

Gun Rights and 'Freedom's' Perversities

The concept of personal freedoms is relatively new to human history but has often, ironically, been exploited by people in power to achieve or maintain a sociopolitical goal, posits Lawrence Davidson in this analysis.

By Lawrence Davidson

For much of human history, the idea of freedom had little meaning. This was because life was, as Thomas Hobbes put it, "poor, nasty, brutish, and short." And while he thought this descriptor applied to life outside of society, for a long time it did not really matter – life within pre-modern societies often had the same limiting character. Religious belief in these same times reflected this depressing fact by asserting that there was no hope of meaningful freedom in this life. To achieve it you would have to die and go to Heaven. So, what set you free was death.

Around the end of the 18th century, progress in technology and science suggested an alternative to this "life is a vale of tears" scenario. It was at that point that different types of freedoms started to become viable goals. However, as the use of the plural implies, the idea of freedom manifested itself in discrete categories: political freedom, economic freedom (here defined as freedom from want), religious freedom, freedom of speech and press, and so forth. It really had to be this way. Total freedom produces anarchy and – here is the irony – anarchy will quickly make any particular freedom meaningless.

Thus it was that over time, as constitutions came into vogue, freedoms were written down, usually in the form of rights. Yet, not surprisingly, their translation into practice often ended up reflecting the needs and desires of the powerful and influential. This was the case whether we are considering democracies or more authoritarian forms of government. This customizing of freedoms by select groups inevitably led to less than satisfactory, and sometimes quite perverse, results.

Let's take a look at an example of such a conceptual deformity taken from the practice in the United States, "the land of the free."

Gun Rights – A Perversion of Freedom

Perhaps the most perverse American definition of freedom is the one that promotes largely unrestricted gun rights. The champion of this definition is the National Rifle Association (NRA). We are not just talking about guns used to shoot at targets or for hunting game. One can actually make an argument for

ownership of the latter weapons along the same line as bows and arrows, slingshots and fishing rods. However, according to Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's executive vice president, freedom demands more. His stand is that citizens have a fundamental right to own almost any firearm, including military-style assault weapons. His position is that this right is the sine qua non of American freedom. And only by exercising it can you really ensure individual freedom.

LaPierre insists that gun ownership is enshrined in the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and the NRA has taken an out-of-context fragment of that amendment as its motto – “The Right of the People to Keep and Bear Arms Shall Not Be Infringed.” The fact that this phrase is part of a comprehensive statement that ties gun ownership to the government's need to maintain “a well regulated militia” is disregarded by the NRA leadership. In truth, if we are to take the Second Amendment in its entirety as describing a discrete “freedom,” Mr. LaPierre and his buddies would have to join the National Guard in order to play with guns.

So here is a case where a definition of a freedom or a right has been customized to meet the demands of a politically powerful subgroup of society, and it has had predictably disastrous results. The largely open-ended access of U.S. citizens to military-style weapons has resulted in a prolonged bloodbath. It is estimated that between 2011 and 2014, there was a mass shooting (defined as the killing or wounding of 4 or more people) in the United States every 64 days. This rate has not slowed down in the last four years. As the world now knows, the latest of these massacres came on 14 February 2018, when 17 high school students were shot dead in Parkland, Florida.

Soon after this massacre, Wayne LaPierre gave the NRA's response to those surviving students and their supporters who were demanding greater gun regulation laws. He accused them of being “socialists” who want to make “law abiding” citizens “less free.” If these “leftists” manage to “seize power ... our American freedoms could be lost and our country will be changed forever.”

LaPierre's answer to the bloodbaths caused by guns is to have more guns. “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.” In the case of the Parkland high school shooting, where, in fact, there was an armed guard present at the school, as well as with previous school shootings, LaPierre's formula translates into arming teachers as a way of “hardening the schools.”

By the way, President Trump initially agreed with LaPierre. He too called for arming teachers, suggesting that if 20 percent of teachers were armed and “adept with the firearm, they could end the attack very quickly.” Assuming Trump meant giving teachers a sidearm while the usual assailants continue to use military-

style automatic weapons, one can only call such a suggestion naive. He also praised the NRA leadership and specifically LaPierre, saying that "they are great people and great American patriots who will do the right thing."

Subsequently, Trump suggested that the country may well need to toughen its gun laws, much to the dismay of all those "patriots" at the NRA. Twenty-four hours later he was back on track with the NRA. Perhaps his flip-flopping was a tactical maneuver. Throw out some reforms and then do nothing. Later he can then say to the general public, perhaps during a reelection campaign, that he proved more willing to sign off on gun control reform than any president in history. Trump is famous for such mendacious hyperboles.

In the end LaPierre and all the the other gun fanatics who whittle their definition of freedom down to the nearly unrestricted right to own weapons are archaic primitives whose idea of freedom harkens back to those pre-civilized times so well described by Thomas Hobbes. In a perpetually dangerous world, one that is "poor, nasty, brutish and short," the armed man is the only one with any chance of being "free." And so, he is the "real man," the man who can protect himself, his family and his country.

But that is not the way the world is, at least in the West. It is a relatively settled and safe place where the major threat is not so much crime, and certainly not socialists, but rather LaPierre's own demand – the proliferation of guns. What we are all threatened by is the perversion of this discrete freedom.

The gun rights issue is not the only perversion of freedom one can come up with. The whole issue of economic freedom (as defined as freedom from want) is another. One can argue that, in an era of sufficient resources, this should be an undeniable right. Yet, in the United States, economic freedom is defined in such a way as to satisfy the desires and needs of a particular powerful group. Economic freedom is the freedom of the capitalist to operate within a "free market." Unfortunately, such a definition, applied in practice, has left many people economically disadvantaged.

As is the case with the issue of gun rights, those who want to alter the definition of economic freedom so as to minimize such conditions as indebtedness and poverty are accused of being socialists and wanting to take away "our freedoms."

So, really, just what does freedom mean? Well, it means what the powerful and the influential say it means. And, having it manifested in discrete categories makes it easy to customize. Nonetheless, part of civilizational progress is assuring that freedoms are sane and beneficial to larger and larger groups –

but, obviously, progress in this sense is a real struggle.

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Italy's Choice: Shock or Stagnation

Exclusive: Italy's elections this weekend represent a choice between the status quo, with risks of further austerity and structural reforms, or a wild card of populists who may lack competence and hold anti-democratic views, explains Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Italy will hold elections on March 4, in which the essential choice for voters is to stay the course with the policies of the European Union, or to give populism a chance. The vote is the last in a year-long series of elections in major European countries, and the one where an anti-system party has the highest likelihood of breaking through.

In 2017, populist sentiment helped outsiders increase their support in Holland, France, Germany and Austria, although none of them won any elections outright. This led European elites to breath a major sigh of relief, in the hope that the nationalist and populist broadsides against neoliberal E.U. economic policies and tensions around undocumented immigration, would not force an actual change in the institutions.



Geert Wilder's Freedom Party in Holland came in a distant second, and Marine Le Pen of the National Front in France was soundly defeated in a run-off election with Emmanuel Macron. Yet the effects of the voters' revolt that emerged forcefully in the 2016 Brexit vote and the U.S. Presidential elections were

subsequently felt in two more unexpected locations: Germany and Austria.

In Germany the largest two parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats both lost a considerable number of votes. This drop, coupled with the rise of the anti-E.U. Alternative for Deutschland (Afd), had major repercussions, forcing Chancellor Angela Merkel to engage in months of talks for a new Grand Coalition with the Social Democrats. Before the election, almost all commentators had predicted an easy win for Merkel.

In Austria, the Christian Democrats People's party came in first due in part to the tough-on-immigration stance of its young leader Sebastian Kurz. Along with the rise of the hardline Freedom Party, a new coalition government was formed that moved the country's institutions significantly to the right.

Now it's Italy's turn. The populist revolt actually emerged here first, five years ago with the success of the Five Star Movement (M5S) founded by comedian Beppe Grillo. Based on the success of public rallies with the slogan "F.. you" to the "caste" that dominates the country's political institutions, Grillo decided to take aim at the political institutions. In 2013, while refusing to go on television or radio to campaign, the M5S got about 25% of the national vote, leading to a large presence in the Parliament.

The movement's members are generally young, "regular people" who just decided to fight against the corruption of the establishment, rather than candidates groomed to step into the country's ruling class.

Today, the M5S is positioned to be the top vote-getter in this weekend's elections, with recent polls showing its support at just under 30%. This is despite a concerted attempt to dampen its impact so as to ensure that it could never make it into the government. There are in fact many worries about the Movement, starting with a lack of experience and at times naive or contradictory policy positions. The biggest threat, however, has been seen as the call for a referendum on the European single currency, the Euro.

