

Obama's Cyber-War on Iran

The United States, in collaboration with Israel, has undertaken an unprecedented cyber-warfare attack on Iran's nuclear program, opening the door to a new dimension for international conflict and complicating negotiations with Iran, say Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett at www.RaceForIran.com.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

In May 2009, we published [an op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*, in which we argued that "President Obama's Iran policy has, in all likelihood already failed", largely because "Obama is backing away from the bold steps required to achieve strategic, Nixon-to-China type rapprochement with Tehran." Indeed.

We wrote, "The Obama Administration has done nothing to cancel or repudiate an ostensibly covert but well-publicized program begun in George W. Bush's second term, to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to destabilize the Islamic Republic. Under these circumstances, the Iranian government will continue to suspect that American intentions toward the Islamic Republic remain, ultimately, hostile."

Now, in [an article](#) by David Sanger, "Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran," *The New York Times* informs that:

"From his first months in office, President Obama secretly ordered increasingly sophisticated attacks on the computer systems that run Iran's main nuclear enrichment facilities, significantly expanding America's first sustained use of cyberweapons, according to participants in the program.

"Mr. Obama decided to accelerate the attacks, begun in the Bush administration and code-named Olympic Games, even after an element of the program accidentally became public in the summer of 2010 because of a programming error that allowed it to escape Iran's Natanz plant and sent it around the world on the Internet. Computer security experts who began studying the worm, which had been developed by the United States and Israel, gave it a name: Stuxnet."

The article goes on to describe multiple details about Stuxnet and the President's decision-making as to its use. We, however, are most interested in the report for what it confirms about Obama's approach to Iran, in particular, that Obama's aggressiveness toward the Islamic Republic extended to a significant expansion of "America's first sustained use of cyberweapons."

Consider what Sanger writes about the motives for Obama's decision-making in this regard:

“Mr. Obama, according to participants in the many Situation Room meetings on Olympic Games, was acutely aware that with every attack he was pushing the United States into new territory, much as his predecessors had with the first use of atomic weapons in the 1940s, of intercontinental missiles in the 1950s and of drones in the past decade. He repeatedly expressed concerns that any American acknowledgment that it was using cyberweapons, even under the most careful and limited circumstances, could enable other countries, terrorists or hackers to justify their own attacks.

“‘We discussed the irony, more than once,’ one of his aides said. Another said that the administration was resistant to developing a ‘grand theory for a weapon whose possibilities they were still discovering.’ Yet Mr. Obama concluded that when it came to stopping Iran, the United States had no other choice.

“If Olympic Games failed, he told aides, there would be no time for sanctions and diplomacy with Iran to work. Israel could carry out a conventional military attack, prompting a conflict that could spread throughout the region.”

The perceived imperative “to dissuade the Israelis from carrying out their own preemptive strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities” also reportedly motivated the Administration to have Israel “deeply involved in every aspect” of Olympic Games.

Two things strike us as significant here. First, our May 2009 analysis was right on the money. If anything, we may have underestimated the degree to which Obama was prepared to let half-baked schemes undermine any chance he might have had, at least in theory, to pursue serious diplomacy with Iran.

Obama apologists want us to believe that the President meant well on engaging Tehran, but that what they describe (with no evidence whatsoever) as the Islamic Republic’s “fraudulent” 2009 presidential election and the resulting “disarray” within the Iranian leadership stymied Obama’s benevolent efforts. This is utterly false.

Second, the Sanger article makes undeniably clear, if it were not sufficiently evident already, that the reason for the President’s hostility toward Iran has nothing to do with American security.

Rather, Obama’s aggressiveness, which carries with it a willingness to put significant long-term American interests at risk, is motivated by a perceived imperative to prevent the Israelis from doing something that they cannot credibly do in the first place: namely, strike and destroy Iran’s nuclear program.

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Steering from the Abyss

Exclusive: The world seems on a headlong rush toward the abyss, with American neocons eager to escalate their “clash of civilizations” and religious fundamentalists of various stripes insisting their own ancient texts must be accepted as political prescriptions for the modern era, a crisis addressed by Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

When thousands of people including women and children die in Syria amid what amounts to a sectarian civil war, the Syrian government is condemned and “regime change” is demanded. The West debates military intervention and feeble peace efforts by the United Nations are mocked.

