

Why the Vengeance Toward Sgt. Bergdahl

The angry politics around Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's "desertion" in Afghanistan revolve around right-wing hatred for President Obama who engineered Bergdahl's freedom from the Taliban, as Matthew Hoh describes.

By Matthew Hoh

Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl's guilty plea begins the end of this phase of an embarrassing, sad and morally absurd saga of American history.

Sergeant Bergdahl was dismissed from the Coast Guard because of mental illness, was recruited into the Army in spite of such issues, and then was sent to the frontlines of Afghanistan where he walked away from his base and was captured, kept as a prisoner, and tortured by the Taliban for nearly five years. Yet, he has been offered almost no compassion, sympathy or forgiveness by large swaths of the American public, political classes, veterans and the media.

The shameful blood-crazed calls for vengeance against Sergeant Bergdahl, screamed across Fox News, talk radio and Twitter, by millions of right-wing Americans have begun again with Sergeant Bergdahl's guilty plea.

This hostility has resumed despite an Army investigation finding no Americans were killed by Sergeant Bergdahl's departure of his unit; despite the Pentagon admitting it was known that Sergeant Bergdahl was in Pakistan within a few days of his capture, thus negating the validity of the right-wing talking points of continuous search missions for Sergeant Bergdahl that jeopardized American lives; despite the general who led the investigation of Sergeant Bergdahl's disappearance stating Sergeant Bergdahl should not be punished and the colonel who led the Army's version of a grand jury trial recommending the same; despite the United States military's top prisoner of war expert testifying that Sergeant Bergdahl endured more torture at the hands of the Taliban than any American prisoner of war has endured since the Vietnam War, undoubtedly due to his multiple escape attempts and unwillingness to cooperate with his kidnappers; and despite repeated calls made by President Trump for Sergeant Bergdahl to be executed, as well as calls for retaliation against the military if Sergeant Bergdahl is not sent to jail by Senator John McCain, clear and blatant forms of wrongful and illegal command influence prohibited by military law against a defendant.

Despite all that, Sergeant Bergdahl finds himself having just entered a guilty plea and putting himself at the mercy of a U.S. Army judge.

In time, Sergeant Bergdahl may become just a footnote to America's wars in the Muslim world, wars that have killed well over a million people since 2001. But his individual story relays some fundamental truths of these American wars against Sunnis and Shias, and Arabs, Africans and Pashtuns, (it is a fact that nearly all the people we have killed, maimed and made homeless have been Muslim and dark skinned). One truth is that there is no logic to our violence, only the unending and insatiable requirement for more war and more destruction.

No Forgiveness

There is also no forgiveness in this loudly and righteously proclaimed Christian nation, only the scapegoating of a young man and his family for the failures of immoral and unwinnable wars on the murderous altar of the twin godheads of American Exceptionalism and White Supremacy.

Sergeant Berghdal's story does not just inform us of the madness of our wars overseas, but highlights our wars here at home; for our wars abroad come from the same root causes as our wars at home.

It was Sergeant Bergdahl's parents standing outside the White House with President Obama that began the rage against him and his family. This was the treason that so angered and upset the white conservative audiences of Megyn Kelly and Rush Limbaugh. Sergeant Bergdahl's white parents standing at the White House with *that black president* and thanking him for freeing their son began the scorn, the vitriol and the outrage against Sergeant Bergdahl, his mother and his father.

Jani and Bob Bergdahl, who were just released from the captivity of the unimaginable nightmare of the imprisonment and torture of their son for five years by the Taliban, had the audacity to stand with Barack *Hussein* Obama and to give him thanks. That was a betrayal to the usurped, rightful and white structures that underlie so many white Americans understanding of United States history and society.

Military Mythology

The grand mythology of American militarism, a key pillar of both American Exceptionalism and White Supremacy, does not allow for figures such as Sergeant Bergdahl. *The greatest military in the history of the world* is a required statement of faith for all American politicians and public persons, even though the American military has not achieved victory in war in over 70 years, so an explanation of collusion and cooperation with anti-American and anti-white forces is necessary to provide the causation of such an undermining.

Of course, once Bob and Jani Bergdahl stood with President Obama, the racially

fueled reactionary political anger appeared in Facebook posts and twitter rants and the lies needed to sustain that anger and turn it into a useful political tool arrived: Sergeant Bergdahl attempted to join the Taliban, Sergeant Bergdahl gave information to the enemy, Sergeant Bergdahl got Americans killed, Sergeant Bergdahl had anti-American beliefs, Sergeant Bergdahl's father is a Muslim...all claims that were untrue and disproved over time, but such a straightening of facts is almost always inconsequential to those whose identity is an abominable mix of race, right-wing politics and nationalism.

People of such a type as those who believe Jesus would be okay with them carrying handguns into church, demand that Santa Claus can only be white, and that the Confederate flag is a symbol of a proud heritage, have little time or consideration for the particulars of anything that triggers the base tribalism that dominates and informs their lives.

The fundamental aspects of Sergeant Bergdahl's disappearance were well known and documented years prior to that White House announcement of his release. Veterans' organizations called for his rescue and return at rallies and Republican senators enacted legislation to help release him "Bring Him Home" and "No Man Left Behind" were echoed repeatedly by Republican politicians and pundits, and even Ronald Reagan's most famed acolyte and Fox News hero, Oliver North, wore a Bowe Bergdahl POW bracelet.

However, to be white and to stand tearfully and gratefully alongside *that black president* is unconscionable and unforgivable to many "true Americans" and so the parents' sins became the son's and Sergeant Bergdahl's treason was a dog whistle to those who believe anti-whiteness and anti-Americanism are inseparable.

For the man who used race so overtly and effectively to become President of the United States, calling during his campaign for a traitor like Sergeant Bergdahl to face the firing squad, or be thrown out of a plane without a parachute, was a rudimentary requirement in order to Make America Great Again. Even General James Mattis, who hung outside his office a horseshoe that had belonged to Sergeant Bergdahl and had been given to the general by the sergeant's father, understands the political importance of Bergdahl's treason.

General Mattis who previously had supported the soldier and given great comfort to the family, now, as Secretary of Defense, is silent. I believe Secretary Mattis to have higher ambitions than simply running the Pentagon and keeping that white base of support in his favor is not anything such a savvy and cunning careerist, such as James Mattis, would imperil.

We will soon know what, if any punishment Sergeant Bergdahl is to receive. Hopefully, he and his family will be spared further pain and they can begin

rebuilding lives that were shattered by the unending war in Afghanistan and then shattered again by the race-fueled partisan politics of the unending war against people of color in the United States.

For Bowe Bergdahl, a young man who never should have been inducted into the Army to begin with, his suffering is testament to the viciousness, callousness and hate that dominates American actions both at home and abroad. We deserve no forgiveness for what has been done, and may still be done, to him and his family.

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Trump's Mendacious Speech on Iran

President Trump, in decertifying the Iran-nuclear deal, trotted out all the tripe about the "world leading sponsor of terrorism" and ties to Al Qaeda. But his new policy is one of dangerous incoherence, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump's speech on Iran is the latest chapter in his struggle to reconcile his overriding impulse to denigrate and destroy any significant achievements of his predecessor with the fact that the most salient of those achievements in foreign policy—the Iran nuclear agreement or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — is working.

It is fulfilling its objective of keeping closed all paths to an Iranian nuclear weapon. As international inspectors have repeatedly determined, Iran is fulfilling its obligations under the agreement.

The struggle for Trump is more difficult on Iran policy than with the Affordable Care Act, where Trump has been using his own executive actions to destroy directly what he has denigrated. However painful his actions on health care are to American citizens who are adversely affected, there is no international multilateral agreement that direct destruction violates. With health care there

are no equivalents to the adults, in the person of senior national security officials in his administration, who have been telling him what a bad idea abrogation of the JCPOA would be.