If there's one thing the Eurocracy fears, it's that voters will be given a chance to actually express their opinion on European economic policy, which has been dominated by the pro-finance and harsh austerity measures that Western populations have become disgusted with in recent years. The "responsible" politicians assure everyone that stopping or even slowing European integration would be a disaster, leading to depression and possibly even war. Yet they know well that when faced with the weakening of the middle class, stagnant growth and increasing social tensions due to immigration, a large percentage of voters blame the E.U. itself, which over the past two decades has gradually become the major legislative force in Europe, supplanting individual national governments.

The anti-populist imperative among Italian institutions has led establishment politicians to explicitly embrace the notion of staying the course. Representatives of the Democratic Party (PD) of former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi argue that things are finally getting better now, with economic growth slowly ticking up, and the country beginning to make up the ground lost in recent years.

Renzi has worn out his welcome with many Italians, though. He came to power in 2014 without being elected, through a shake-up within his own party. He subsequently spent almost three years as the head of the government, but ended up betting everything on a referendum to reform the Constitution in December 2016, which he lost badly.

Voters got tired of his personalization of politics, a mix of big talk and modest results, and naturally began to blame him for the country's problems.

The result was a sort of Grand Coalition in which the PD and the center-right parties, led by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, have together supported the government of current Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. Gentiloni is seen as competent and unassuming, and many would prefer him to stay on after the next elections.

Once again, though, there's the problem of the voters. The elites hope to stay the course and work gradually to improve the country's financial position and influence in Europe, but without challenging the neoliberal framework of the E.U. At this point the only way to obtain that result would be for nobody to win the election, thus allowing the centrist parties to again work together, while keeping out the supposed extremists on both the left and the right.

There are other parties, in addition to the M5S, that present themselves as anti-system. One is the Northern League, which has become more moderate since its pro-secession days, but still takes a hard line on immigration. Although the League is once again allied with Berlusconi's Forza Italia, it is also heavily critical of the E.U.

A number of smaller parties also support anti-establishment positions, yet many won't reach the minimum threshold for entering parliament.

The key factor in these elections is the electoral system itself. The fear of the M5S led the traditional parties to re-write the country's election laws. The goal was to favor coalitions, rather than parties, avoiding the fragmentation of the vote and weakening the outsiders.

This goal may well be reached. Despite leading the polls, M5S has always gone it alone, rather than teaming up with others. Thus the center-right coalition is

likely to have more overall votes, allowing the President of the Republic to task them with forming a government. This could once again result in collaboration with the Democrats, although probably with a different Prime Minister.

The result would be little change in the direction of the country. Some see this as positive, to avoid upsetting the system with radical proposals. Yet the risk here is that there will be little progress on issues such as inequality, unstable working conditions, and the perception of an out-of-touch, self-serving political class; all factors that could drive more social and political unrest in the future.

Another possibility would be a government anchored by the Five Star Movement and the League, an alliance many fear could emerge after the vote. This would be a true shock to the system, although probably less dramatic than many expect. The M5S candidate for Prime Minister, 31-year old Luigi Di Maio, has recently stepped up efforts to be considered credible, with meetings in the City of London and the announcement of unthreatening technocrats as potential government ministers. The move may calm fears in the institutions, but could cost him some support among the public.

The League is also taking pains to project a less threatening image. This includes distancing itself from extreme supporters on the right who have committed acts of violence towards immigrants, and engaged in physical clashes with anti-fascist protestors from the left.

Both parties have set out programmatic proposals that could force a reckoning with the march towards further European integration, such as separation between commercial banks and investment banks (inspired by the Glass-Steagall Act in the U.S.), along with calls for moving back towards national sovereignty. This forms a significant contrast with the centrist parties, that especially on the left, have adopted the line of "more Europe," counting on voters to shy away from endorsing the path of open conflict with E.U. institutions.

Thus Italy's elections reflect a significant, but complicated choice. On the one hand voters can seek not to rock the boat, but risk further austerity and structural reforms, while hoping for gradual progress. The other possibility is the unknown of populists who on the one hand promise a serious challenge to the failed policies of recent years, but on the other raise fears of incompetence, and also undemocratic attitudes from Europe's past.

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Trump” (Why Trump is Winning – June 2016) and “La rivolta degli elettori” (The Revolt of the Voters – July 2017).

California Dems Withhold Endorsement of Sen. Feinstein

California Democrats did not endorse longstanding Senator Dianne Feinstein for the upcoming primary election, setting the stage for a tough campaign against challengers such as California Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin de León, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

It is no secret that the second most powerful politician in the State of California, Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin de León, is gearing up for a knock-down, drag-out primary fight with California’s senior Senator, Dianne Feinstein. Many feel it’s time for a changing of the guard and time for a person of color to represent the white minority state of California.

This passed weekend, California democrats refused to endorse Senator Feinstein, in a major rebuke of California’s senior senator, opening the door wide for de León to run.

According to the Sacramento Bee, “As a child, de León spent time on both sides of the border, in Tijuana, Baja California, and Logan Heights in San Diego and identifies strongly with Mexican culture, though he doesn’t know where his grandparents are from.”

Senator de León recently led a coalition to sponsor legislation “that addresses lapses in our justice and labor systems creating serious challenges for the California’s immigrant community, including stronger wage theft laws, securing u-visas from law enforcement, and providing healthcare for undocumented children.”

Before joining the Legislature, de León taught citizenship courses to immigrants. When he was sworn in as the 47th president pro tem of the California Senate in 2014, he became the first Latino to hold the position in more than a century.

Bernstein spoke to Kevin de León on February 14, 2018.

Dennis Bernstein: With everyone watching Washington and wondering whether humane immigration reform can be passed, what are you expecting from Congress?

Kevin de León: These are very difficult times for many of us. As a nation, we are grappling with the resurgence of ugly, hateful ideologies, including white supremacy, spewing from the highest levels of our federal government. We are confronting something we have never had to come to terms with before in our political history.

At the same time, I have never been more proud to be a Californian. In November 2016, Californians rejected the politics fueled by resentment and bigotry. The DACA issue is very dear to my heart. In California, we have the vast majority of DACA beneficiaries, the vast majority of Dreamers, and we have the vast majority of beneficiaries of the TPS [Temporary Protected Status] program, primarily from El Salvador. We are also home to the majority of immigrants in the nation, both those who became naturalized US citizens and those who have yet to normalize their status because of the dysfunction in Washington, D.C.

In this context, the DACA program is really a low-hanging fruit. Both Democrats, as well as Republicans among the national electorate, strongly support the Dreamers and DACA. Why the issue should seem so complex is beyond me, except that there is political gamesmanship being played and the DACA beneficiaries have been taken as hostages. I hope that a common sense settlement can be reached to give these young men and women the protections they deserve. We need sensible comprehensive immigration reform for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants across the nation.

DB: What is your response then you hear that we have to do something about the problem of “chain migration”?

KdL: For me, “chain migration” is another word for family reunification. The thesis behind the new term is quite pernicious. Quite frankly, many of my close family members would not have been eligible to enter this country had there been a so-called “chain migration” clause in the country’s immigration policy. If we’d had an immigration policy that was exclusively merit-based, I would never have become the leader of the California State Senate.

DB: In a press release toward the end of January you expressed your concern that Homeland Security was threatening to go after public officials if they continued to give their support to sanctuary cities. Do you really think ICE will be out arresting officials like you?

KdL: These are extraordinary threats meant to intimidate and silence political opponents. But threatening to weaponize federal agencies against Californians

and their elected representatives will only strengthen our resolve.

DB: I'd like to change the subject for a moment. This concerns the economy and the environment. As you know, the Trumpites are gung-ho about offshore drilling. This is a huge issue in the context of global warming and is pitting California against the rest of the country.

KdL: California is blessed with an incomparably beautiful and pristine coastline and we want to keep it that way for future generations. In California we have some of the most progressive climate change policies in the entire world. By the year 2030, we will be generating half of our electricity from renewable sources: wind, solar and geothermal. We are investing in rooftop solar power in low-income communities. We are looking for ways to provide electric vehicles to communities at the lowest economic strata. We are doing this intentionally to make sure that we democratize our climate change benefits and offer relief to those communities that suffer disproportionately from the devastations of carbon dioxide and other emissions.

We are witnessing an administration that is trying to unilaterally, through executive action, unwind all of our progressive policies in a state like California. We have created 500,000 jobs in the clean energy space alone. That means there are ten times more clean energy jobs now in California than there are coal jobs in all of America! No doubt about it, there is a battle brewing between Washington and California, and not just around the issue of immigration.

DB: We are seeing now the roll-out of the recreational marijuana industry, which is looking to become a huge cash crop. What role do you see marijuana playing in the future of California?