By contrast, when President George W. Bush invaded Iraq under false pretenses touching off a conflagration that killed hundreds of thousands or when President Barack Obama authorizes drone strikes inside Yemen, such as his first known one in the al-Majala region on Dec. 17, 2009, killing dozens, including 14 women and 21 children, most Americans just shrug. The international community stays mostly silent.

It is such double standards outrage when “their bad guys” do something and excuses when “our good guys” do that have become the recipe for what looks to be a poisonous future of endless warfare for the world. Mix in religious fundamentalism, especially the mythologies and grievances of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and the brew becomes even more toxic. And don’t forget the foul seasoning one gets by sprinkling in propaganda from supposedly “objective” and “professional” news outlets.

Indeed, it is hard now even to conceive how the world will push back from this table filled with hate, self-righteousness and recriminations. In the United States, anyone who dares to honestly address the nation’s checkered history is accused of “apologizing for America,” a charge that Mitt Romney has leveled repeatedly at President Obama for making the mildest of accurate observations.

In the U.S., we have seen this ugly pattern for decades. In the 1970s, there was a brief period of self-reflection regarding the Vietnam War, but a new revisionism took hold in the 1980s as President Ronald Reagan hailed the Indochina bloodbath as “a noble cause” and his UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick tongue-lashed those who would “blame America first.”

Ever since then, nearly all U.S. politicians and many journalists have fallen over themselves to avoid anything that even looks like criticism. So, when President George W. Bush flattened the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, there was scant regard for the wanton slaughter and the mass graves. It was all “necessary,” with blame for the civilian deaths falling on the city’s defenders for hiding in populated areas.

The same has been true when Israel launched punishing assaults against its Arab neighbors, from the initial ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the late 1940s through the “preemptive” Six-Day War in 1967 and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to more recent attacks on Lebanon in 2006 and on Gaza in 2008-09. Some U.S. pundits, like the Washington Post’s Charles Krauthammer, even praise the disproportionate nature of those slaughters as necessary to teach the Muslims a lesson and to protect Israel.

Yet, while such bloody messages may be acceptable to many Christians and Jews, they represent a harder sell to Muslims, who then nurse their own grudges and even feel sympathy toward al-Qaeda terrorists when they inflict unconscionable bloodshed on innocents in the United States and elsewhere.

All the sides are toting up their grudges while ignoring those of others. No one, it seems, wants to or has the courage to acknowledge that all sides are at fault. No one in authority dares take the first meaningful step toward peace. At this dark moment, it may not even be politically practical to try.

Role of Religion

As a Washington-based investigative journalist for the past three decades, I have tended to focus on provable facts and pay little heed to religious beliefs and doctrines. As someone who respects the U.S. Constitution, I also believe that everyone has the right to hold the religious creed of his or her choosing. I never thought it was my business to judge that.

Yet, as the years have progressed and the world has regressed I have concluded that religion is not something that can be ignored. It is not just some innocent force that gives people comfort and a sense of community. It has become a key part of the crisis as competing orthodoxies countenance less and less tolerance and justify more and more atrocities.

That's true whether it's Islamists who insist that everyone should live under Shariah law and that pluralistic democracy is just the latest trick of Western imperialism; or whether it's Christians believing that the Bible is the unchallengeable word of God and that the United States must be a "Christian nation"; or whether it's Zionists insisting that God granted the Jews dominion over wide swaths of the Middle East, thus giving them the right to drive the Palestinians from the land through force and coercion.

Besides religion, there are other factors compounding the problem, like the self-centered view of Americans that they have a right to the oil resources of the Middle East called "protecting our way of life" as well as a guarantee of perfect security against the possibility that others in the world might get angry and strike back.

Not to mention the career ambitions of politicians and journalists who know that they could find themselves out on the street if they don't toe the line of whatever the prevailing patriotic sentiment is. After all, Americans don't like negative observations about America: "USA! USA!"

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration played a key role in whipping the post-Watergate press corps back into line, in part, by organizing and dispatching special "public diplomacy" teams to lobby news executives to get rid of or at least silence troublesome reporters. [See Robert Parry's *Lost History* for details.]

But the collapse of an independent press in the United States reached a new low during the run-up to war in Iraq under President George W. Bush. When Bush launched an aggressive war against Iraq in 2003, not a single major national news organization spoke out consistently against what the Nuremberg Tribunals had labeled "the supreme international crime" because aggression allows the unpacking of all the other crimes of war.