With those adults uncomfortably restraining him, Trump is turning to Congress to square the circle between impulse and reality, to do what the adults are advising him not to do, and to come up with an Iran strategy that is markedly different from what previous administrations have done.

Neither the brief boilerplate in the speech about countering Iran's "destabilizing activity" and conventional weapons development nor the paper labeled as a "new strategy on Iran" that the White House released shortly before the speech provide such a strategy. Most of the paper could have been written in either of the previous two administrations and probably in any of the previous half dozen.

Compliance Confirmed

The issue of Iranian compliance with the JCPOA is where the dissonance Trump is experiencing, in the face of the International Atomic Energy Agency's confirmation of that compliance, is most acute. Trump's speechwriters went to the usual wells that have been tapped by longtime opponents of the JCPOA who have tried to find any possible ground for claiming an Iranian violation.

There was mention of heavy water, without any mention that in the two instances in which Iran's supply of heavy water bumped up against the agreed-upon limits, Iran promptly did exactly what it is supposed to do under the agreement, which is to sell or otherwise dispose of the excess. Nor was there any mention of how, given Iran's reconfiguration of its heavy water reactor at Arak and permanent obligation under the JCPOA not to reprocess spent fuel, the heavy water does not represent a proliferation concern.

Trump also asserted that Iran had "intimidated international inspectors," a line which evidently hinges on some Iranian rhetorical bravado about not giving foreigners the run of their country, and which continues a theme pushed by Nikki Haley that is intended to foster the belief that Iran is denying inspectors access to suspect sites. Neither Trump nor Haley has provided a shred of evidence that there has been any such denial, or that the procedures under JCPOA for inspection of non-declared as well as declared sites are not working well.

The key to reality as far as Iranian compliance is concerned can be found in Trump's own speech. When he announced that he was withholding certification under the terms of the legislation governing Congressional review, he explicitly said he was doing so on the basis of the clause in the legislation that does *not*

pertain to Iranian compliance but instead refers to whether sanctions relief is still “appropriate and proportionate” to the benefits from the JCPOA. If the administration had genuine grounds for claiming Iranian noncompliance, Trump surely would have invoked the clauses in the law that instead refer to whether Iran is meeting its obligations.

Trump also went to the usual wells in complaining about “flaws” in the JCPOA. Also as usual, the implicit comparison was with a mythical, impossible-to-achieve pact, with no attention given to what the real negotiating possibilities were when the JCPOA was laboriously being hammered out nor what those possibilities are now.

The ‘Sunset’ Clauses

This was true, for example, of what Trump said about the “sunset” provisions. He disregarded the key considerations about these provisions, including how the most important elements of the agreement never expire and how whether such restrictions remain in place years from now will depend more on how all the parties to the JCPOA see their interests years from now (including whether the United States lives up to its commitments) than on the fine print of a past agreement.

Most important about the sunset clauses is that if the JCPOA were killed, the relevant restrictions on Iranian nuclear activities would vanish right away, not 10 or 20 years from now. This fact makes especially ironic Trump’s closing threat that if Congress doesn’t somehow come up with legislation to his liking, and other parties to the JCPOA do not – contrary to every indication those parties have been giving – bend to whatever it is Trump wants, then “the agreement will be terminated.” If he really is worried about those sunset clauses, then this threat is akin to committing suicide because of fear of death.

The entire speech was filled with what is hoary, well-rehearsed, and well-refuted. This was true of Trump’s efforts to encourage other misconceptions about the JCPOA, including the favorite one among opponents that Iran got its benefits “up front” before fulfilling most of its obligations. In fact, the reverse was true, with Iran having to dismantle centrifuge cascades, dilute enriched uranium, gut its reactor, and take most of the steps it was required to take to close pathways to a nuclear weapon before it got an ounce of additional sanctions relief.

Besides the outright falsehoods, there was hardly a syllable of recognition in the speech that what is one of the most significant nuclear nonproliferation agreements in recent years had accomplished anything at all.

The first portion of Trump's speech was a play to emotions that consisted of a recitation of bad things Iran had done through the years, dating back to the hostage crisis of almost 40 years ago and featuring terrorist attacks by Iranian-supported groups in the 1980s. One need not disagree that there were indeed many reprehensible Iranian deeds during those years to note the misrepresentations in the speech.

The Al Qaeda Fiction

Trump tried to tie Iran to al-Qaeda (evidently relying on the fact of some al-Qaeda members having been in Iran, in a status that probably was most like house arrest) and its attacks, including the attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa. That sort of linkage has as much validity as George W. Bush alleging an "alliance" between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda as one of the selling points for launching the Iraq War.

Missing from Trump's bill of historical particulars about Iranian conduct was any sense of the possibility or desirability of regimes changing their conduct – partly through evolution of their own perception of self-interest and partly through inducements, which is what the JCPOA is all about in keeping Iran from building nuclear weapons. Also missing was any reference to the responsibility of other players for much of the mayhem involved (as with the Saudi-led, U.S.-supported war in Yemen).

Missing as well was any genuine connection between all of the recited reasons to dislike Iran and a rationale for Trump undermining the JCPOA. Trump offered the usual assertions about unfrozen assets that Iran "could use to fund terrorism" while offering no reason to believe that the level of what is unfrozen has anything to do with the level of Iran's activity outside its borders.

Trump even used the chestnut about a payment by the Obama administration to Iran in the form of pallets of cash – without mentioning, of course, that this payment was settlement of an old claim involving aircraft that Iran under the shah had ordered but the United States never delivered, and that cash was used because Iran was still frozen out of Western banking systems.

Although Trump claimed to be offering an entire new strategy on Iran and not just making a statement about the JCPOA, something else that was missing was any reason to believe that his administration has new and better ideas to do anything about non-nuclear Iranian actions, whether this involves missiles, terrorism, or anything else.

Neither in this speech nor on other occasions has Trump shown any awareness of the need to look at the reasons the other state is doing what it is doing, how

this fits in with what other states are doing, and what incentives would be required to elicit any changes.

Trump referred repeatedly in his speech to the “Iranian dictatorship.” There was no hint of recognition that the Iranian regime is currently one of the more democratic ones in the Middle East (and much more so than some other regimes in the region that Trump prefers to associate with). There was no acknowledgement that the JCPOA was negotiated with the government of a popularly elected Iranian president who won re-election over hard-line opposition partly because of the promise of better relations, including economic relations, with the West under the JCPOA.

The misrepresentations in the speech were too numerous to catalog entirely, but one of the biggest was Trump’s assertion that “the previous administration lifted sanctions just before what would have been the complete collapse of the regime.” There is no evidence whatsoever that the Iranian regime was on the brink of any such collapse.

Piling on more and more sanctions in the absence of engagement and diplomacy had merely seen the spinning of more and more centrifuges enriching uranium. This line in the speech points to the vacuity of what Trump is offering for a policy toward Iran: endless hostility and confrontation, and with it the risk of war, sustained by a baseless hope of regime change – a hope that has brought costs and chaos that the United States knows all too well.

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How Trump’s Iran Decision Invites War

By decertifying the Iran-nuke deal, President Trump opts for another Mideast war of choice, but war on Iran is really the choice of Israel and Saudi Arabia wanting the U.S. to do the killing and dying, as Trita Parsi explains.

By Trita Parsi

Make no mistake: We do not have a crisis over the Iran nuclear deal. It is working and everyone from Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to the U.S. and Israeli intelligence services to the International

Atomic Energy Agency agree: Iran is adhering to the deal.