KdL: Recreational use of cannabis is now the law of the land in California. It has the overwhelming support of the people. It is the responsibility of state and local government to roll out a regulatory framework that is responsible and fiscally prudent. But it is now the law in California, and any threats from the Department of Justice—and specifically from Jeff Sessions, who has his mind fixated on a certain era in American history—will be met with legal resistance.

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.

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Billy Graham: An Old Soldier Fades Away

Evangelist Billy Graham, who counseled presidents and stirred controversy with inflammatory statements on gay rights, opposition to Martin Luther King’s tactics of civil disobedience, and support for U.S. wars, died Wednesday. Cecil Bothwell reflects here on his life and legacy.

By Cecil Bothwell

“We are selling the greatest product on earth. Why shouldn’t we promote it as effectively as we promote a bar of soap?” – Billy Graham, Saturday Evening Post, 1963

Billy Graham was a preacher man equally intent on saving souls and soliciting financial support for his ministry. His success at the former is not subject to proof and his success at the latter is unrivaled. He preached to millions on every ice-free continent and led many to his chosen messiah.

When Graham succumbed to various ailments this week at the age of 99 he left behind an organization that is said to have touched more people than any other

Christian ministry in history, with property, assets and a name-brand worth hundreds of millions. The address lists of contributors alone comprise a mother lode for the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, now headed by his son and namesake, William Franklin Graham, III.

Graham also left behind a United States government in which religion plays a far greater role than before he intruded into politics in the 1950s. The shift from secular governance to "In God We Trust" can be laid squarely at this minister's feet.

Graham's message was principally one of fear: fear of a wrathful god; fear of temptation; fear of communists and socialists; fear of unions; fear of Catholics; fear of homosexuals; fear of racial integration and above all, fear of death. But as a balm for such fears, he promised listeners eternal life, which he said was readily claimed through acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's savior.

Furthermore, he assured listeners that God loved us so much that He created governments, the most blessed form being Western capitalist democracy. To make this point, he frequently quoted Romans 13, particularly the first two verses. In the New American Standard Version of the Bible, they read, "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves."

The question of whether this was actually the recorded word of God or a rider inserted into the bill by Roman senators with rather more worldly aims never dimmed Graham's insistence that all governments are the work of the Almighty. Almost perversely, he even endorsed the arrest of a woman who lofted a Christian banner during his Reagan-era visit to Moscow, opting for the crack-down of "divine" authority over the civil disobedience of a believer.

Governments, he reminded his Moscow listeners, do God's work.

Based on that Biblical mandate for all governments, Graham stood in solid opposition to the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, all but addressed to Graham, King noted, "We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was 'legal' and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was 'illegal.' ... If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's anti-religious laws."

Finger on the Pulse of American Fear

Fear is the stock in trade of most evangelists, of course, comprising the necessary setup before the pitch. As historian William Martin explained in his 1991 account of Graham's early sermons, "even those whose personal lives seemed rich and fulfilling must live in a world filled with terror and threat. As a direct result of sinful humanity's rebellion against God, our streets have become jungles of terror, mugging, rape, and death. Confusion reigns on campuses as never before. Political leaders live in constant fear of the assassin's bullet. Racial tension seems certain to unleash titanic forces of hatred and violence. Communism threatens to eradicate freedom from the face of the earth. Small nations are getting the bomb, so that global war seems inevitable. High-speed objects, apparently guided by an unknown intelligence, are coming into our atmosphere for reasons no one understands. Clearly, all signs point to the end of the present world order. ...

"Graham's basic mode of preaching in these early years was assault. ... Then, when he had his listeners mentally crouching in terror, aware that all the attractively labeled escape routes—alcohol, sexual indulgence, riches, psychiatry, education, social-welfare programs, increased military might, the United Nations—led ultimately to dead ends, he held out the only compass that pointed reliably to the straight and narrow path that leads to personal happiness and lasting peace."

Columnist and former priest James Carroll had much the same take, noting that "Graham had his finger on the pulse of American fear, and in subsequent years, anti communism occupied the nation's soul as an avowedly religious obsession. The Red Scare at home, unabashed moves toward empire abroad, the phrase 'under God' inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance, the scapegoating of homosexuals as 'security risks,' an insane accumulation of nuclear weapons, suicidal wars against postcolonial insurgencies in Asia—a set of desperate choices indeed. Through it all, Billy Graham was the high priest of the American crusade, which is why U.S. presidents uniformly sought his blessing."

While Carroll had most of that right, the record suggests that, over and over again, it was Graham who sought presidential blessing, rather than the other way around. Letters enshrined in the presidential and Graham libraries reveal a preacher endlessly seeking official audience. As Truman said, years after his presidency, "Well, I hadn't ought to say this, but he's one of those counterfeits I was telling you about. He claims he's a friend of all the presidents, but he was never a friend of mine when I was president."

Of course, politicians have often brandished fear as well, and the twin streams of fear-based politics and fear-based religion couldn't have been more

confluent. Communist infiltrators, missile gaps and the domino effect each took their turn, as did the Evil Empire and, more recently, Saddam, Osama bin Laden and an amorphous threat of global terrorism.

In light of the Biblical endorsement of rulers, Graham supported police repression of Vietnam war protesters and civil rights marchers, opposed Martin Luther King's tactic of civil disobedience, supported South American despots, and publicly supported every war or intervention waged by the United States from Korea forward.

A Pro-War Christian

Born on a prosperous dairy farm and educated at Wheaton College, Graham first gained national attention in 1949 when the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, searching for a spiritual icon to spread his anti-communist sentiments, discovered the young preacher holding forth at a Los Angeles tent meeting. Hearst wired his editors across the nation, "puff Graham," and he was an instant sensation.

Hearst next contacted his friend and fellow publisher Henry Luce. Their Wall Street ally, Bernard Baruch, arranged a meeting between Luce and Graham while the preacher was staying with the segregationist Governor Strom Thurmond in the official mansion in Columbia, South Carolina, Luce concurred with Hearst about Graham's marketability and Time and Life were enlisted in the job of selling the soap of salvation to the world. Time, alone, has run more than 600 stories about Graham.

The man who would become known as "the minister to presidents" offered his first military advice in 1950. On June 25, North Korean troops invaded South Korea and Graham sent Truman a telegram. "MILLIONS OF CHRISTIANS PRAYING GOD GIVE YOU WISDOM IN THIS CRISIS. STRONGLY URGE SHOWDOWN WITH COMMUNISM NOW. MORE CHRISTIANS IN SOUTHERN KOREA PER CAPITA THAN ANY PART OF WORLD. WE CANNOT LET THEM DOWN."

It was the first time Graham encouraged a president to go to war, and with characteristic hyperbole: Korea has never topped the list of Christian-leaning nations. Subsequently, Graham gave his blessing to every conflict under every president from Truman to the second Bush, and most of the presidents, pleased to enjoy public assurance of God's approval, made him welcome in the White House.

Graham excoriated Truman for firing General Douglas MacArthur and supported the general's plan to invade China. He went so far as to urge Nixon to bomb dikes in Vietnam – knowing that it would kill upward of a million civilians – and he claimed to have sat on the sofa next to G.H.W. Bush as the bombs began falling

in the first Gulf War (though Bush's diary version of the evening somehow excludes Graham, as does a White House video of Bush during the attack).

According to Bush's account, in a phone call the preceding week, Graham quoted poetry that compared the President to a messiah destined to save the world, and in the next breath called Saddam the Antichrist. Bush wrote that Graham suggested it was his historical mission to destroy Saddam.

Through the years, Graham's politics earned him some strange bedfellows. He praised Senator Joseph McCarthy and supported his assault on Constitutional rights, then scolded the Senate for censuring McCarthy for his excesses. He befriended oil men and arms manufacturers. He defended Nixon after Watergate, right up to the disgraced president's resignation, and faced public scorn when tapes were aired that exposed the foul-mouthed President as a schemer and plotter.

Nixon's chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, reported on Graham's denigration of Jews in his posthumously published diary—a claim Graham vehemently denied until released tapes undid him in 2002. Caught with his prejudicial pants down, Graham claimed ignorance of the hour-and-a-half long conversation in which he led the anti-Semitic attack.

As reported by the Associated Press on March 2, 2002:

"Although I have no memory of the occasion, I deeply regret comments I apparently made in an Oval Office conversation with President Nixon . . . some 30 years ago," Graham said in a statement released by his Texas public relations firm. "They do not reflect my views, and I sincerely apologize for any offense caused by the remarks."

Whether or not the comments reflect Graham's views at the time or thirty years later, it is his defense that bears much closer scrutiny. What were we to make of a preacher who insisted that his words didn't reflect his beliefs? Were we to believe him then or later, on other matters?