Instead, the New York Times and the Washington Post served as little more than propaganda delivery devices, while the TV channels competed to see who could wave the flag most vigorously. Fox News and MSNBC even superimposed electronic American flags over scenes of Iraq, and CNN wasn't much better, adopting the military's code name "Operation: Iraqi Freedom" and supplying jingoistic domestic programming for Americans while offering more professional coverage on its international channels. [See *Neck Deep*.]

One might have thought that the humiliation of getting snookered over Iraq's non-existent WMD would have taught the U.S. news media some painful lessons and that the implicated news executives would have been held sternly accountable. But nothing much happened besides a few mumbled admissions that mistakes were

made.

Pretty much the same cast of characters was around to hail war for “regime change” in Libya (by citing dubious claims about Libyan guilt in the Lockerbie bombing of 1988). Today, much of the press is posturing as tough guys regarding Iran’s nuclear program and the civil war in Syria. Neocons dominate not only Washington’s think tanks but much of the national news media.

If you truly are a person seeking objective information about crises in the Middle East, I really wouldn’t recommend that you read or watch the major U.S. news media. The truth is the journalists all know where their bread is buttered and are acting accordingly. A reporter would have to be a masochist or someone inviting career suicide to write or say anything against the “tough-guy” conventional wisdom.

The same goes double for most politicians and officials. There has been some resistance to another Middle East war from some military veterans and a few policymakers. This handful especially those in the military who watched the Afghan and Iraq debacles up close are sounding notes of caution.

However, the loudest and the most influential voices are still the neocon hawks who have little first-hand experience with war but remain determined to crush Israel’s Muslim enemies with whatever force is necessary. There also are those Americans who believe the United States has the right to dictate geopolitical outcomes around the world and have guaranteed access to oil.

Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, has made clear that if elected he would put the neocons firmly back in the saddle of U.S. foreign policy. Meanwhile, President Obama has tried to straddle the differences, looking for low-cost ways to strike at America’s “enemies” mostly using unmanned drones while drawing down U.S. troops in Iraq and soon in Afghanistan.

Retail Slaughter

Though Obama’s approach is quantitatively less violent than Bush’s i.e. the slaughter now is less wholesale and more retail it is having a similar qualitative effect, i.e. it is angering the world’s Muslims who are coming to view al-Qaeda victims as heroes rather than monsters.

In Yemen, for instance, the collateral damage from drone strikes has radicalized more of the population and discredited the pro-U.S. government. Correspondent Sudarsan Raghavan reported for the Washington Post on Wednesday that “across the vast, rugged terrain of southern Yemen, an escalating campaign of U.S. drone strikes is stirring sympathy for al-Qaeda-linked militants and driving tribesmen

to join a network linked to terrorist plots against the United States.”

Citing estimates from Yemeni officials and tribal leaders, Raghavan wrote that the number of al-Qaeda members has more than doubled since President Obama escalated the drone attacks in Yemen in 2009, with al-Qaeda ranks swelling from about 300 to 700 or more.

A Yemeni soldier, Abu Baker Aidaroos, said he quit his unit after an American drone strike killed al-Qaeda leader Fahd al-Quso as he was greeting Aidaroos’s nephew, 19-year-old Nasser Salim, who was tending his farm at the time. “He was torn to pieces,” Aidaroos said of Salim. “He was not part of al-Qaeda. But by America’s standards, just because he knew Fahd al-Quso, he deserved to die with him.”

Though drone strikes and other counterterrorism attacks have decimated al-Qaeda’s leadership, including the U.S. Special Forces raid into Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, Obama’s offensive against lower-ranking or replacement operatives has had the effect of spreading anti-Americanism.

Indeed, one reason the Obama administration has been hesitant to arm the Syrian opposition is the fact that some and maybe many of the anti-government fighters are Islamic militants, including hardened veterans of the battles against the American forces in Iraq over the last decade.

But how to unwind the snarled narratives of the various belligerents? The neocons would tell you that there is no backing away from the “clash of civilizations,” that the West is simply at war with militant Islam, a “Long War” that amounts to a religious/cultural death match that will bleed generations for decades.

In the shorter term, the neocon goal is the same as it was under George W. Bush, to force “regime change” in countries deemed hostile to U.S. and Israeli interests. That is why the Washington Post’s neocon editors are so eager for talks with Iran over its nuclear program to fail, all the better to get to the main event, a military assault ostensibly to destroy nuclear facilities but with the hope and prayer that a new pro-Western, pro-Israeli government might emerge.