But President Trump is about to take a working deal and turn it into a crisis – an international crisis that very likely can lead to war. While the decertification of the Iran deal that Trump is scheduled to announce on Friday in and of itself doesn't collapse the deal, it does trigger a process that increases the risk of war in the following five ways.

1. If the deal collapses, so do the restrictions on Iran's nuclear program

The nuclear deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) took two very bad scenarios off the table: It blocked all of Iran's paths to a nuclear bomb and it prevented war with Iran. By killing the deal, Trump is putting both of those bad scenarios back on the table.

As I describe in my book *Losing an Enemy – Obama, Iran and the triumph of Diplomacy*, it was the very real danger of a military conflict that drove the Barack Obama administration to become so dedicated to find a diplomatic solution to this crisis. In January 2012, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated publicly that Iran's breakout – the time it would take from making the decision to build the bomb to having the material for a bomb – was 12 months. In spite of massive sanctions on Iran aimed at both retarding the nuclear program and convincing the Iranians that the nuclear program was too costly to continue, the Iranians aggressively expanded their nuclear activities.

By January 2013, exactly a year later, a new sense of urgency dawned on the White House. Iran's breakout time had shrunk from 12 months to a mere 8-12 weeks. If Iran decided to dash for a bomb, the United States might not have enough time to stop Tehran militarily.

According to former CIA deputy director Michael Morell, Iran's shrinking breakout time caused the U.S. to be "closer to war with the Islamic Republic than at any time since 1979." Other countries realized the danger as well. "The actual threat of military action was almost felt as electricity in the air before a thunderstorm," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told me.

If nothing changed, President Obama concluded, the U.S. would soon face a binary option: Either go to war with Iran (due to pressure from Israel, Saudi Arabia and some elements inside the U.S.) to stop its nuclear program or acquiesce to Iran's nuclear fait accompli. The only way out of this lose-lose situation was a diplomatic solution. Three months later, the U.S. and Iran held a pivotal secret meeting in Oman where the Obama administration managed to secure a diplomatic breakthrough that paved the way for the JCPOA.

The deal prevented war. Killing the deal prevents the peace. If Trump collapses

the deal and the Iranians restart their program, the U.S. will soon find itself facing the same dilemma that Obama did in 2013. The difference is that the President is now Donald Trump, a man who doesn't even know how to spell diplomacy, let alone conduct it.

2. Trump is planning to take on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps

Decertification is only half the story. Trump also plans to significantly escalate tensions with Iran in the region, including taking a measure that both the Bush and Obama administrations rejected: Designate the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. Make no mistake, the IRGC is far from an army of saints. It is responsible for much of the repression against the population inside of Iran and it fought the U.S. military indirectly in Iraq through Shia militias. But it has also been one of the most critical fighting forces against ISIS.

In real terms, the designation does not add much to the pressure the U.S. already is or can impose on the IRGC. But it ratchets things up in a very dangerous way without any clear benefits to the United States. The drawbacks, however, are crystal clear.

IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari issued a stern warning last week: "If the news is correct about the stupidity of the American government in considering the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist group, then the Revolutionary Guards will consider the American army to be like Islamic State [ISIS] all around the world." If the IRGC acts on its warning and targets U.S. troops – and there are 10,000 such targets in Iraq – we will only be a few steps away from war.

3. Trump is escalating without having any exit-ramps

Escalation is under all circumstances a dangerous game. But it is particularly dangerous when you do not have diplomatic channels that ensure that the other side reads your signals correctly and that provide mechanisms for de-escalation. Not having such exit-ramps is like driving a car without a brake. You can accelerate, you can crash, but you can't brake.

Military commanders understand this. That's what former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen warned about prior to the Obama administration investing in diplomacy. "We've not had a direct link of communication with Iran since 1979," Mullen said. "And I think that has planted many seeds for miscalculation. When you miscalculate, you can escalate and misunderstand... We are not talking to Iran, so we don't understand each other. If something happens, it's virtually assured that we won't get it right – that there will be miscalculation which would be extremely dangerous in that part of

the world.”

Mullen issued this warning when Obama was president, a man often criticized for being too restrained and too unwilling to use military power. Imagine how nervous and worried Mullen must be today with Trump calling the shots in the situation room.

4. Some U.S. allies want the U.S. to fight their war with Iran

There is no secret that Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been pushing the U.S. for years to go to war with Iran. Israel in particular was not only making threats of preemptive military action itself, its ultimate aim was to convince the United States to conduct the attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities for Israel.

“The intention,” former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak admitted to the Israeli paper Ynet in July of this year, “was both to make the Americans increase sanctions and to carry out the operation.”

While the Israeli security establishment today opposes killing the nuclear deal (Barak himself said as much in an interview with the New York Times this week), there are no indications that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has changed his mind on this matter. He has called on Trump to “fix or nix” the deal, though his criteria for how to fix the deal is so unrealistic it virtually ensures the deal will collapse – which in turn would put the U.S. on a path to war with Iran.

The only person who arguably has a worse sense of judgment than Trump is Netanyahu. After all, this is what he told U.S. lawmakers in 2002 as he lobbied them to invade Iraq: “If you take out Saddam, Saddam’s regime, I guarantee you that it will have enormous positive reverberations on the region.”

5. Trump’s donors are obsessed with starting war with Iran

Some have suggested that Trump is pursuing the decertification of the Iran deal – in spite of the near consensus advice of his top advisors to not go down this path – as a result of pressure from his base. But there is no evidence that his base cares much about this issue.

Rather, as Eli Clifton meticulously had documented, the most dedicated force behind Trump’s obsession with killing the Iran deal is not his base, but a tiny group of top Republican donors. “A small number of his biggest campaign and legal defense donors have made extreme comments about Iran and, in at least one case, advocated for the use of a nuclear weapon against the Islamic Republic,” Clifton wrote last month.

The billionaire Home Depot founder Bernard Marcus, for instance, has given Trump \$101,700 to help pay Trump and Donald Trump Jr.'s legal fees following the probe into Russian election interference. Hedge-fund billionaire Paul Singer is another major donor to pro-war groups in Washington who Trump has relied upon for financial support. The most famous billionaire donor, of course, is Sheldon Adelson who has contributed \$35 million to pro-Trump Super PAC Future 45. All of these donors have pushed for war with Iran, though only Adelson has gone as far as to suggest the U.S. should strike Iran with nuclear weapons as a negotiating tactic.

Thus far, Trump has gone with the advice of these billionaires on Iran over that of his Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff.

None of the above five scenarios were realistic a few months ago. They have become plausible – even likely – because Trump has decided to make them so. Just like with George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, Trump's confrontation with Iran is a war of choice, not a war of necessity.

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https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/5-reasons-why-trump-is-moving-towards-war-with-iran_us_59df6f8de4b0fdad73b27711?section=us_contributor

The Evil That Guns Do

On the defensive over the Las Vegas massacre, the NRA is trotting out some new arguments, such as the inevitability of evil, to deter any meaningful gun control, explains Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

In the United States, you will hear madmen insist that: 58 dead and 500 injured in Las Vegas are the price of freedom; 49 dead and 58 wounded in Orlando, Florida, are the price of freedom; 27 dead and 2 injured in Newtown, Connecticut, are the price of freedom.

And so it goes. This truly is insanity. We can try to deal with that small percentage of the population who collect or own guns for hunting, target

shooting or security, but to claim as a constitutional right the possession of firearms intended for nothing less than brutal, gruesome warfare strains credulity. These are killing machines with no purpose other than to maim and destroy.

Of course, we've said this time and again and will doubtless say it again because the foolish cycle remains unchanging. Every time someone unleashes gun violence and takes multiple victims, we begin with adamant, genuine grief and a collective wringing of hands. Then we are told that the immediate aftermath is not the time to bring politics into a time of sorrow, and then that, yes, maybe we will look into the license to kill we permit with our lax gun laws. Then the flowers will fade, the candles will gutter, the memorials will be over and nothing will be done.