Graham was a political operative, reporting to Kennedy on purported communist insurgencies in Latin America, turning over lists of activist Christians to the Republican party, conferring regularly with J. Edgar Hoover and networking with the CIA in South America and Vietnam. He was even assigned by Nixon's operatives to talk George Wallace out of a second run for the White House.

To accomplish the latter, he phoned Wallace as he was coming out of an anesthetic stupor after one of his numerous post-assassination-attempt surgeries. While the long suffering gunshot victim asked the minister to pray for him, the minister asked him not to make a third-party bid for the

presidency. "I won't do anything to help McGovern," Wallace replied.

There are many who would argue that the good that Graham did outweighs whatever political intrigue he embraced, and even the several wars he enthusiastically endorsed. To the extent that bringing people to Christ is of benefit to them, an untestable hypothesis, he was successful with his calls to come forward. He accrued hundreds of millions of dollars which were used to extend his ministry and thereby bring more people to "be saved," which is self-justifying but fails as evidence of goodness.

Billy Graham Freeway

If Christian beliefs about the hereafter prove correct, we will all presumably discover what good he accomplished, or what chance for salvation we missed, in the sweet by and by.

In talking to one of his biographers, Graham recalled his mood during his fire and brimstone declamations, "I would feel as though I had a sword, a rapier, in my hand, and I would be slashing deeper and deeper into the consciences of the people before me, cutting away straight to their very souls."

In that regard, Graham's largest and most lasting monument is a highway cut through Beaucatcher Mountain, blasted through a majestic land form that once bisected Asheville, North Carolina. He helped convince recalcitrant landowners to permit the excavation and construction through the cut of the short stretch of Interstate highway subsequently named the Billy Graham Freeway.

Downwind residents report that the weather has permanently shifted due to the gaping mountain maw and the future of the highway that transects the city continues to be one of the most divisive issues in that southern metropolis.

"Straight to their very souls," indeed.

In every way, Graham was the spiritual father of today's right-wing religious leaders who so inhabit the national conversation. If he cloaked his suasion in public neutrality it was the hallmark of an era in which such intrusion was deemed unseemly. If today's practitioners are less abashed, it is in many ways reflective of the secure foundation Graham built within Republican and conservative circles.

Graham endorsed and courted Eisenhower and compared a militaristic State of the Union speech to the Sermon on the Mount, fanned anti-Catholic flames in the Nixon-Kennedy contest, backed Johnson and then Nixon in Vietnam, lobbied for arms sales to Saudi Arabia during the Reagan years, conveyed foreign threats and entreaties for Clinton and lent his imprimatur to G.W. Bush as he declared war

on terrorism from the pulpit of the National Cathedral.

Billy Graham approved of warriors and war, weapons of mass destruction (in white, Christian hands) and covert operations. He publicly declaimed the righteousness of battle with enemies of American capitalism, abetted genocide in oil-rich Ecuador and surrounds and endorsed castration as punishment for rapists. A terrible swift sword for certain, and effective no doubt, but not much there in the way of turning the other cheek.

Graham will be cordially remembered by those who found solace in his golden promises and happy homilies, but the worldly blowback from his ministry is playing out in Iraq and Afghanistan, Chechnya and Korea, the Philippines and Colombia – everywhere governments threaten human rights and pie in the sky is offered in lieu of daily bread.

In the words of Graham's ministerial and secular adversary, Dr. King, "I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress."

Farewell Reverend Graham. Let justice roll.

Prize-winning investigative reporter Cecil Bothwell is author of *The Prince of War: Billy Graham's Crusade for a Wholly Christian Empire*, (Brave Ulysses Books, 2007) and *Whale Falls: An exploration of belief and its consequences* (Brave Ulysses Books, 2010).

The Right's Second Amendment Lies

From the Archive: In the wake of the latest gun massacre in the United States, we republish an article by Robert Parry debunking some of the right-wing myths about the Second Amendment that have prevented common sense gun laws.

By Robert Parry ([first published December 21, 2012](#))

Right-wing resistance to meaningful gun control is driven, in part, by a false notion that America's Founders adopted the Second Amendment because they wanted an armed population that could battle the U.S. government. The opposite is the truth, but many Americans seem to have embraced this absurd, anti-historical narrative.

The reality was that the Framers wrote the Constitution and added the Second

Amendment with the goal of creating a strong central government with a citizens-based military force capable of putting down insurrections, not to enable or encourage uprisings. The key Framers, after all, were mostly men of means with a huge stake in an orderly society, the likes of George Washington and James Madison.

The men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 weren't precursors to France's Robespierre or Russia's Leon Trotsky, believers in perpetual revolutions. In fact, their work on the Constitution was influenced by the experience of Shays' Rebellion in western Massachusetts in 1786, a populist uprising that the weak federal government, under the Articles of Confederation, lacked an army to defeat.

Daniel Shays, the leader of the revolt, was a former Continental Army captain who joined with other veterans and farmers to take up arms against the government for failing to address their economic grievances.

The rebellion alarmed retired Gen. George Washington who received reports on the developments from old Revolutionary War associates in Massachusetts, such as Gen. Henry Knox and Gen. Benjamin Lincoln. Washington was particularly concerned that the disorder might serve the interests of the British, who had only recently accepted the existence of the United States.

On Oct. 22, 1786, in a letter seeking more information from a friend in Connecticut, Washington wrote: "I am mortified beyond expression that in the moment of our acknowledged independence we should by our conduct verify the predictions of our transatlantic foe, and render ourselves ridiculous and contemptible in the eyes of all Europe."

In another letter on Nov. 7, 1786, Washington questioned Gen. Lincoln about the spreading unrest. "What is the cause of all these commotions? When and how will they end?" Lincoln responded: "Many of them appear to be absolutely so [mad] if an attempt to annihilate our present constitution and dissolve the present government can be considered as evidence of insanity."

However, the U.S. government lacked the means to restore order, so wealthy Bostonians financed their own force under Gen. Lincoln to crush the uprising in February 1787. Afterwards, Washington expressed satisfaction at the outcome but remained concerned the rebellion might be a sign that European predictions about American chaos were coming true.

"If three years ago [at the end of the American Revolution] any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws & constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him a

bedlamite – a fit subject for a mad house,” Washington wrote to Knox on Feb. 3, 1787, adding that if the government “shrinks, or is unable to enforce its laws anarchy & confusion must prevail.”

Washington’s alarm about Shays’ Rebellion was a key factor in his decision to take part in and preside over the Constitutional Convention, which was supposed to offer revisions to the Articles of Confederation but instead threw out the old structure entirely and replaced it with the U.S. Constitution, which shifted national sovereignty from the 13 states to “We the People” and dramatically enhanced the power of the central government.

A central point of the Constitution was to create a peaceful means for the United States to implement policies favored by the people but within a structure of checks and balances to prevent radical changes deemed too disruptive to the established society. For instance, the two-year terms of the House of Representatives were meant to reflect the popular will but the six-year terms of the Senate were designed to temper the passions of the moment.

Within this framework of a democratic Republic, the Framers criminalized taking up arms against the government. Article IV, Section 4 committed the federal government to protect each state from not only invasion but “domestic Violence,” and treason is one of the few crimes defined in the Constitution as “levying war against” the United States as well as giving “Aid and Comfort” to the enemy (Article III, Section 3).

But it was the Constitution’s drastic expansion of federal power that prompted strong opposition from some Revolutionary War figures, such as Virginia’s Patrick Henry who denounced the Constitution and rallied a movement known as the Anti-Federalists. Prospects for the Constitution’s ratification were in such doubt that its principal architect James Madison joined in a sales campaign known as the Federalist Papers in which he tried to play down how radical his changes actually were.

To win over other skeptics, Madison agreed to support a Bill of Rights, which would be proposed as the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Madison’s political maneuvering succeeded as the Constitution narrowly won approval in key states, such as Virginia, New York and Massachusetts. The First Congress then approved the Bill of Rights which were ratified in 1791. [For details, see Robert Parry’s *America’s Stolen Narrative*.]

Behind the Second Amendment

The Second Amendment dealt with concerns about “security” and the need for trained militias to ensure what the Constitution called “domestic Tranquility.”

There was also hesitancy among many Framers about the costs and risks from a large standing army, thus making militias composed of citizens an attractive alternative.

So, the Second Amendment read: "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." Contrary to some current right-wing fantasies about the Framers wanting to encourage popular uprisings over grievances, the language of the amendment is clearly aimed at maintaining order within the country.

That point was driven home by the actions of the Second Congress amid another uprising which erupted in 1791 in western Pennsylvania. This anti-tax revolt, known as the Whiskey Rebellion, prompted Congress in 1792 to expand on the idea of "a well-regulated militia" by passing the Militia Acts which required all military-age white males to obtain their own muskets and equipment for service in militias.