A May 26 Post editorial, entitled “Iran’s intransigence: The West should not bargain away sanctions for faux concessions,” essentially demanded Iran’s capitulation over its right to enrich uranium for energy and other peaceful purposes, a humiliation that Iranian leaders are unlikely to accept despite escalating sanctions and threats of military attack.

Iran has shown a willingness to surrender its higher-refined uranium and tolerate additional United Nations inspections, but it wants some rollback of

economic sanctions in return. However, the neocon rejectionist camp in the United States has made clear that any give-and-take negotiations will be denounced as appeasement while the tensions continue to escalate toward another war.

The Post's editors pretend that they want to avoid that war but then adopt an our-way-or-the-highway approach that makes war almost inevitable. They wrote: "While an interim bargain that arrests what has looked like a slide toward war remains desirable, Iran cannot be granted much more time to build and install centrifuges."

The U.S. press corps also routinely describes the crisis over Iran's nuclear program without mentioning that U.S. and other intelligence services have concluded that Iran is *not* building a nuclear bomb. Nor is it common to see a mention that Israel itself has a large and undeclared nuclear arsenal. Arguably, Israel is the world's preeminent rogue nuclear power, but that point is never made in the American news media.

This persistent Western double standard regarding nuclear weapons it's okay for "our" side to have them but not "yours" only feeds the resentment in the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda documents captured in the bin Laden raid reveal that the terrorist group is well aware that its propaganda trump cards remain the Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians and the West's hypocrisy on issues like human rights and nuclear weapons. [See Consortiumnews.com "[How al-Qaeda Exploits Palestine Cause.](#)"]

What to Do?

One might conclude that the best way to counter al-Qaeda's propaganda themes is to show they're wrong, but that remains politically undoable in the United States and in Israel. So, there is core truth to the propaganda: the Israelis have mistreated the Palestinians and the West does operate with double standards.

So what to do to steer the world away from the looming abyss? There may be no short-term solution to the animosities fueling the "Long War." But if it is to be cut short at all, several changes must occur:

–People of goodwill must develop the means of explaining the complex and ambiguous reality to their own audiences. A truly independent and honest news media must take shape and resist pressures to take sides in this "clash of civilizations."

Journalists should take their commitment to objectivity seriously, i.e. leaving cultural and other biases at the door. Drop the "black hat, white hat" dichotomy

and deal with the grays of the real world. If you mention Israel's condemnation of Iran's non-weaponized nuclear program, you should include the context including the fact that Israel has an actual nuclear arsenal.

When you do this kind of professional journalism, don't be intimidated by phony accusations that you are "blaming America" or are "anti-Israel." Such taunts should be treated as the ugly lies they are and not be allowed to silence the truth.

—Religious mythologies whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic must be rejected, even if that offends some religious true-believers. The Torah, the Bible and the Koran are religious texts from ancient times reflecting cultural attitudes and political interests from their respective eras. They must not be prescriptions for how to behave in the 21st Century.

God did not give the Jews the "promised land"; God did not send Jesus to earth to guarantee eternal life for Christians; God did not dictate to Mohammed laws to govern mankind. These are all myths, no more real than stories about thunder gods. Religious believers may find some wisdom or solace in these texts, but these "holy books" must be set aside by modern society before they get millions of more people killed.

The American Founders had the right idea. Influenced by the Baptists and their demands for religious freedom tracing back to their founder Roger Williams, James Madison and other authors of the Bill of Rights separated church and state. The erosion of that separation in recent years mostly by the demands of Christian fundamentalists has contributed to the irrationality now infecting U.S. politics.

—Political leaders must find the courage to explain the dangers of the world's current path. Granted, the current media environment polluted with superficiality and propaganda doesn't make it easy. And it is unrealistic to insist on perfection. But progress toward the restoration of sanity must be made a high priority.

Political sophisticates also must resist the vanity of perfectionism that is, adopting the self-absorbed view that it is more important to stake out a "perfect" position than it is to do something practical to help save the planet. Change may be frustratingly incremental. So, a large measure of persistence would come in handy, too.

In the end, a combination of factors including an informed electorate, acceptance of rational thinking and commitment to pragmatic progress will be needed to stop the world's headlong rush to disaster.