But beyond the horrific scale of the Las Vegas killings, there were a couple of things that struck us as different about this latest tragedy. Usually, the National Rifle Association goes into its bunker and assumes radio silence for a week or so after these mass murders take place, and as if on cue Sunday morning, NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre suddenly popped up on CBS' *Face the Nation*, blaming the violence not on the millions and millions his organization spends holding gun control at bay but, you guessed it, "the elites." He said:

"They all protect themselves with armed security. I mean, they criticize the NRA. You want to talk about irresponsible use of firearms? The No. 1 person teaching irresponsible use of firearms is all these elites' employer, the Hollywood television gaming industry. We spend millions teaching responsible use of firearms. They make billions every single day, teaching irresponsible use of firearms. They're so hypocritical it's unbelievable."

Limiting the Response

What was different this time was that just a couple of days after the Las Vegas deaths, for once the NRA seemed in favor of new gun laws, in this case forbidding the sale of the bump stocks that killer Stephen Paddock used to turn his semiautomatic rifles into automatic weapons that could spray the concert area below him with hundreds of bullets.

But hold on. What the NRA's carefully parsed statement actually said was that the group was urging the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives "to immediately review whether these devices comply with federal law. The NRA believes that devices designed to allow semi-automatic rifles to function like fully automatic rifles should be subject to additional regulations."

In other words, as John Cassidy reported at *The New Yorker*, "the NRA was looking

to convert a legislative threat into a regulatory issue. Since fully automatic weapons are already illegal, it wasn't giving up any substantive ground, and it was trying to prevent an open political debate in areas where it knows it is vulnerable."

So don't be fooled by their rhetorical camouflage. In truth, the NRA still wants to steer clear of any open debate in Congress that conceivably could change minds and even lead to other new gun control rules already widely favored by the public – like a renewal of the ban on assault rifles, universal background checks and a federal data base tracking gun sales.

Which leads to the second thing we noticed – the repeated use of the word "evil" to describe the deadly Vegas attack. It was "an act of pure evil," President Trump said the morning after. And Don Turner, president of the Nevada Firearms Coalition, state branch of the NRA, told Mary Louise Kelley of NPR's All Things Considered:

"Putting more new laws on the books is not going to stop it. This has been a conundrum humans have fought with since Cain and Abel. You cannot legislate compliance with evil. People are going to be evil. They're going to do evil acts for one reason or another, and there's not any laws in the world would stop them. If we had a total ban on guns, they would've used a semitruck or a bomb."

That the acts of mass murderers are evil is undeniable. The problem is that if you insist that civilization cannot avoid the generation of evil acts – that the force of evil is out of the control of mere mortals – you are throwing up your hands and shirking responsibility for taking action. It's a stinking cop out.

Bruce Clark, who writes the Erasmus blog on religion and public policy for The Economist magazine, notes that the emphasis on evil makes this assumption: "If evil is an inexorable feature of a fallen plane of existence, one that has been tainted from the very start of things by human sin, then no policy measures will ever remove it. The only response to evil is to identify it clearly, to avoid secular soft-headedness, and perhaps to mitigate its effects as and when they arise, without presuming to abolish it. In other words, gun control will not work."

You can't change fundamental human nature, the NRA and its allies shout. Wayne LaPierre proclaims, "[I]f we could legislate morality, we would have done it long ago." But as Clark concludes, "whatever you may think about the causes of badness in the world, it seems manifestly absurd to suggest that the legislator should not try, at least, to reduce the scope for evil to prevail."

We must continue to try. Yet given the nature of evil, why bother, LaPierre

suggests. He knows the answer. More guns. But only for “the good guys,” of course. Madness.

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President Zigzag

Exclusive: President Trump boasts about his “zigzag” foreign policy as if inconsistency is an attribute in dealing with a fragile world, but his zigzagging endangers backchannel intermediaries handling outreach to North Korea, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Trump’s [bellicose speech](#) to the United Nations General Assembly last month sparked a crisis for the behind-the-scenes diplomacy that was then reaching out to North Korea and Iran, with Trump’s comments jeopardizing not only the talks but the credibility of the intermediaries, according to a source familiar with those efforts.

Trump essentially pulled the rug out from under the intermediaries by insulting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as “Rocket Man,” threatening to “totally destroy” Kim’s nation of 25 million people, and calling for regime change in Iran. Trump’s bluster on Sept. 19 also deepened internal tensions with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson who was privately supporting the secret diplomacy.

The next day, when one of the intermediaries complained about the harm that Trump’s speech had caused, the President glibly explained that he liked to “zigzag” in charting his foreign policy, the source said.

The immediate consequences of Trump’s U.N. speech included ratcheting up nuclear-war tensions on the Korean peninsula and torpedoing a possible diplomatic breakthrough with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. A proposed meeting between Rouhani and Trump around the Iranian president’s trip to the U.N. sank under Trump’s barrage of insults, the source said.

Trump’s “zigzag” approach to foreign policy has similarities to President Richard Nixon’s infamous “madman theory,” in which Nixon pretended to be crazy enough to launch a nuclear strike against North Vietnam in a ploy to gain

concessions from Hanoi and its allies during the Vietnam War.

In Trump's depiction of his business negotiating style, he has hailed the value of coming on tough to soften up a rival. But one problem of this approach in foreign policy is that Trump's zigzagging left the U.S. government's middlemen in the uncomfortable position of appearing to have misled senior North Korean and Iranian officials regarding what U.S. intentions were. The source said no one was in physical danger but apologies had to be made and the credibility of the initiatives suffered a severe blow.

In the case of North Korea, the backchannel goal had been to tamp down the heated rhetoric between Washington and Pyongyang and to persuade the North Koreans to begin talks with South Korea about the possibility of some loosely formed confederation that could then lead to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. military forces and a reduction in overall tensions.

Leaving Intermediaries in the Lurch

However, by using his maiden U.N. speech to personally insult North Korea's leader and to threaten to annihilate the country, Trump left his intermediaries in the unenviable spot of trying to explain to North Korean officials the chasm between the U.S. administration's private overtures and the President's public outburst.

That was the context behind Secretary of State Tillerson's public acknowledgement last Saturday that the administration was engaged in direct communications with the North Korean government. In effect, Tillerson was trying to bolster the credibility of the intermediaries by putting the backchannel contacts into the public light.

"We are probing, so stay tuned," Tillerson said. "We ask, 'Would you like to talk?' We have lines of communications to Pyongyang – we're not in a dark situation, a blackout."

Tillerson added, "We have a couple, three channels open to Pyongyang." Tillerson even went out of his way to specify that these were American channels, not indirect contacts through China or some other third-party government.

"We can talk to them," Tillerson said. "We do talk to them." The Secretary of State then rebuffed a suggestion that he was referring to Chinese intermediaries. Shaking his head, Tillerson said, "Directly. We have our own channels."

But Trump was not done with his administration's zigzagging. On Sunday, he belittled the idea of a dialogue with North Korea by tweeting out that "I told

Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.”

“Save your energy Rex,” Trump added, before slipping in another thinly veiled threat of a military strike: “we’ll do what has to be done!”

However, despite Trump’s truculence, the source said the behind-the-scenes contacts with North Korea have resumed although they remain fragile amid concerns that Trump may again take to Twitter with more threats and insults – and again put the intermediaries in a no-man’s-land facing angry North Koreans leaders doubting the honesty and integrity of individuals supposedly representing the U.S. government.

The source said Trump has been apprised of this danger and supposedly has agreed not to undercut these intermediaries again.