In 1794, President Washington, who was determined to demonstrate the young government's resolve, led a combined force of state militias against the Whiskey rebels. Their revolt soon collapsed and order was restored, demonstrating how the Second Amendment helped serve the government in maintaining "security," as the Amendment says.

Beyond this clear historical record that the Framers' intent was to create security for the new Republic, not promote armed rebellions there is also the simple logic that the Framers represented the young nation's aristocracy. Many, like Washington, owned vast tracts of land. They recognized that a strong central government and domestic tranquility were in their economic interests.

So, it would be counterintuitive as well as anti-historical to believe that Madison and Washington wanted to arm the population so the discontented could resist the constitutionally elected government. In reality, the Framers wanted to arm the people at least the white males so uprisings, whether economic clashes like Shays' Rebellion, anti-tax protests like the Whiskey Rebellion, attacks by Native Americans or slave revolts, could be repulsed.

However, the Right has invested heavily during the last several decades in fabricating a different national narrative, one that ignores both logic and the historical record. In this right-wing fantasy, the Framers wanted everyone to have a gun so they could violently resist their own government. To that end, a few incendiary quotes are cherry-picked or taken out of context.

This "history" has then been amplified through the Right's powerful propaganda apparatus Fox News, talk radio, the Internet and ideological publications to

persuade millions of Americans that their possession of semi-automatic assault rifles and other powerful firearms is what the Framers intended, that today's gun-owners are fulfilling some centuries-old American duty.

The mythology about the Framers and the Second Amendment is, of course, only part of the fake history that the Right has created to persuade ill-informed Tea Partiers that they should dress up in Revolutionary War costumes and channel the spirits of men like Washington and Madison.

But this gun fable is particularly insidious because it obstructs efforts by today's government to enact commonsense gun-control laws and thus the false narrative makes possible the kinds of slaughters that erupt periodically across the United States, most recently in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 schoolchildren and six teachers were murdered in minutes by an unstable young man with a civilian version of the M-16 combat rifle.

While it's absurd to think that the Founders could have even contemplated such an act in their 18th Century world of single-fire muskets that required time-consuming reloading right-wing gun advocates have evaded that obvious reality by postulating that Washington, Madison and other Framers would have wanted a highly armed population to commit what the Constitution defined as treason against the United States.

Today's American Right is drunk on some very bad history, which is as dangerous as it is false.

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

Vietnam's Lessons and the U.S. Culture of Violence

In the wake of another deadly school shooting in Florida, the lessons of past massacres in Vietnam can teach us about U.S. violence and the need to reform unchecked gun culture, discusses Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Back in October 2016 I wrote an analysis entitled "[Are Humans Natural-Born](#)

Killers?” It described and commented on research on the origins of human violence published in the science journal *Nature*. The conclusion offered in the article is that humans come from an evolutionary line that has the capability for violent behavior genetically built into it. It is a reasonable hypothesis. As just about every serious historian knows, the human propensity for lethal violence goes back as far as the evidence can take us – so far that there can be little doubt that this trait is inherited from our pre-human ancestors.

Yet, as the *Nature* scholars also point out, in the case of our species, culture has the ability to “modulate our bloodthirsty tendencies.”

I bring this up now because there is new interest in the slaughter and massacres that took place during the Vietnam War. This may in part be a response to the fact that last month marked the 50th anniversary of that war’s Tet offensive.

America waged war in Vietnam roughly from 1961 to 1975. The starting date is a “rough” one because the United States never actually declared war. In this 14-year span it is generally accepted that the turning point in the struggle came during the Tet offensive of 1968. Tet is the term used for the Vietnamese new year, and that celebratory time in 1968 was when the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong launched attacks in some 100 South Vietnamese towns and cities, in an effort to change the course of the war in their favor.

Though very costly (there were an estimated 50,000 Vietnamese casualties) the offensive worked, at least in the long run. Within a year the United States started a gradual withdrawal from the country. Although the fighting dragged on for another seven years (until the fall of Saigon in 1975) it was Washington’s stubborn search for face-saving terms that largely kept it going.

By the time of the Tet offensive, the war had degenerated into mutual slaughter. The U.S. ended up killing some 3 million Vietnamese, many of them civilians. The massacre at My Lai on 16 March 1968, has often been cited as the “singular” American example of such criminal behavior. It was on this date that a company of soldiers of the 23rd Americal Division murdered, without provocation, 504 peasant villagers of all ages and both sexes.

The massacre itself, and its background year of 1968, have been accurately described in a recent book, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968 and the Descent into Darkness*, by Howard Jones (Oxford University Press, 2017). In turn the book has been expertly reviewed and elaborated upon in the popular *London Review of Books* (LRB) (25 January 2018) by Max Hastings.

It is to be noted that both the publisher and the reviewing magazine are located in the United Kingdom. The reviews of the book offered in the United States have

been, to date, in academic journals, including the U.S. Army's own *Army University Press*. Just about all of them have described Jones's work as definitive and a seminal important read. Whether this will translate into public attention in the U.S. is doubtful.

Explaining Wartime Massacres

Modern efforts to explain happenings like the My Lai massacre usually bring up the problem of waging war when it has become hard to know who the enemy is – in other words, when not everyone is wearing a uniform and a lot of resistance is coming from irregular forces. The *Army University Press* review raises this issue.

Another possibility is that such behavior is an “inevitable consequence of combat.” In his *LRB* review, Max Hastings gives a long introductory account of a number of other massacres committed by soldiers in modern times, including in Vietnam. As a consequence one comes away with the feeling that, within a war zone, these criminal acts are almost common.

While it is no doubt true that a combat situation (or perhaps we can say the culture of combat) does raise the probability of massacres, they do not make them “inevitable.” Suggesting that they are, sounds more like an excuse than an explanation. After all, most combat soldiers are not participants in massacres.

This brings us back to the judgment of the research published in *Nature* – we all might well be potential natural born killers who are restrained or encouraged by cultural variables. Within the combat scenario, Hastings suggests that a culture of self-restraint accepted and enforced by the officer corps can forestall mass killings.

This is of particular interest when it comes to the peculiar culture of the United States. In Vietnam many of the massacres (My Lai was by no means unique) were perpetrated by soldiers as well as their officers from the so-called “land of the free.” I use this descriptive term intentionally because one of the things that is often declared to be constitutionally “free” from rational regulation in the U.S. are guns. And, as a consequence, these troops came out of a “gun culture.”

It should be kept in mind that the American gun culture, with its accompanying violence, is not new. The 2014 book *Gun Violence and Public Life* documents this history. If anything has changed from the 1960s to today it is that the public now has access to military grade weapons. What also existed then as now is a culture of bigotry and racism. In the 1960s this was just being confronted by the Civil Rights Movement. It all made for an explosive mix that carried over to

influence perceptions of and behavior toward the Vietnamese.

Manipulating Culture

If the *Nature* study's conclusions can be believed, modern violence both of military and civilian origin can be moderated by manipulating culture. In the American case this means overcoming the gun culture as well as racism. There are many ways to do this. It can be done through public education as well as the way a society designs and applies its laws.

However, if any of these approaches to a safer, less violent society is to work, citizens must commit to a consistently enforced, long-term, indeed multi-generational, effort of reform. None of this will happen until politicians and the courts understand the Second Amendment of the Constitution (the present interpretation of which underpins the nation's gun culture) in a more literal and reasonable way. And that won't happen until public opinion overwhelms the ideological rigidity of the U.S. gun lobby.

In the United States the desire for rational reform of the gun laws goes up after each mass shooting and then is stymied by a rigid, but very politically influential, gun lobby. This scenario is part of a "culture war" that is ongoing within the American body politic. It involves not only the issue of gun control but also other issues such as abortion, gay rights, the promotion of racial equality and immigrant rights. So heated is this "culture war" that one might see it as a (so far) non-violent form of civil war.

The lessons of Vietnam, and a greater awareness of the massacres that occurred during this war, speak to the need to reform U.S. culture – to make it less violent and more tolerant. Thus the Vietnam experience should be incorporated into the current debate about guns in America. It would be a major achievement if the 1968 slaughter at My Lai could help stop today's slaughter on the streets of the U.S.

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

Honduras Nearing Ten Years of Stolen

Elections, Neo-Colonial Rule

Despite an organized and active grassroots movement, Honduran politics have been repeatedly steamrolled by the self-interests of international ruling elites, as journalist and filmmaker Jesse Freeston explained to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

For weeks following its stolen election, the corrupt right-wing, neo-fascist government of Juan Orlando Hernández's in Honduras has been terrorizing its people. Street protests and spontaneous blockades have been met by extreme violence. Dozens have already died on the frontlines and many more have been arrested and brutalized in detention, while often being held incommunicado.

