For one thing, what does "major" mean? Is saying that we are not in a "major ground war" an acknowledgement that the U.S. is no longer at war, or is it a tacit confirmation that we are in a minor ground war? If we are not at war, does that mean we are in a state of peace? If so, can pre-9/11 civil liberties, constitutional principles and privacy rights be restored, or are those gone for good?

Of course, all of these questions assume that terms like "war and peace" still have some commonly understood meanings, which is a dubious assumption 14 years into this ill-defined war. While some of us may retain memories of periods of relative peace, these are not memories that can be expected of all Americans.

Indeed, an entire generation of young people has now come of age in the era of the "War on Terror." To put this into perspective: the 18-year-olds currently enlisting in the United States Armed Forces and being deployed to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban or being sent to Guantanamo to guard the prisoners who continue to languish there were just preschoolers when the Twin Towers came crashing down, and can scarcely remember a time at which their country was not "at war."

While many Americans might still consider the not-so-new normal of war, militaristic displays at sporting events, routine scapegoating of Muslims, and the relinquishing of individual privacy and civil liberties to be somehow "weird," to millions of young people, there is nothing weird about it.

While some of us may expect or quietly hope for a return to a time of peace, a

time when we can expect both personal safety and individual liberty, it is sobering to realize that this expectation cannot possibly exist for those born and bred in this environment. After all, how can people expect to return to a normalcy that they have never known?

The sad fact is, normalcy to many Americans now means precisely this atmosphere of permanent war, militarism and hyper-security. But perhaps even sadder is that the tradeoff that we have been expected to make in terms of sacrificing blood and treasure in exchange for security and peace of mind now increasingly appears to be a false promise, a mirage on the horizon that always seems to disappear the further we travel across the desert of the "War on Terror."

Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.* [This story originally appeared at Essential Opinion, <https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/2015/11/20/the-bject-failure-of-the-war-on-terror/>]

Hard Lessons from Paris Attack

In Official Washington, the talk is all about expanded wars and how tough to be on Syrian refugees. But elsewhere there is some serious reflection on how the West went wrong in its approach toward the Middle East, as reflected in Dennis J Bernstein's interview with Indian historian Vijay Prashad.

By Dennis J Bernstein

After the Paris terror attacks and a bloody hostage standoff in Mali, the focus has been on the West's plans to "intensify" the war against Islamic terrorists, especially the Islamic State (or ISIS), but some more thoughtful thinkers are calling for a critical examination of the past mistakes made and the lessons that can be learned.

For instance, Vijay Prashad, an Indian historian, journalist and commentator, warned against "clichéd policies" that could make the violence worse. Prashad spoke in an interview with Pacifica Radio host Dennis J Bernstein.

DB: Vijay Prashad writes, "A week of horrible carnage, bomb blasts in Beirut and Baghdad, then the cold-blooded shootings in Paris. Each of these acts of terror left dead bodies and wounded lives. There is nothing good that comes of them, only the pain of the victim, and then more pain, as powerful people take refuge in clichéd policies that once again turn the wheel of violence."

Meanwhile the BBC announced, "France is committed to destroying the so-called Islamic State group after last Friday's deadly attacks. President Francois Hollande has said France's military campaign against ISIS and Iraq will intensify." Imagine, intensify. Vijay, what is your overview?

VP: These attacks have been horrible. There's been an intensification of ISIS attacks – the one in Paris was part of a sequence. The reaction from the French president is to be expected. There's a kind of political grammar that he's forced to fall in line with. Two words apply here – you have to "do something," and you have to appear strong.

Something and *strong* are the key words in order to understand the French reaction just as we are to understand the US reaction after 9/11. There's no worked out strategy after 15 months of U.S. and Gulf air bombing Iraq and then Syria. The rollback, particularly in Syria, has been minimal. The French now want to intensify that. They had been part of the coalition previously, so there's nothing new here. It's the same strategy, which is not bringing dividends. On the other hand, it's producing acts of terror. I'm afraid the prognosis is very poor for what Francois Hollande is recommending.

DB: You have some suggestions for the French president. What are they?

VP: First, grieve for those who have been killed. Grief is important for a family, neighborhood, city, country, and the planet. There are terrible stories, and each one should be told. A 41-year-old woman at a cafe was shot in Paris. In Beirut, a four-month-old baby was sitting in his mother's lap. She cushioned the blow. Mother and father died, and the baby lived.

These stories are educational. They tell us who the victims of these terror attacks are. There was the killing by drones of an entire family in Yemen. We need to know their names – their lives – so that people don't just see them as statistics. First we need an accounting of who they are, and then grieve for them.

Secondly, states need to not believe that a response to a terrorist action is military force. They need to believe that it's got to be forensic. One needs to understand how this happened. How is it possible that the Turkish government handed over the names of one of these terrorists to the French – not once, but twice? Apparently, it was not acted upon.

These are the kinds of questions that were not asked after 9/11. The 9/11 Commission ducked many serious questions about how people on a watch list were not discovered. It's the same thing with any terrorist action, whether it's 9/11 or the Oklahoma City bombing. These were known characters on a certain list.

We're supposed to have this enormous surveillance, but instead of forensic surveillance, we have blanket surveillance. Everybody's emails are checked. There needs to be a proper police accounting of what occurred.

DB: I like the next suggestion: Try to get to the root of the issue to what provoked the inhumanity. This is one the U.S. and the West aren't particularly interested in.