But Trump lacks enough sophistication about international relations to understand the complexities of the global chessboard and the risks involved in his erratic behavior. He is also susceptible to having his head turned by the last person who speaks with him, particularly if that person is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Some people around Trump traced the President’s destructive U.N. speech, in part, to Netanyahu’s insistence that Trump get in line behind the Israeli policy of continued hostility toward Iran and Syria.

When Trump was delivering the address to a mostly stone-faced General Assembly – with many delegates clearly distressed listening to crude threats of war at the podium of an institution created to achieve peace – one of the few visibly happy people in the building was Netanyahu as Trump embraced neoconservative war policies, albeit behind “America First” rhetoric.

Trump has continued to toe Netanyahu’s line in the President’s current threats to refuse certification that Iran is abiding by the 2015 nuclear-weapons accord even though senior administration officials and international inspectors have confirmed that Iran is in compliance.

So, the fate of Tillerson’s backchannel diplomacy may ultimately rest on whether the troublemaking Netanyahu pulls Trump’s chain again or whether President Zigzag wakes up at 3 a.m. with an itchy Twitter finger and a desire to look tough.

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

Political Fig Leaf After Las Vegas Slaughter

The Las Vegas massacre, like all the other massacres, won't change the easy accessibility of guns in America, but politicians are scrambling to enact a fig-leaf bill against a rapid-fire device used by this one shooter, JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Congress' forthcoming "[bump stock](#)" bill is the perfect political fig leaf. Cracking down on a simple device that turns deadly weapons even deadlier is an ideal political solve for lawmakers who desperately need to be seen taking some sort of action.

Republicans in particular can embrace this ultimately meaningless move under the guise of actually "doing something" about gun violence in America. And that's why they are embracing it ... it's gun control without controlling guns.

If passed, they can comfortably go into next year's elections inoculated against the charge that they are beholden to the National Rifle Association without actually transgressing the NRA or most gun-owners. In fact, the [NRA just announced](#) that *even they* are open to restrictions on bump stocks ... thus inoculating themselves from a potential backlash, too.

So it's a two-fer! But it is only a two-fer for the NRA and their "cash and carry" cadre in Congress. It is a big zero when it comes to the [daily grind of American gun violence](#). It's pure political posturing that will not change anything.

That's because bump stocks have been [flying off the shelves](#) for three days ... often [selling out](#) in some locations. And bump stocks look like something that could be fashioned by a handy man in a well-stocked shop in a typical suburban garage. Even if someone doesn't have the skill to make one, they'll still be out there. Anyone who really wants one ... will get one ... particularly with millions of bump stocks already sold across America.

Given that stark reality, how will a new restriction functionally eliminate those privately owned bump stocks? And who will be tasked with stopping people

from making one or buying one on the black market if they really want to get to the so-called "happy spot" where their already high-powered rifles spit out hundreds of rounds like an open garden hose? How will a new law put that genie back into the bottle?

It's really just an extension of the conundrum around the entire gun issue. It is estimated that Americans own 310 million guns. That's nearly a gun per person. America is locked and loaded. Simply put, this nation, which owns nearly half of the world's civilian-held guns, is a teeming mass of well-armed wannabe actions heroes who believe it is their birthright, and some even believe it's their God-given right, to bear arms.

No Gun Round-up

There is no chance they'll let go of that Hollywood-primed fantasy or that intoxicating feeling of individual power. And there is no way this country will engage in an Australia-style round-up of guns ... at least, not for another two generations. And we ain't gonna amend the Second Amendment ... at least, not for another two to four generations ... if ever. Let's be honest, it's gonna take a lot of effort and a long time to stop handing down America's uniquely potent gun-loving gene.

So, it seems like we are stuck. And that's because we are stuck. We have a culture that is suspicious of society and a society that is suspicious of each other. And we are a people who are suspicious of our government, which, it must be pointed out, is really just made up of people. Government is referred to like it is a being ... or a monster ... but it's really just made up of other Americans. Which brings us back around to a growing dysfunction that causes us to fear our neighbors and loathe our fellow Americans. Our distrust of government is intertwined with our distrust of each other. And that's the real reason we like our guns.

Frankly, this Hobbesian dystopia has been the rule in American history. The one blip was the period from the Great Depression through World War II and, with notable exceptions (Jim Crow plus McCarthyism), into the Eisenhower Years. That was a faint glimpse of America as a "whole" people who might be willing to entertain the idea of living in a society.

It was catalyzed by widespread economic hardship, total war and fear of Commies raining down nuclear holocaust on mom, apple pie and Chevrolet. They were tribal reactions to existential fears. But there was also a widely held belief that most Americans were in it together and that government and being a part of society were not inherently bad things. And other Americans were not merely your competition.

Since then, it has been one long back-slide into the bloody, anti-social norm of American history. This has been the American Way since America's inception. It's been that way since the Whiskey Rebellion and runaway slave patrols and the bugle-tootin' cavalry galloping in to wipe out nettlesome American Indians who dared to get in the way of Manifest Destiny. It's been that way since the Black Wall Street Massacre of 1921. And it returned during the assassinations and chaos of 1968. The only real difference now is the turbo-charged nature of the weapons we wield thanks to the All-American ethos of bigger-faster-cheaper.

Of course we want more firepower with more bullets delivered in less time. That's not just an integral part of America's insatiable consumerism ... it's just common sense when everyone is armed and everyone is a potential enemy in a nation that looks and feels like one giant O.K. Corral. It's the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy and it ultimately ends up filling morgues with the collateral damage of our damaged culture.

And all the politically easy bump stock bans in the world will not fix that core issue. We are going to keep paying this price until there is a real and lasting change in the way we see each other. Until we are willing to be a part of society ... we will not be able to give up our gun-based culture.

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America's Hypocrisy on Democracy

U.S. politicians often lecture other nations about their flawed governance as if American democracy is the gold standard, but anti-democratic measures like gerrymandering belie that self-image, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

An old fear about Islamist political parties entering government is that once in power, even if they had gained their position through democratic means, they would subvert democracy for the sake of maintaining power.

The U.S. government explicitly mentioned the specter of "one man, one vote, one time" in condoning in 1992 the Algerian military's cancellation of the second round of a legislative election that the Islamic Salvation Front, which had won a plurality in the first round, was poised to win. The military's intervention

touched off a vicious civil war in which hundreds of thousands of Algerians died.

History has indeed offered examples of rulers coming to power through democratic means and then clinging to power through undemocratic means. Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany only after his Nazi Party had won pluralities in two successive free elections in 1932. But there is no reason to associate such scenarios with Islamists more so than with parties of other ideological persuasions.

A relevant modern data point is Tunisia, the one Arab country in which democracy took hold as a result of the Arab Spring. The Islamist Ennahdha Party won a free election in 2011 and formed a government but willingly stepped down in 2014 after it lost much of its public support, very much in the mold of how governments in parliamentary democracies in the West vacate office after losing the public's confidence.

The more common recent pattern regarding Islamists in office has been for their opponents to cut their tenures short through undemocratic means. This has included, besides Algeria in 1992, the Turkish military's "coup by memorandum" to oust a mildly Islamist civilian government in 1997, and the Egyptian military's coup in 2013 that toppled President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Democracy in Turkey today is being rapidly eroded, but this involves not the ideological coloration of the Justice and Development Party but instead the megalomania of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been using Turkish nationalist themes more than Islamist ones in cementing his hold on power.

Anti-Democratic Gerrymandering

All this, important though it is, ought to be less important to Americans who are concerned about preserving democracy than what has been happening in their own country. The gerrymandering case that is before the Supreme Court this week is especially important in that respect, because it gets directly to the phenomenon of one person, one vote, one time.