I spoke to Jesse Freeston, who has been based in Honduras for the last eight years working as a video-journalist and documentary filmmaker, ever since the US supported/Hillary Clinton sustained 2009 coup d'état that purged the duly elected president, Manuel Zelaya. Freeston, who has reported for the Real News Network and Democracy Now en Español, is the producer of the feature documentary "[Resistencia: The Fight for the Aguan Valley.](#)"

Freeston reports that, among other crimes against the people, "this regime has: stolen an election; ignored calls from the Organization of American States to hold a new election; passed a law prohibiting the prosecution of all former and current members of Congress in the midst of a series of massive corruption scandals [and has] appointed a new national police chief who has clear evidence against him of drug trafficking..."

I spoke to Freeston on February 7.

Dennis Bernstein: We continue our drumbeat coverage of Honduras and the recent stolen election there, an attempt to suppress the will of the people who, by all accounts, want to have a more progressive government. It has been a very violent situation since the election. We are hearing that dozens of people have been killed and that the atrocities being perpetrated by the government have resulted in a nightmare. Could you put this in the context of the last two recent election cycles in Honduras?

Jesse Freeston: On June 28, 2009, there was a vote on a non-binding resolution put forward by President Manuel Zelaya, who had taken up the call of various indigenous groups in the country to rewrite the constitution. When people went out to vote on that day, the military staged a coup d'état and Zelaya wound up in Costa Rica.

This led to the most organized national resistance movement Honduras has ever seen. Assemblies were held, which brought together all these people who stood to gain from a new constitution. Just about every sector of the society were represented, except perhaps the oligarchy.

This led to the formation of the Libre Party, which participated in the 2013 elections [with Manuel Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, running as the party's presidential candidate]. The election was officially won by Juan Orlando Hernandez but there was massive fraud. The November, 2017 elections were even more of a farce.

Despite all that, when the electoral tribunal released its first results, the Oppositional Alliance were up by 5% with 60% of the votes counted. One of the magistrates on the tribunal described it at the time as an "irreversible trend." Then, counting stopped for over a day when the computer system supposedly crashed. When it was back up again, the tendency had completely flipped and Hernandez ended up winning by one percentage point.

This led to another massive uprising. On one day of action there were 48 blockades of highways and major boulevards in the country. During the last two months, this has been happening a couple times a week.

Even international observers such as the European Union Commission and the Organization of American States—who have been discredited here after turning their back many times in the last eight years to the crimes of this regime—even they have said that they have to redo the election or there has to be a recount.

Nevertheless, the members of those organizations, like Canada, like the United States and the countries of the European Union, went ahead and validated the election.

DB: We have heard that activists and members of the resistance have been arrested.

JF: Yes, there are dozens of political prisoners behind bars right now. One of the most worrying cases is that of Edwin Espinal. He is someone who has consistently paid a price for his resistance against the ongoing coup d'état.

In September of 2009, Edwin Espinal's wife died from tear gas inhalation after taking part in several protests. A week later, Edwin was at a small neighborhood protest after which he was arrested for kidnapping because he took a child with him on his motorcycle when he was fleeing the tear gas. The mother of the child went over and over to the police station to explain that she had pleaded with Edwin to take her kid with him. Another time he was jailed for car theft for driving a friend's car.

The first thing that the newly-formed military-trained urban police force did was raid Espinal's house, claiming they had proof that he was a drug trafficker. The police falsely accused him of being involved in the Marriot Hotel fire and right now he is in a maximum security prison on that charge. Journalists and human rights workers are not allowed in to talk to him, his family have not been allowed to see him. This is the first time since the 1980's that a civilian will be tried inside a military base.

DB: How would you describe the US role in this situation? We know that Hillary Clinton played a key role in sustaining the coup in 2009.

JF: I think that informed people in Honduras realize that changes in political leadership in the US don't make much difference in how Honduras is treated. Decisions are made here at the US Embassy and ambassadors act as de-facto rulers here, as shadow presidents.

The one constant here is the massive military funding from the US. Since the coup, the Honduran military has received more direct funding from the US than any other country in the Americas, despite the fact that they have not been involved in a single military conflict or been threatened with one.

The military is purely used against people inside the country. Although the United States is by far the largest funder of the Honduran military, other countries are also involved because humanitarian and other aid is typically diverted to the military.

DB: You said that there is a continuity between the last administration's policy toward Honduras and the Trump administration's policy. In terms of so-called US interests, the real problem is that we push a program of "free trade" and we insist on having our military bases there. So we have every reason to sustain the government as long as it provides us with an opportunity to police the region. Could you talk about the geopolitical part of this?

JF: I think the more a country depends on its natural resources, the more everything comes down to who controls the land. In 1961, [John F.] Kennedy launched a program called The Alliance for Progress, which was billed as a kind of Marshall Plan for Latin America. It was a response to the Cuban revolution and an attempt to ward off similar revolutions across Latin America.

We were going to give billions of dollars to countries in Latin America if they promised to undertake land reform, if the oligarchy agreed to give up a portion of their land. When Johnson replaced Kennedy there was much less priority assigned to this program. Nonetheless, the Honduran government had to pass a number of land reform laws to receive the money, but none of those laws were

ever implemented.

If the US intends to keep its business interests here alive—the sweatshop sector as well as bananas and palm oil—and for Canada, gold mining primarily—they need to maintain their alliance with this land-holding oligarchy. It is this alliance that the resistance is asking the countries of the North and the West to break.

With eight and a half years of organizing experience, the people of Honduras could put together a government so fast it would make your head spin. This movement is very organized. They know who to trust, they know who can provide intellectual support, they know who can run the economy. They are just waiting for the international community to change its alliances.

DB: So will the resistance to the Hernandez regime go on?

JF: The Oppositional Alliance has decided to wage a “peaceful insurrection,” something they are entitled to do under the Honduran constitution, which states that no one owes obedience to a government which takes power by force. The numbers now at the protests have been considerably less than in the past two months, particularly since the inauguration on January 27.

It is hard to predict what will happen but the vast majority of the population do not want this regime. There is a massive corruption scandal developing and we will see what happens with that. Students are planning a strike for next month. But we will have to wait to see what kinds of ideas are going to be put forward in Honduras.

People are looking at Honduras as a laboratory for the ultra-right of the world. Fortunately, there is a well-organized movement here that will be rising up again and again. It is up to those of us in the international community to put pressure on those who claim to represent us to change their allegiances.

DB: Would you say that this is a movement inspired by young people in the country?

JF: Yes, and that is the key to understanding this new law that the National Party is trying to pass which would regulate social media. It has to do with this young generation that has grown up in this period following the coup.

Someone like Zelaya doesn't necessarily reach them. This new law the government is trying to pass would give them the right to criminalize anyone posting anything they deem “hateful” on social media. And this is a government that labels “racist” people who are defending rivers from dams being built.

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.

Ten Commonsense Suggestions for Making Peace, Not War

President Trump's first year in office brought an escalation of military aggression abroad as he built on the interventions of previous administrations, but there are steps America can take to move towards a more peaceful future, writes retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel William J. Astore at TomDispatch.

By William J. Astore

Whether the rationale is the need to wage a war on terror involving 76 countries or renewed preparations for a struggle against peer competitors Russia and China (as Defense Secretary James Mattis suggested recently while introducing America's new National Defense Strategy), the U.S. military is engaged globally.

A network of 800 military bases spread across 172 countries helps enable its wars and interventions. By the count of the Pentagon, at the end of the last fiscal year about 291,000 personnel (including reserves and Department of Defense civilians) were deployed in 183 countries worldwide, which is the functional definition of a military uncontained. Lady Liberty may temporarily close when the U.S. government grinds to a halt, but the country's foreign military commitments, especially its wars, just keep humming along.

As a student of history, I was warned to avoid the notion of inevitability.

Still, given such data points and others like them, is there anything more predictable in this country's future than incessant warfare without a true victory in sight? Indeed, the last clear-cut American victory, the last true "mission accomplished" moment in a war of any significance, came in 1945 with the end of World War II.

Yet the lack of clear victories since then seems to faze no one in Washington.

In this century, presidents have regularly boasted that the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in human history, while no less regularly demanding that the most powerful military in today's world be "rebuilt" and funded at ever more staggering levels. Indeed, while on the campaign trail, Donald Trump promised he'd invest so much in the military that it would become "so big and so strong and so great, and it will be so powerful that I don't think we're ever

going to have to use it.”

As soon as he took office, however, he promptly appointed a set of generals to key positions in his government, stored the mothballs, and went back to war.

Here, then, is a brief rundown of the first year of his presidency in war terms.