[To read more of Robert Parry's writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

Bin Laden Files Dispel Iran-Qaeda Link

To build support for "regime change" in Iran, neocon operatives and U.S. officials have tried to link al-Qaeda to Iran by exaggerating intelligence and ignoring evidence of mutual hostility, including new data in Osama bin Laden's captured files, writes Gareth Porter for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

The U.S. Treasury Department's claim of a "secret deal" between Iran and Al-Qaeda, which had become a key argument by right-wing activists who support war against Iran, has been discredited by former intelligence officials in the wake of publication of documents from Osama bin Laden's files revealing a high level of antagonism between Al-Qaeda and Iran.

Three former intelligence officials with experience on Near East and South Asia told IPS they regard Treasury's claim of a secret agreement between Iran and Al-Qaeda as false and misleading. That claim was presented in a way that suggested it was supported by intelligence. It now appears, however, to have been merely a propaganda line designed to support the Obama administration's strategy of diplomatic coercion on Iran.

Under Secretary of Treasury David S. Cohen announced last July that the department was "exposing Iran's secret deal with Al-Qaeda allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory." The charge was introduced in connection with the designation of an Al-Qaeda official named Yasin al-Suri as a terrorist subject to financial sanctions.

The Treasury claim has been embraced by the right-wing Weekly Standard and others aligned with hardline Israeli views on Iran, as primary source evidence

of an alliance between Iran and Al-Qaeda.

But Paul R. Pillar, former national intelligence officer for Near East and South Asia, told IPS the allegation of a “secret deal” between Iran and Al-Qaeda “has never been backed up by any evidence that would justify such a term” and that it is “a highly misleading characterization of interaction between Iran and Al-Qaeda.”

Pillar said the recently released bin Laden documents “not only do not demonstrate any agreement in which Iran condoned or facilitated operations by Al-Qaeda, they contradict the notion that there was any such agreement.”

“I’ve never seen anything that suggests that happened,” said another former intelligence official, referring to an Iran-Al Qaeda agreement. “I’m very skeptical about that.”

A third former intelligence official said Treasury’s “secret deal” claim “doesn’t pass the BS test” and noted that it is perfectly aligned with the Obama administration’s policy of pressure on Iran. The official said the Treasury Department’s push for its “secret deal” line is emblematic of a larger split in the intelligence community between those for whom intelligence is secondary to their role in “counterterrorism” policy and the rest of the community.

“The counterterrorism types are like used car salesmen,” the former official told IPS. “They are always overselling something. They have to show that they are doing important work.”

The actual text of the July 28, 2011, “designation” of Yasin al-Suri suggests that the claim of such a “secret deal” is merely a political spin on the fact that Iran dealt with al-Suri on the release of prisoners.

It says that Yasin al Suri is an Al-Qaeda facilitator “living and operating in Iran under agreement between Al-Qaeda and the Iranian government.” Iranian authorities, it said, “maintain a relationship with (al-Suri) and have permitted him to operate within Iran’s borders since 2005.”

The designation offers no other evidence of an “agreement” except for the fact that Iran dealt with al-Suri in arranging the releases of Al-Qaeda prisoners from Iranian detention and their transfer to Pakistan. The official notice of a \$10 million reward for al-Suri on the website of the “Rewards for Justice” program under the Diplomatic Security office of the State Department also indicates that the only “agreement” between Iran and Al-Qaeda has been to exchange prisoners.

“Working with the Iranian government,” it said, “al-Suri arranges the release of

al Qaeda personnel from Iranian prisons. When al Qaeda operatives are released, the Iranian government transfers them to al-Suri, who then facilitates their travel to Pakistan.”

Neither the Treasury Department nor the State Department, which joined the February 2012 press briefing on the reward for finding al-Suri, referred to the fact that Iran had been forced to deal with al-Suri and to release Al-Qaeda detainees in order to obtain the release of the Iranian diplomat kidnapped by Pakistani allies of Al-Qaeda in Peshawar, Pakistan, in November 2008.

In one of the documents taken from the Abbottabad compound and published by West Point’s Counter-Terrorism Center last week, a senior Al Qaeda official wrote, “We believe that our efforts, which included escalating a political and media campaign, the threats we made, the kidnapping of their friend the commercial counselor in the Iranian Consulate in Peshawar, and other reasons that scared them based on what they saw (we are capable of), to be among the reasons that led them to expedite (the release of these prisoners).”