VP: We used to joke that somebody needs to tell the CIA that highlighter pens are yellow and not black. The 9/11 Commission did some accounting of the reason it occurred, but most of the 9/11 report was entirely blacked out, particularly the section that involved Saudi Arabia and its involvement – not the country, but individual sheiks. There needs to be a very serious and honest appraisal, not only of the culpability of people in the Arabian Peninsula, but also in the French and American government.

Just this year, the French government sent \$10 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia. The U.S. and Western Europe rely on Saudi oil money – not the oil itself, but the profits – to liquefy their banks. There's extreme complicity of the West with the Gulf Arab states. So any accounting of where this vicious ideology spawns from, who finances the network of mullahs, some of these extremist groups – none of that is taken in hand.

Friends in Paris tell me that when a mosque is searching for a new cleric, often the government insists the cleric not be from the community, but they must be brought in from abroad. Often some Saudi-trained cleric arrives, so people feel these clerics are foisted upon them. This is the nature of the accounting that's necessary. You can't just say they are bad guys, ISIS. It's much deeper than that, because our complicity is quite considerable in these cases.

DB: Do you think U.S. and Western terrorism in the Middle East is the driving force behind growing acts of terrorism against the West? They tried to put a cork in Allah's mouth, and the whole world blew up?

VP: There's a lot of truth to what you are saying. There are different timelines by which you can sketch that story backwards, such as to the Iraq war of 2003. Now it's widely understood that the regime change in Iraq had a catastrophic impact on the region. It essentially produced the space for ISIS to grow, and brought us to where we are.

But we can go earlier, to the way the West and the Gulf Arab states first collaborated to send the mujahedeen to Afghanistan. This was also a regime change in process, where we financed anybody, mostly the most conservative and heinous forces on the ground. We legitimized them, gave them training, and then

were surprised when out of the kernel of Afghanistan, Al Qaeda erupted.

Before that, in the 1950s, the U.S. collaborated with the Saudis, largely, to attack Arab nationalism, undermining and destroying the Left by promoting very virulent forms of Islam, pushed by the Saudis in particular. There's a lot to be said about the role of the West in producing the social conditions which lead to ISIS. Many serious questions must be asked about the role Saudi Arabia has played in West Asia and across the Muslim world, with its collaborators in Morocco and elsewhere, pushing a very heartless politics against the social democratic politics that had emerged from the people of the Arab lands.

DB: The more I see how the Saudis operate, the more it reminds me of Israel.

VP: The last UN report that came out from the Economic and Social Commission of West Asia addressed the sense of the Arab Spring, and stressed the importance of what happened in Tunisia. Then the report made a startling comparison. It had a section where it went after states that promote a kind of moral, ethnic, religious culture where there's no cultural diversity allowed or sanctified by the state.

The countries it used as an example were Israel and Saudi Arabia. The report suggested that these two countries are creating an anachronistic form of nation vote for the world, and are not a good example for the region. Of course, Israel is furious with the comparison, because it prefers to be compared to European states, and would hate to be compared to Saudi Arabia. But there's something to be said for the way in which Israel is increasingly showing a very narrow understanding of ethnic or religious nationalism. If you were very uncharitable, you might call it racist nationalism.

DB: Where does this go now? Do you see a light at the end of the tunnel?

VP: There is the phrase, "May we always live in interesting times." In an essay I wrote after the Paris shootings, I call these pitiless times times without pity. We are going to prosecute a ruthless, pitiless war. Our political leadership, across the planet, has the imagination of yesterday. They don't want to see new ways of doing things, or acknowledge we are dealing with people, not aliens who can be smashed out of existence.

We need creative thinking. In Syria, as an example, all understand the West is trapped in a web of its relationships. Turkey is on one side, which understands terrorism to include the Kurds. The Kurdish fighters have been some of the most successful fighters against ISIS. Here's a major U.S. ally, and NATO member, which wants to attack the Assad government in Damascus, and the Kurds.

The Americans have been giving close air support to the Kurds against ISIS.

Meanwhile, the U.S. is so compromised with the Saudis that it's unable to pressure the Saudis to back down from their proxies. We live in an age where the politics is yesterday – they are not able to look forward. [On Nov. 15], Obama and Putin had a private discussion for 35 minutes. My only hope is that they don't do more damage than they've already done. Our current political leadership is not capable of rolling back the damage, but we should have faith that they will not make it worse than it is already.

DB: After the Charlie Hebdo killing in Paris, we had the insanity of Netanyahu marching in the streets of Paris in solidarity with the people of France after he had slaughtered some 2,200 people, including many children. They say no peace in Palestine, no peace anywhere else in the world.

VP: In 2003, it was very gratifying to see India, Brazil and South Africa take a very strong position against the American war in Iraq. Then in 2011, the five BRICS countries happened to comprise the UN Security Council [BRICS is the acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The grouping was originally known as "BRIC" before the inclusion of South Africa in 2010].

Sadly, Russia, China, India and Brazil abstained when the West and the Gulf Arab states wanted to bomb Libya. Only South Africa voted in favor, and President Jacob Zuma said that Obama personally called him to convince him to vote yes. So the five BRICS countries essentially allowed the West and Gulf Arabs to destroy Libya.

Now we have an extraordinarily introspective BRICS bloc, particularly India, Brazil, South Africa and China. The four of them seriously regret their vote about Libya. Unfortunately they've gone silent, but my hope is that these four countries will assert themselves on the global stage, and argue that the approach the West has taken has been catastrophic, and another way must be put forward. Thus far they haven't had the confidence to articulate an alternative, but I very much hope that these countries, which are very chastised by the vote in 2011, might now come out and say the West doesn't have all the answers.

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.