Trump’s First Year of War-Making

In 2017, Afghanistan saw a mini-surge of roughly 4,000 additional U.S. troops (with more to come), a major spike in air strikes, and an onslaught of munitions of all sorts, including MOAB (the mother of all bombs), the never-before-used largest non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal, as well as precision weapons fired by B-52s against suspected Taliban drug laboratories. By the Air Force’s own count, 4,361 weapons were “released” in Afghanistan in 2017 compared to 1,337 in 2016. Despite this commitment of warriors and weapons, the Afghan war remains – according to American commanders putting the best possible light on the situation – “stalemated,” with that country’s capital Kabul currently under siege.

How about Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State? U.S.-led coalition forces have launched more than 10,000 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria since Donald Trump became president, unleashing 39,577 weapons in 2017. (The figure for 2016 was 30,743.) The “caliphate” is now gone and ISIS deflated but not defeated, since you can’t extinguish an ideology solely with bombs.

Meanwhile, along the Syrian-Turkish border a new conflict seems to be heating up between American-backed Kurdish forces and NATO ally Turkey.

Yet another strife-riven country, Yemen, witnessed a sixfold increase in U.S. airstrikes against al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (from 21 in 2016 to more than 131 in 2017). In Somalia, which has also seen a rise in such strikes against al-Shabaab militants, U.S. forces on the ground have reached numbers not seen since the Black Hawk Down incident of 1993. In each of these countries, there are yet more ruins, yet more civilian casualties, and yet more displaced people.

Finally, we come to North Korea. Though no real shots have yet been fired, rhetorical shots by two less-than-stable leaders, “Little Rocket Man” Kim Jong-un and “dotard” Donald Trump, raise the possibility of a regional bloodbath.

Trump, seemingly favoring military solutions to North Korea’s nuclear program even as his administration touts a new generation of more usable nuclear warheads, has been remarkably successful in moving the world’s doomsday clock ever closer to midnight.

Clearly, his “great” and “powerful” military has hardly been standing idly on the sidelines looking “big” and “strong.” More than ever, in fact, it seems to be lashing out across the Greater Middle East and Africa. Seventeen years after the 9/11 attacks began the Global War on Terror, all of this represents an eerily familiar attempt by the U.S. military to kill its way to victory, whether against the Taliban, ISIS, or other terrorist organizations.

This kinetic reality should surprise no one. Once you invest so much in your military – not just financially but also culturally (by continually celebrating it in a fashion which has come to seem like a quasi-faith) – it’s natural to want to put it to use. This has been true of all recent administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, as reflected in the infamous question Madeleine Albright posed to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell in 1992: “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”

With the very word “peace” rarely in Washington’s political vocabulary, America’s never-ending version of war seems as inevitable as anything is likely to be in history. Significant contingents of U.S. troops and contractors remain an enduring presence in Iraq and there are now 2,000 U.S. Special Operations forces and other personnel in Syria for the long haul. They are ostensibly engaged in training and stability operations. In Washington, however, the urge for regime change in both Syria and Iran remains strong – in the case of Iran implacably so. If past is prologue, then considering previous regime-change operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the future looks grim indeed.

Despite the dismal record of the last decade and a half, our civilian leaders continue to insist that this country must have a military not only second to none but globally dominant. And few here wonder what such a quest for total dominance, the desire for absolute power, could do to this country. Two centuries ago, however, writing to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams couldn’t have been clearer on the subject. Power, he said, “must never be trusted without a check.”

The question today for the American people: How is the dominant military power of which U.S. leaders so casually boast to be checked? How is the country’s almost total reliance on the military in foreign affairs to be reined in? How can the plans of the profiteers and arms makers to keep the good times rolling be brought under control?

As a start, consider one of Donald Trump’s favorite generals, Douglas MacArthur, speaking to the Sperry Rand Corporation in 1957:

“Our swollen budgets constantly have been misrepresented to the public. Our

government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear – kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor – with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it by furnishing the exorbitant funds demanded. Yet, in retrospect, these disasters seem never to have happened, seem never to have been quite real.”

No peacenik MacArthur. Other famed generals like Smedley Butler and Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke out with far more vigor against the corruptions of war and the perils to a democracy of an ever more powerful military, though such sentiments are seldom heard in this country today. Instead, America’s leaders insist that other people judge us by our words, our stated good intentions, not our murderous deeds and their results.

Perpetual Warfare Whistles Through Washington

Whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the war on terror, the U.S. is now engaged in generational conflicts that are costing us trillions of dollars, driving up the national debt while weakening the underpinnings of our democracy. They have led to foreign casualties by the hundreds of thousands and created refugees in the millions, while turning cities like Iraq’s Mosul into wastelands.

In today’s climate of budget-busting “defense” appropriations, isn’t it finally time for Americans to apply a little commonsense to our disastrous pattern of war-making? To prime the pump for such a conversation, here are 10 suggestions for ways to focus on, limit, or possibly change Washington’s now eternal war-making and profligate war spending:

1. Abandon the notion of perfect security. You can’t have it. It doesn’t exist. And abandon as well the idea that a huge military establishment translates into national safety. James Madison didn’t think so and neither did Dwight D. Eisenhower.
2. Who could have anything against calling the Pentagon a “defense” department, if defense were truly its focus? But let’s face it: the Pentagon is actually a war department. So let’s label it what it really is. After all, how can you deal with a problem if you can’t even name it accurately?
3. Isn’t it about time to start following the Constitution when it comes to our “wars”? Isn’t it time for Congress to finally step up to its constitutional duties? Whatever the Pentagon is called, this country should no longer be able to pursue its many conflicts without a formal congressional declaration of war. If we had followed that rule, the U.S. wouldn’t have fought any of its wars since the end of World War II.

4. Generational wars – ones, that is, that never end – should not be considered a measure of American resolve, but of American stupidity. If you wage war long, you wage it wrong, especially if you want to protect democratic institutions in this country.
5. Generals generally like to wage war. Don't blame them. It's their profession. But for heaven's sake, don't put them in charge of the Department of "Defense" (James Mattis) or the National Security Council (H.R. McMaster) either – and above all, don't let one of them (John Kelly) become the gatekeeper for a volatile, vain president. In our country, civilians should be in charge of the war makers, end of story.
6. You can't win wars you never should have begun in the first place. America's leaders failed to learn that lesson from Vietnam. Since then they have continued to wage wars for less-than-vital interests with predictably dismal results. Following the Vietnam example, America will only truly win its Afghan War when it chooses to rein in its pride and vanity – and leave.
7. The serious people in Washington snickered when, as a presidential candidate in 2004 and 2008, Congressman Dennis Kucinich called for a Department of Peace. Remind me, though, 17 years into our latest set of wars, what was so funny about that suggestion? Isn't it better to wage peace than war? If you don't believe me, ask a wounded veteran or a Gold Star family.
8. Want to invest in American jobs? Good idea! But stop making the military-industrial complex the preferred path to job creation. That's a loser of a way to go. It's proven that investments in "butter" create double or triple the number of jobs as those in "guns." In other words, invest in education, health care, and civilian infrastructure, not more weaponry.
9. Get rid of the very idea behind the infamous Pottery Barn rule – the warning Secretary of State Colin Powell offered George W. Bush before the invasion of Iraq that if the U.S. military "breaks" a country, somehow we've "bought" it and so have to take ownership of the resulting mess. Whether stated or not, it's continued to be the basis for this century's unending wars. Honestly, if somebody broke something valuable you owned, would you trust that person to put it back together? Folly doesn't decrease by persisting in it.
10. I was an officer in the Air Force. When I entered that service, the ideal of the citizen-soldier still held sway. But during my career I witnessed a slow, insidious change. A citizen-soldier military morphed into a professional ethos of "warriors" and "warfighters," a military that saw itself as better than the rest of us. It's time to think about how to return to that citizen-soldier tradition, which made it harder to fight those generational wars.

Consider retired General John Kelly, who, while defending the president in a controversy over the president's words to the mother of a dead Green Beret, refused to take questions from reporters unless they had a personal connection to fallen troops or to a Gold Star family. Consider as well the way that U.S. politicians like Vice President Mike Pence are always so keen to exalt those in uniform, to speak of them as above the citizenry. ("You are the best of us.")

Isn't it time to stop praising our troops to the rooftops and thanking them endlessly for what they've done for us – for fighting those wars without end – and to start listening to them instead? Isn't it time to try to understand them not as "heroes" in another universe, but as people like us in all their frailty and complexity? We're never encouraged to see them as our neighbors, or as teenagers who struggled through high school, or as harried moms and dads.

Our troops are, of course, human and vulnerable and imperfect. We don't help them when we put them on pedestals, give them flags to hold in the breeze, and salute them as icons of a feel-good brand of patriotism. Talk of warrior-heroes is worse than cheap: it enables our state of permanent war, elevates the Pentagon, ennobles the national security state, and silences dissent. That's why it's both dangerous and universally supported in rare bipartisan fashion by politicians in Washington.