In response to the IPS request for clarification of the “secret agreement” claim, John Sullivan, a spokesman for the Treasury Department’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, declined to answer any questions on the subject or to allow IPS to interview Eytan Fisch, the assistant director of the Terrorism and Financial Intelligence office.

In briefing journalists on al-Suri last February, Fisch had again invoked the alleged Iran-Al Qaeda “secret agreement” last February.

Sullivan defended the Treasury Department’s position on the issue, however, against criticism based on the publication of the bin Laden documents. “We based our action on Yasin al-Suri on a broad array of information that far exceeds what was recently made public,” Sullivan said in an e-mail to IPS.

Asked about the hint by the Treasury spokesman that department officials used still-classified material as the basis for the claim of a “secret agreement”, former national intelligence officer Pillar called it “disingenuous.”

The origins of the Treasury Department’s “secret deal” claim indicate that it was intended to generate press stories that would increase political and government support for pressure on Iran through economic sanctions and military threats.

The designation of Yasin al-Suri as a terrorist subject to financial sanctions July 28, 2011, did not have any impact on Al-Qaeda funding. The objective was to allow Treasury to generate press coverage of its charge of a secret Iran-Al Qaeda agreement. The timing of the move coincided with a shift in Obama

administration strategy from diplomatic engagement to maximizing pressure on Iran.

During the period when neoconservatives were pushing for an explicit policy of support for regime change in Iran during the first George W. Bush administration, U.S. officials frequently talked as though any Al-Qaeda presence in Iran was evidence of Iran's cooperation with the terrorist organization.

But as ABC News reported on May 29, 2008, Bush administration officials were acknowledging privately that they were not complaining about Iranian policy toward Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran, because Iran had "kept these al Qaeda operatives under control since 2003, limiting their ability to travel and communicate." One official said Al-Qaeda officials under Iranian control, "some of whom are quite important," were "essentially on ice."

Israel has continued, however, to use its relations with friendly news media, especially in the UK, to generate disinformation about alleged joint Iranian-Al Qaeda planning for terrorist actions.

Rupert Murdoch's Sky News carried a story Feb. 15, 2012, citing "intelligence sources" from an unnamed state as suggesting that Iran had been supplying Al-Qaeda with "training in the use of advanced explosives" as well as some funding and a safe haven "as part of a deal first worked out in 2009."

The report quoted the intelligence sources as saying that Iran wanted to use the threat of Al-Qaeda retaliation against Western targets as "revenge for any military strike against Iran's nuclear capabilities."

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published in 2006. [This story originally appeared at Inter Press Service.]

Bush Did Lie About Iraq

From the Archive: Some loyalists still defend President George W. Bush's honesty by insisting he really believed the bogus intelligence on Iraq's WMD and, true, it is impossible to know what was in his mind. But Bush did lie about Iraq's WMD in another way, as Robert Parry explained in 2010.

By Robert Parry (Originally published March 5, 2010)

George W. Bush's political adviser Karl Rove claims "one of the biggest mistakes" of that presidency was not aggressively challenging critics who charged that Bush "lied" to the American people about the reasons for the Iraq War, an accusation that Rove insists was false and unfair.

In his book, *Courage and Consequence*, Rove calls the "lie" charge "a poison-tipped dagger aimed at the heart of the Bush presidency" and blames himself for "a weak response" that underestimated "how damaging this assault was."

But the problem with Rove's account is that not only did Bush oversee the twisting of intelligence to justify invading Iraq in March 2003 but he subsequently lied and lied repeatedly about how Iraq had responded to United Nations inspection demands.

So, while it may be impossible to say for certain what Bush believed about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction, it can't be argued that Bush didn't know that Iraq declared that it had destroyed its WMD stockpiles and let U.N. inspectors in to see for themselves in the months before the invasion.

Nevertheless, Bush followed up his false pre-war claims about Iraq's WMD with a post-invasion insistence that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had barred U.N. inspectors from his country, a decision that Bush said left him no choice but to invade. Bush began reciting this faux history just months after the invasion and continued the tall tale until the end of his presidency more than five years later.

Tellingly, throughout that period, as Bush blithely lied about the Iraq War history, he was never challenged to his face by the mainstream U.S. journalists who politely listened to the lies. Indeed, some big-name journalists even adopted Bush's false narrative as their own.

Now, it appears Rove is intent on rehabilitating Bush's record by insisting that the ex-President never lied at all. The historical record, however, is clear: Hussein and other Iraqi officials did say they no longer possessed WMD and they did let UN arms inspectors into Iraq in the fall of 2002 to search any site of their choosing.