That phenomenon is what has occurred in Wisconsin, where the case now before the court originated. Republican legislators, once in power, secretly and aggressively devised new legislative boundaries that have enabled them to retain their grip on power even after, in subsequent elections, losing majority support among the citizens of Wisconsin.

Given the power of those same legislators to draw Congressional districts as well as their own districts, the disconnect between the will of the people and

the ideology of representatives extends to the federal as well as the state level.

The methods used may be different from those used by some of the foreign rulers who have transitioned from democratically elected leaders to autocrats using nondemocratic means. The prime method used in gerrymandering in the United States is not brown shirts in the streets but rather computing power used to crunch demographic data and to try out endless variations of how lines might be drawn to gain maximum partisan advantage. But the result is the same: rulers stay in power even after most citizens no longer want them there.

Gerrymandering is not the only such undemocratic tool being used to the same effect. There also are the Republican-sponsored voter suppression laws designed to impede people's ability to exercise the right to vote, and to do so in ways that fall most heavily on those presumed to be more likely to support the opposition party. These methods are rationalized through unsupported assertions about widespread voter identification fraud. President Trump has even established a commission founded on such a lie, to provide momentum for still more voter suppression measures.

Excuses Not to Act

When any case such as the Wisconsin case comes before the Supreme Court, there always are voices calling for the court to defer to elected branches of the government on what is a "political" question. But such a position is groundless when gerrymandering is involved. The problem at the very heart of the case concerns the composition of the political branch that has been drawing district lines. For the court to defer to that political branch would mean not that it is avoiding a decision but rather that it is deciding in favor of the pro-gerrymandering side.

Of course, the politicization of the U.S. Supreme Court is a long-established feature of American government and politics. The effects of gerrymandering and the voter suppression laws have been amplified by supposed "strict constructionists" construing the First Amendment guarantee of free speech so loosely as to strike down laws governing campaign financing. Moreover, the composition of the court that is now deliberating on the gerrymandering case is itself the product of an extra-constitutional exercise of power by a Senate majority that refused to perform its constitutional duty of considering a nomination by the then-incumbent president.

The health or sickness of democracy overseas has been a major focus of U.S. foreign policy debate and much policymaking. Some strains of policy thinking have even led to costly overseas military expeditions rationalized as efforts to

install democracy in lands overseas. Any Americans thinking along such lines should stop and think first about how democracy in the United States appears to observers overseas. It is not an especially pretty sight.

The United States today is a less healthy democracy than what prevails in many other advanced industrial countries of the West. There is a foreign policy equity involved – in terms of the soft power that comes from being a conspicuously healthy democracy– but what is most important is what kind of political system Americans themselves can enjoy.

Of all the advantages of democracy that democratic theorists have posited, surely the most important is the ability of citizens to remove leaders whom they no longer support. There is no better guarantee that government will be run in the interests of the governed.

The case now before the Supreme Court will go a long way toward determining whether U.S. democracy will exhibit this principle or instead will be a case of one person, one vote, one time.

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

Why Trump Slaps Down Minority Protests

There's a troubling subtext to President Trump's harsh attacks on people of color who complain and protest, as if he thinks they should keep quiet and know their place, as Michael Winship observes.

By Michael Winship

A post-surgical convalescence has held me captive to the 24/7 news cycle more than usual so I've been far too immersed than is healthy in the concurrent sagas of Donald Trump versus the National Football League and the United States Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Hence a couple of thoughts about aspects of Trump's life and worldview that may help connect some dots:

First, when it comes to sports, Trump adores a big fat spectacle. He would have loved the Coliseum of ancient Rome. Can't you just see him ruling over the games? Lions versus Christians or maybe one of the re-creations of a great Roman

naval victory when they flooded the bottom of the arena with water and set ships ablaze, slaves giving up their lives for show business and special effects?

And can't you also picture him with his jaw jutting out, tangerine head crowned with tilted laurels and body clad in disheveled toga, turning his thumb down with a leer in his eye as he sends the defeated to their deaths?

But he confuses his love of glitz with knowledge of the game. As he does when it comes to virtually every subject, the President wrongly fancies himself an expert on professional athletics. His Trump Tower office is filled with sports memorabilia and a quick Google search shows Trump posing over the years with a panoply of pro stars, many of them African-American. There he is with Muhammad Ali. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. George Foreman. Jim Brown. Shaquille O'Neal.

In 1992, when heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson was found guilty of rape, Trump jumped to his defense, called the conviction "a travesty" and said it wasn't his pal's fault – "I've seen women going around touching him... He walks in a room and the women start grabbing him..." Sounds like Trump's own Access Hollywood tape, doesn't it?

Twenty-four years later, as he campaigned for president, Trump was still touting his friendship at a rally in Indiana, the very state where Tyson was arrested: "Mike Tyson endorsed me. I love it. He sent out a tweet. Mike. Iron Mike. You know, all the tough guys endorse me. I like that, OK?"

A Tough Guy

Trump thinks he's a tough guy, too. Witness his remarks about pro football rules when he spoke at that Sept. 22 rally for Alabama U.S. Sen. Luther Strange, who last week lost a runoff primary to crazed Judge Roy Moore:



“Today if you hit too hard – 15 yards! Throw him out of the game! They had that last week. I watched for a couple of minutes. Two guys, just really, beautiful tackle. Boom, 15 yards! The referee gets on television – his wife is sitting at home, she’s so proud of him. They’re ruining the game! They’re ruining the game.”

This mindless egging on of violence at the risk of mortal harm comes in the wake of the latest overwhelming evidence of National Football League (NFL) players who have had their lives and careers destroyed by the severe brain damage of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

That Trump seems to think that he has a masterly knowledge of pro football and how it should be run and played goes back to his disastrous involvement in the mid-1980s with the United States Football League (USFL), an upstart challenger to the NFL that might have had a chance at success had it not been for Trump’s bumbling. Apparently, he was trying to leverage his ownership of the USFL’s New Jersey Generals into an NFL franchise that the league wasn’t about to give him.

So when it comes to this whole controversy about players taking a knee during “The Star Spangled Banner,” it would be a mistake to rule out Trump’s ongoing grudge against the NFL as a factor in his attacks. Nor should it come as a surprise that he has chosen to exploit a basic and essentially civil protest against police who kill unarmed civilians and explode it into an attack on God and country, roiling his base and once more chiseling into America’s racial divide.

In the words of Charlie Pierce over at *Sports Illustrated*, Trump “never saw a crack in the pavement he couldn’t turn into an earthquake.”

To sum up: Evidence suggests that Donald Trump fawns over a player with slobbering fan fever as long as you’re an athlete who stays in line, shows appreciation and entertains the boss. But step out of line, express an opinion in conflict with his own and suddenly it’s thumbs down from the emperor. Just like that, you’re a security threat to the nation.

And to rub it in further, Trump denounced NFL owners who have been supportive of their team protests as “afraid of their players, if you want to know the truth, and I think it’s disgraceful.”

That’s not a referee’s whistle you’re hearing, it’s the shrill dog whistle of bigotry and white paranoia, of a hypocrisy that decries dissent from racial minorities while defending the rights of neo-Nazis and those who speak out against anyone who finds statues and monuments celebrating the secessionist South to be offensive.

Bread and Circuses

And the hits just keep on coming. Trump continues to find, as the great Jelani Cobb recently wrote at *The New Yorker*, novel ways “to diminish the nation he purportedly leads... [he] is a small man with a fetish for the symbols of democracy and a bottomless hostility for the actual practice of it.”

When it comes to the catastrophe in Puerto Rico, at first it seemed – as was true of Roman emperors at the Coliseum distracting the masses with bread and circuses – that the President was again using the NFL controversy, this time to divert attention from the slowness of hurricane emergency relief.