So here's my final point. Think of it as a bonus 11th suggestion: don't make our troops into heroes, even when they're in harm's way. It would be so much better to make ourselves into heroes by getting them out of harm's way.

Be exceptional, America. Make peace, not war.

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Connecticut Court Decision Highlights U.S. Educational Failures

A recent court decision in Connecticut overturned a mandate that would have addressed inadequate education funding for poorer communities, a historic problem of the U.S. educational system, which relies on local resources instead of federal wealth, as Jonathan Kozol and Dennis J. Bernstein discussed.

By Dennis J Bernstein

In 1973, I was a struggling young teacher working in inner city Brooklyn when I discovered Jonathan Kozol's National Book Award-winning *Death at an Early Age*.

It became my young teacher's bible on understanding the nature of the school system and the pervasive racism at its core. It's subtitle, "The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools" is as relevant now as it was when it was published some 53 years ago.

Witness the recent decision by the Connecticut Supreme Court [Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell], which rejected a claim by a coalition of municipalities, parents and students that the state's education funding formula is unconstitutional.

According to the AP, a divided court recently overturned a lower court ruling that had ordered state officials to develop plans for an overhaul of the state's education system, citing a huge gap in test scores between students in rich and poor towns. In response, Kozol remarked recently that this Court decision condones and sustains a system of virtual total segregation.

Kozol has worked with children in inner city schools for some fifty years.

Death at an Early Age was followed by a series of books, each one a powerful indictment of the public school system in the US, even as he celebrates the kids he meets and their teachers who continue to do their best, despite the abandonment of public schools and the racism that accompanies it.

His subsequent books include *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, and *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*.

I spoke with Kozol on January 31st in Boston.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you begin by describing what the decision was that the court overturned and explaining why it is significant.

Jonathan Kozol: A lower court had found that the inequalities within the state between wealthy and poor school districts were unacceptable and unconstitutional. But the Connecticut Supreme Court in a divided decision unfortunately overturned the lower court judge. This has been a pattern all over the United States. By and large, we have seen this for decades.

In the 1990's we had the same situation in Ohio. They actually prevailed three times in showing that the system was blatantly unequal and won at the supreme court level. Even then, in contempt of court, the governor and legislature refused to obey the order. The governor finally packed the court with new appointees and the next time around they accepted the status quo.

This kind of thing has happened everywhere. Legislatures and governors have a thousand ways to drag their heels. In some cases they just say they don't have the money to do it.

There is a very poor town in Virginia named Petersburg. It is an important city in a way because it was a center of the slave trade and some important slave rebellions took place there. They have basically an all-Black school system.

They get about \$10,000 per child a year. Not so far away, in Arlington, Virginia, they're spending \$19,000 every year per child. That is almost twice as much, and of course the irony was that the kids in Petersburg were more in need!

They don't have parents who can take them to Paris before their French finals.

They don't get three years of preschool like wealthy kids do. There's just no level playing field in the United States.

I don't think this is ever going to be solved at the state level. The problem will only be solved when the education of every child in America is financed with the real wealth of the nation by the federal government. This is the way it is done in almost every other advanced society in the world.

We can't do that now because of a dreadful court decision [San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez] way back in 1972 in Texas. The poor districts prevailed at the local level and then the US Supreme Court overruled the district court. They ruled that education is not a protected right under the US Constitution.

DB: Your first book, *Death at an Early Age*, really broke the story of the unequal distribution of wealth among schools. As a substitute teacher in New York City, I remember that I would get called into a school on the east side of Manhattan and they had everything: a gymnasium, a library full of books, guidance counselors. You go up twenty or thirty blocks and the Dewey decimal system is still in place, athletics amounts to "here's a basketball, go out and play." It was always amazing for me to see the incredible difference in the same school system!

JK: I must say parenthetically that even in these very poorly funded schools, I keep running into terrific teachers. I've spent some time in Kern County, California, in schools that are just an hour and a half drive from L.A. These are badly funded schools but I would run into these great teachers and good principals, too.

But when these poorer kids do badly on these standardized tests, who does the media blame? They don't blame the state for cheating these kids from the hour of their birth, they blame the kids or else they blame their teachers. We have this whole regime now in the United States that holds the victims accountable.

In the poorer schools, we spend half the year drilling them for the tests, which has little to do with education but is training them to outsmart the test. We try to pump the scores a couple points and if that doesn't happen we blame the teachers.

The new solution is to set up charter schools in these cities, which become drill academies. Virtually all of them are apartheid schools because they specifically target minorities. And if they can raise the scores a few points, then the media says ah, that's the answer! Actually, they are just slightly higher-scoring separate and unequal schools.

If it were only inequality, then we could say it is a technical problem, we can solve it somehow. But there is a toxic synergy between financially unequal schools and virtually total abandonment of any integration efforts. In fact, when I talk about integration at school conferences, the corporate types that sponsor these events start to yawn.

What they do is sort of reinvent Dr. King's dream. They say, this is an all-Black school but we are living Dr. King's dream because we are training these Black and Latino kids to be more responsible for themselves and improving their character.

But Dr. King didn't say, "I have a dream that one day our victims will be more productive." It was about separate and unequal. We are back to that again. In my hometown of Boston, the system is more segregated than when I started teaching in 1964.

You mentioned New York and the Upper East Side. The Upper West Side is the classic example of what is happening now. There are a lot of affluent white professionals who are historically liberal in every way except this one. Just ten, twenty blocks to the north in Harlem you have virtually all-minority schools. And there are some schools that are kind of on the border between the two neighborhoods, but white people, for all their liberal beliefs, shun those schools.

When enlightened civic leaders ask why these kids can't go to school together, the white parents aren't as obvious in their racism as people were in Alabama fifty years ago, but they will say, of course we believe in diversity, but if they go to those schools our kids won't do as well.

There is still this assumption of basic inferiority in the minority kids. They wouldn't say it is genetic inferiority but, for a combination of social reasons, these kids are going to ruin our kids' education. That is what it amounts to.

It is heartbreaking to me. I am 81 years old and I felt sure in 1968 that all

this was going to change within ten years.

There are answers, of course. At least in small or middle-sized cities like Boston, we could very easily create a metropolitan school system. It wouldn't be a long ride for a kid to go in either direction. But that agenda is off the table, it's unfashionable now. This withdrawal from the mountaintop has been going on for a quarter century.

DB: One important point you make in *Savage Inequalities* is that we have to change the way public schools are funded. Schools are set up for failure from the get-go when so much depends on the local economic base. Is a lack of resources at the heart of the matter?

JK: These experts at the Hoover Institution and Heritage Foundation are always asking, "Is money really the answer?" Supposed liberals will look me in the face and say, "Jonathan, can you really solve the problems of those kinds by throwing money at them?" These are the same people who send their kids to prep schools that cost \$60,000 a year. My answer is always: "It seems to work for your kids, doesn't it?" It is sheer hypocrisy.

The basic funding for public schools comes from property taxes. States contribute what is known as "foundation money" so that no school goes without the bare minimum even if their local property taxes are insignificant.

The problem is that these foundation levels are always set so low. All the wealthy districts have to do is have a small bond levy and raise their property taxes half of one percent, and since they have lots of million dollar homes their funding shoots way up. Or they hold fundraising parties and in one night they will raise half a million dollars to build a new library or bring in art and music teachers. A poor district is lucky if they can raise \$800.

The only answer, I believe, is to do what all other developed nations do already and fund education out of the real wealth of the nation. It makes sense not only in practical terms, but in moral terms, in terms of citizenship. You don't go to school to be a citizen of Nebraska or California. We go to school to be Americans. Kids pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States.

What we have today is an uneven social contract. If not for that decision in 1972, equal education would be a fundamental right under the US Constitution.

If Bernie Sanders had won, perhaps we would have ended up with a Supreme Court that would reexamine that decision.

DB: Finally, what do you think of the job our Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is doing?

JK: She is a catastrophe. First of all, although she is not very smart, she is slick and gives a slick veneer to this old slogan “freedom of choice.”

This was the slogan of segregationists in the South after the Brown decision, when they started so-called “voucher schools.” She is not simply in favor of more and more of these segregated charter schools, which are even more segregated than public schools; she is also in favor of vouchers, the invidious idea that goes way back to Milton Friedman in the 1950’s and was tested out in Pinochet’s Chile.

Devos also wants to open this up to religious schools. She represents the spearhead of the privatization movement that would like to do away with public education altogether.

We are at the lowest point in the history of education in America that I can remember since the hopeful moment at the tail end of the 1960’s. Fortunately, there is a younger generation that is gathering momentum now. I am working with Black Lives Matter on a project. They are talking about these issues at last.

When I visit colleges, I’ll stay up half the night with these young minority kids, and sometimes some damn decent white kids who identify with the struggle. Maybe they are going to save us.

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.