The inspectors in their white vans drove around Iraq for months, with their excursions covered daily by the international news media. In trip after trip, guided by the best available U.S. intelligence, the inspectors came up empty.

Hussein and his government also backed up their claims to be WMD-free by providing the United Nations a 12,000-page declaration on Dec. 7, 2002, explaining how Iraq's stocks of chemical and biological weapons had been destroyed in the 1990s.

Though the Bush administration mocked these Iraqi disclosures, U.S. intelligence had its own independent facts supporting the Iraqi statements, including information from Hussein's son-in-law Hussein Kamel al-Majid who defected and described his work destroying the stockpiles after the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s. [When he returned to Iraq, he was killed.]

Top-Level Intelligence

With the help of French intelligence, the CIA also had "turned" Hussein's foreign minister, Naji Sabri, who conveyed real-time intelligence to the U.S. government, passing along information in September 2002 about the absence of Iraqi WMD. Here is how author Ron Suskind described that intelligence in his 2008 book, *The Way of the World*:

"The upshot of Sabri's account was that Saddam neither possessed WMD nor was trying very hard to procure or develop them. If Saddam was eager for a nuclear weapon, he was as far as ever from having one and was making no progress on that front; any vestige of a bio-weapons program was negligible; and if any chemical weapons remained in Iraq, they were no longer in the hands of either Saddam Hussein or his military.

"[CIA Paris station chief Bill] Murray flew down to Washington to deliver the news and briefed John McLaughlin, CIA's deputy director. McLaughlin was enthusiastic about the intelligence but pointed out that it was contradicted by information from Curveball, the best source on Iraqi WMD to that point. Sabri's account was relayed to [CIA Director George] Tenet, who delivered it personally to Bush the following day.

"But the administration quickly lost interest in Sabri when it heard what he had to say. Bush dismissed the intelligence as disinformation, and the White House said it would be interested in Sabri only if he chose to defect."

Though the CIA found additional information to corroborate Sabri's story and regarded Curveball as a highly unreliable source, Bush pressed forward on his course to war. Suskind further reported that the written report on Sabri's intelligence was distorted to lend greater credence to the WMD suspicions, "almost certainly altered under pressure from Washington."

Yet, it may never be fully known whether Bush didn't care about the truth or simply chose to believe the "stove-piped" intelligence that was coming from neoconservatives salted throughout the national security bureaucracy and who were determined to go to war with Iraq.

What can't be doubted is what happened next. Set on invading, Bush forced the U.N. inspectors to wrap up their work and to leave Iraq in March 2003, a

departure that was followed within days by his “shock and awe” attack on Iraq, beginning March 19.

Reinventing History

Several months later, with Hussein’s government ousted and with the U.S. military coming up empty in its search for WMD caches, Bush began his historical revisionism by insisting publicly that he had no choice but to invade because Hussein supposedly had barred U.N. inspectors.

On July 14, 2003, Bush told reporters: “We gave him [Saddam Hussein] a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn’t let them in. And, therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove him from power.”

Facing no contradiction from the White House press corps, Bush continued repeating this lie again and again in varied forms.

On Jan. 27, 2004, for example, Bush said, “We went to the United Nations, of course, and got an overwhelming resolution 1441 unanimous resolution, that said to Saddam, you must disclose and destroy your weapons programs, which obviously meant the world felt he had such programs. He chose defiance. It was his choice to make, and he did not let us in.”

As the months and years went by, Bush’s lie and its unchallenged retelling took on the color of truth. At a March 21, 2006, news conference, Bush again blamed the war on Hussein’s defiance of U.N. demands for unfettered inspections.

“I was hoping to solve this [Iraq] problem diplomatically,” Bush said. “The world said, ‘Disarm, disclose or face serious consequences.’ We worked to make sure that Saddam Hussein heard the message of the world. And when he chose to deny the inspectors, when he chose not to disclose, then I had the difficult decision to make to remove him. And we did.”

At a press conference on May 24, 2007, Bush offered a short-hand version of the made-up tale, even inviting the journalists to remember the invented history.

“As you might remember back then, we tried the diplomatic route: [U.N. Resolution] 1441 was a unanimous vote in the Security Council that said disclose, disarm or face serious consequences. So the choice was his [Hussein’s] to make. And he made a choice that has subsequently caused him to lose his life.”