But once San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz declared, “We are dying, and you are killing us with the inefficiency and the bureaucracy,” Trump went on the attack once more, declaring that she had “poor leadership ability” and is being manipulated by Democrats. Puerto Rican officials, Trump tweeted, “want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort.”

Damn, there goes that dog whistle again. People of color raising their voices in protest make our loutish emperor mad and antsy. He puts the petty in petty tyrant. Time to call foul and throw him out of the game.

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How 2nd Amendment Distortions Kill

Exclusive: The Las Vegas massacre underscores the intellectual dishonesty of the “gun rights” lobby, which falsifies Second Amendment history and pretends armed citizens could shoot back to stop slaughters, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Many politicians, especially those on the Right, pretend they are strictly adhering to the U.S. Constitution when they often are just making the founding document mean whatever they want – but perhaps nowhere is that as dangerous as with their make-believe Second Amendment.

In the wake of Sunday’s mass shooting in Las Vegas – where one individual firing from a high-rise hotel murdered 58 people and wounded more than 500 at a country music festival – we are told that the reason the United States can’t do anything

to stop this sort of carnage is the Second Amendment's "right to bear arms."

"Gun rights" advocates insist that pretty much any gun control violates the design of the Constitution's Framers and thus can't be enacted no matter how many innocent people die.

Some on the Right, as well as some on the Left, even claim that the Founders, as revolutionaries themselves, wanted an armed population so the people could rebel against the Republic, which the U.S. Constitution created. But the Constitution's Framers in 1787 and the authors of the Bill of Rights in the First Congress in 1789 had no such intent.

Arguably other individuals disconnected from the drafting of those documents may have harbored such radical attitudes (at least rhetorically), but the authors didn't. In fact, their intent was the opposite.

The goal of the Second Amendment was to promote state militias for the maintenance of order at a time of political unrest, potential slave revolts and simmering hostilities with both European powers and Native Americans on the frontiers. Indeed, the amendment's defined purpose was to achieve state "security" against disruptions to the country's new republican form of government.

The Second Amendment reads: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."

In other words, if read in context, it's clear that the Second Amendment was enacted so each state would have the specific right to form "a well-regulated militia" to maintain "security," i.e., to put down armed disorder and protect its citizens.

In the late Eighteenth Century, the meaning of "bearing" arms also referred to a citizen being part of a militia or army. It didn't mean that an individual had the right to possess whatever number of high-capacity killing machines that he or she might want. Indeed, the most lethal weapon that early Americans owned was a slow-loading, single-fired musket or rifle.

No Anarchists

Further to the point, both the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were the work of the Federalists, who – at the time – counted James Madison among their ranks.

And whatever one thinks about the Federalists, who often are criticized as elitists, they were the principal constitutional Framers and the leaders of the

First Congress. They constituted the early national establishment, people such as George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Gouverneur Morris and Madison.

The Federalists feared that their new creation, a constitutional republic in an age of monarchies, was threatened by the potential for violent chaos, which is what European aristocrats predicted for the new United States. Democracy was a largely untested concept that was believed likely to fall victim to demagoguery and factionalism.

So, the Framers sought a political system that reflected the will of the citizens (the House of Representatives) but within a framework that constrained public passions (the Senate and other checks and balances). In other words, the Constitution sought to channel political disputes into non-violent competition among various interests, not into armed rebellions against the government.

The Framers also recognized how fragile the nation's independence was and how domestic rebellions could be exploited by European powers. Indeed, one of the crises that led to the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787 was the inability of the old system under the Articles of Confederation to put down Shays's Rebellion in western Massachusetts in 1786-87. Washington saw the possible hand of British agents.

So, the Federalists were seeking a structure that would ensure "domestic Tranquility," as they explained in the Constitution's Preamble. They did not want endless civil strife.

The whole idea of the Constitution – with its mix of voting (at least by some white male citizens), elected and appointed representatives, and checks and balances – was to create a political structure that made violence unnecessary.

So, it should be obvious even without knowing all the history that the Framers weren't encouraging violent uprisings against the Republic that they were founding. To the contrary, they characterized violence against the constitutional system as "treason" in Article III, Section 3. They also committed the federal government to protect each state from "domestic Violence," in Article IV, Section 4.

Putting Down Rebellion

One of the first uses of the new state militias formed under the Second Amendment and the Militia Acts, which required able-bodied men to report for duty with their own muskets, was for President Washington to lead a federalized force of militiamen against the Whiskey Rebellion, a tax revolt in western Pennsylvania in 1794.

In the South, one of the principal reasons for a militia was to rally armed whites to put down slave uprisings. On the frontier, militias fought against Native Americans over land. Militias also were called up to fight the British in the War of 1812.

But you don't have to like or dislike how the Second Amendment and the Militia Acts were used to recognize how the Framers intended these legislative provisions to be used.

The Second Amendment was meant to maintain public order, even an unjust order, rather than to empower the oppressed to take up arms against the government. That latter idea was a modern reinterpretation, a distortion of the history.

The revisionists who have transformed the meaning of the Second Amendment love to cite provocative comments by Thomas Jefferson, such as a quote from a 1787 letter criticizing the Constitution for its commander-in-chief provisions.

Jefferson argued that violence, like Shays's Rebellion, should be welcomed. He wrote, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its [sic] natural manure."

Jefferson, of course, was a world-class hypocrite who rarely believed what he was saying or writing. He crafted noble words, like "all men are created equal, ... endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," but he was a major slaveholder who raped at least one and likely more slave girls and had slave boys whipped.

He also was never willing to risk his own blood as that "natural manure" of liberty. During the Revolutionary War when Benedict Arnold led a force of Loyalists against Richmond, Jefferson, who was then Virginia's governor, fled the capital. Later, when British cavalry approached Charlottesville and his home of Monticello, Gov. Jefferson again took flight.

But more to the point, Jefferson was not a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, nor was he in the First Congress, which produced the Second Amendment. In other words, it's a historical error to cite Jefferson in any way as speaking authoritatively about what the Framers intended with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He was not directly involved in either.

A Collective Right

The real history of the Second Amendment was well understood both by citizens and courts in the generations after the Constitution and Bill of Rights were enacted. For most of the years of the Republic, the U.S. Supreme Court interpreted the Second Amendment as a collective right, allowing Americans to

participate in a “well-regulated Militia,” not an individual right to buy the latest weaponry at a gun show or stockpile a military-style arsenal in the basement.

It’s true that many Americans owned a musket or rifle in those early years especially on the frontier, but regulations on munitions were still common in cities where storing of gunpowder, for instance, represented a threat to the public safety.

As the nation spread westward, so did common-sense restrictions on gun violence. Sheriffs in some of the wildest of Wild West towns enforced gun bans that today would prompt a recall election financed by the National Rifle Association.

However, in recent decades – understanding the power of narrative on the human imagination – a resurgent American Right (and some on the Left) rewrote the history of the Founding era, dispatching “researchers” to cherry-pick or fabricate quotes from Revolutionary War leaders to create politically convenient illusions. [See, for instance, Steven Krulik’s compilation of apocryphal or out-of-context gun quotes.]

That bogus history gave rise to the image of the Framers as wild-eyed radicals – Leon Trotskys of the Eighteenth Century – encouraging armed rebellion against their own Republic. Rather than people who believed in the rule of law and social order, the Framers were contorted into crazies who wanted citizens to be empowered to shoot American police, soldiers, elected representatives and government officials as agents of “tyranny.”

This false history was advanced particularly by the American Right in the last half of the Twentieth Century as a kind of neo-Confederate call to arms, with the goal of rallying whites into a near-insurrectionary fury particularly in the South but also in rural areas of the North and West.

In the 1950s and 1960s, some white Southerners fancied themselves an armed resistance against the tyrannical federal government as it enforced laws on racial integration and other supposed infringements on “states’ rights.” In the 1990s, armed “citizens militias” began to pop up in reaction to the election of Democrat Bill Clinton, culminating in the Oklahoma City bombing of 1994.

While designed primarily for the weak-minded, the Right’s faux Founding history also had an impact on right-wing “intellectuals” including Republican lawyers who worked their way up through the federal judiciary under Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and now Donald Trump.

By 2008, these right-wing jurists held a majority on the U.S. Supreme Court and could thus overturn generations of legal precedents and declare that the Second

Amendment established an individual right for Americans to own guns. Though even these five right-wing justices accepted society's right to protect the general welfare of the population through some gun control, the Supreme Court's ruling effectively "validated" the Right's made-up history.

The ruling created a political dynamic to which even liberals in national politics – the likes of Barack Obama and Joe Biden – had to genuflect, the supposed Second Amendment right of Americans to parade around in public with guns on their hips and high-powered semi-automatic rifles slung over their shoulders.

What the Framers Wanted?

As guns-right activists struck down gun regulations in Congress and in statehouses across the nation, their dominant argument was that the Second Amendment offered no leeway for restrictions on gun ownership; it's what the Framers wanted.

So, pretty much any unstable person could load up with a vast killing capacity and slouch off to a bar, to a work place, to a church, to a school or to a high-rise Las Vegas hotel and treat fellow Americans as targets in a real-life violent video game. Somehow, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was overtaken by the "right" to own an AR-15 with a 30-or-100-bullet magazine.

When right-wing politicians talk about the Second Amendment now, they don't even bother to include the preamble that explains the point of the amendment. The entire amendment is only 26 words. But the likes of Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, find the preamble inconvenient because it would undercut their false storyline. So they just lop off the first 12 words.

Nor do they explain what the Framers meant by "bear arms." The phrase reflected the reasoning in the Second Amendment's preamble that the whole point was to create "well-regulated" state militias to maintain "security," not to free up anybody with a beef to kill government officials or citizens of a disapproved race or creed or just random folks.

So, even after the massacre of 20 first-graders and six educators in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, Fox News personality Andrew Napolitano declared: "The historical reality of the Second Amendment's protection of the right to keep and bear arms is not that it protects the right to shoot deer. It protects the right to shoot tyrants, and it protects the right to shoot at them effectively, with the same instruments they would use upon us."

At the time, the clear message from the Right was that armed Americans must

confront the “tyrannical” Barack Obama, the twice-elected President of the United States (and the first African-American to hold that office) especially if he pressed ahead seeking common-sense gun restrictions. But Napolitano was simply wrong on the history.

Another dubious argument from the gun-rights lobby was that armed citizens could take down a gunman and thus stop a mass shooting before it became a full-fledged massacre.

But a gunfight among largely untrained civilians would likely add to the slaughter, not stop it. For instance, a 2012 mass shooting occurred in a darkened theater in Aurora, Colorado. Does anyone logically think that a bunch of terrified gun carriers exchanging fire in such a situation – not knowing who the original shooter was – would solve the problem?

And how about Sunday’s massacre in Las Vegas where the shooter positioned himself on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Hotel and fired down on a packed concert venue, a substantial distance away?

Assuming that the concertgoers were armed and tried to defend themselves, they would likely have ended up shooting other innocent concertgoers because of the initial confusion as to where the shooter was positioned. That would have further complicated the challenge to police who could have mistakenly opened fire on armed people in the crowd rather than locate and stop the original killer as he kept firing from his sniper’s perch. In other words, the horrific death toll could have been even higher.

To pretend that such carnage was the intent of the Constitution’s Framers, who wrote about achieving “domestic Tranquility,” or the goal of the First Congress, which drafted the Second Amendment to promote “the security of a free State,” is intellectually dishonest and a true threat to the lives of American citizens.

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](#)).

Trump’s Irrational ‘Travel Ban’

President Trump has used the three iterations of his “travel ban” as a dog whistle to his “base,” which he thinks harbors hatred toward Muslims, but there is no logic behind the policy, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar observes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Trump administration's travel ban is in its third version, and it still does not respond convincingly to the ostensible need it was supposed to address. The supposed purpose itself is unclear. The latest version introduces additional confusion about the ostensible objective, even without getting into the real motivations behind it.

Most administration statements on the subject, including the more formal ones as well as less scripted defenses of the ban, center on the idea of keeping bad guys out of the United States by restricting travel from countries in which such guys are presumed to live. The disconnect between justification and reality that has existed ever since version 1.0 is that there is little or no correspondence between the countries listed in the ban and where terrorists gunning for the U.S. homeland have come from. Over the past four decades, no Americans have been killed in the United States by foreign terrorists who came from any of the countries in either the original version of the ban or the latest version.

Moreover, the whole idea of a ban on entry to the United States overlooks how much terrorism within the United States, even when it has involved foreign-born individuals, has not involved crossing of borders to commit the act. According to a study by the New America Foundation, all the perpetrators of post-9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States were U.S. citizens or legal residents and would not have been stopped by the travel ban. The evident ethnic targeting of the ban is likely only to increase the resentment, suspicion, and alienation – and thus the propensity to resort to extremist violence – of members of the communities who feel kinship with those targeted.

Other rationales that administration officials have offered for the ban have mentioned cooperation or lack of cooperation on counterterrorism from governments of the countries involved, especially in sharing information about possible terrorists. Although this rationale is still about terrorism, it is quite different from the question of where bad guys are most likely to come from. Countries with cooperative regimes are not necessarily the same as countries with nonviolent, peace-loving citizens. The result is new confusion about exactly how the measure is supposed to make Americans safer.

Tossing in Venezuela

The latest version ban goes clearly beyond terrorism-related considerations of any kind. This is true of the addition of Venezuela, evidently put on the list as just one more way to express disapproval of the Maduro regime, with Venezuela having replaced Iraq in the old axis of evil.

This is also true of North Korea, where any legitimate policy motivations have to do with weapons proliferation, not terrorism, and with the search for new ways to punish or condemn Pyongyang. Given that there are almost no North Koreans other than diplomats (who are not affected by the ban) traveling this way, the listing of North Korea has no practical effect.

The true principal motivation for this measure is the one that has been all too obvious all along: it is a Muslim ban, just as Donald Trump had been calling for. This observation isn't something that needs to be confirmed in a court of law. With the replacement of an earlier temporary ban, which had been the focus of a lawsuit, by a newer permanent one, the courts might not weigh in on this anyway. The observation follows from the words of Trump himself, such as his request to former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani for advice on how to erect a Muslim ban "legally."

The selection of which Muslim states to target has had much less to do with terrorism than with other reasons Trump has had to pick on some states but not others. The most glaring omissions in a measure supposedly designed to keep would-be terrorists out of the United States are the countries from which the 9/11 hijackers came: Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and especially Saudi Arabia. All are ruled by regimes whose side Trump has taken in regional rivalries.

The deletion of Iraq from the most current version of the ban also is hardly consistent with the idea of listing the countries where anti-U.S. terrorists are most likely to be found. Iraq is one of the two countries where the so-called Islamic State has been ensconced for the past three years, and where many former members of the group no doubt still dwell. The contrived addition of Venezuela and North Korea hardly removes all the other evidence of the primary and original intent.

The Muslim travel ban is another instance of Trump playing to his base and acting out the rhetoric of a demagogic campaign, with all the prejudices that entails. The shuffling and revising after the original proposal constitute an effort to ward off inevitable and well-founded objections to an ill-motivated measure.

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