In one of his White House exit interviews on Dec. 1, 2008 Bush again revived his convenient version of history, that Hussein was responsible for the invasion because he wouldn’t let the U.N. inspectors in. ABC News anchor Charles Gibson

asked Bush, "If the [U.S.] intelligence had been right [and revealed no Iraq WMD], would there have been an Iraq War?"

Bush answered, "Yes, because Saddam Hussein was unwilling to let the inspectors go in to determine whether or not the U.N. resolutions were being upheld."

In his frequent repetition of this claim, Bush never acknowledged the fact that Hussein did comply with Resolution 1441 by declaring accurately that he had disposed of his WMD stockpiles and by permitting U.N. inspectors to examine any site of their choosing.

Media Complicity

And never did mainstream reporters contradict Bush's false history to his face. Indeed, some prominent Washington journalists even adopted Bush's lie as their own. For instance, in a July 2004 interview, ABC's veteran newsman Ted Koppel used it to explain why he Koppel thought the invasion of Iraq was justified.

"It did not make logical sense that Saddam Hussein, whose armies had been defeated once before by the United States and the Coalition, would be prepared to lose control over his country if all he had to do was say, 'All right, U.N., come on in, check it out,'" Koppel told Amy Goodman, host of "Democracy Now."

In the real history, Hussein did tell the U.N. to "come on in, check it out." But faux reality had become the trademark of the Bush presidency and of its many supporters in the press corps.

Washington's conventional wisdom eventually embraced another fake belief, that Hussein provoked the war by misleading people into believing that he still possessed WMD. The fact that Hussein and his government had declared they didn't possess WMD was forgotten.

In line with the bogus version of history, "60 Minutes" correspondent Scott Pelley asked FBI interrogator George Piro, who had debriefed Hussein in prison, why the dictator kept pretending that he had WMD even as U.S. troops massed on Iraq's borders, when a simple announcement that the WMD was gone would have prevented the war.

"For a man who drew America into two wars and countless military engagements, we never knew what Saddam Hussein was thinking," Pelley said in introducing the segment on the interrogation of Hussein about his WMD stockpiles, which aired Jan. 27, 2008. "Why did he choose war with the United States?"

This "60 Minutes" segment never mentioned the fact that Hussein and his government did disclose that the WMD had been eliminated. Instead Pelley pressed

Piro on the mystery of why Hussein supposedly was hiding that fact: “Why keep the secret? Why put your nation at risk, why put your own life at risk to maintain this charade?”

After Piro mentioned Hussein’s lingering fear of neighboring Iran, Pelley felt he was close to an answer to the mystery: “He believed that he couldn’t survive without the perception that he had weapons of mass destruction?”

But, still, Pelley puzzled over why Hussein’s continued in his miscalculation. Pelley asked: “As the U.S. marched toward war and we began massing troops on his border, why didn’t he stop it then? And say, ‘Look, I have no weapons of mass destruction,’ I mean, how could he have wanted his country to be invaded?”

Now, with the publication of Karl Rove’s memoir, the American public can expect a reprise of the argument that it was unfair for anyone to accuse President Bush of lying about Iraq, that he simply believed mistaken intelligence and did what he thought was best for America. In other words, Bush was the victim of mean critics, not a dishonest warmonger.

One also can expect that the mainstream U.S. news media will continue to forget its own role in perpetuating the lie that George W. Bush would never lie.

[To read more of Robert Parry’s writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [click here.](#)]

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How Obama Recycled a Lie about Iran

Exclusive: President Obama has joined much of Official Washington in mistranslating a comment by Iran’s President Ahmadinejad into the provocative phrase, “wiping Israel off the map.” Obama’s falsehood recalls President George W. Bush’s bogus claim about Iraq seeking uranium in Africa, says ex-CIA analyst Elizabeth Murray.

By Elizabeth Murray

In June 2007, Middle East expert and University of Michigan professor Juan Cole remarked that bad translations can sometimes start wars. Professor Cole, in this case, was referring to the misleading, yet widely circulated mistranslated remark by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during a speech in 2005 – in which he is purported to have said that Israel should be “wiped off the map.”

This old canard – long dismissed by Persian language experts as a gross distortion of Ahmadinejad’s actual words – is regularly trotted out by Israeli leaders and their supporters as proof that Iran’s regime intends genocide against Israel, thereby justifying a military attack on Iran.

However, a literal translation of Ahmadinejad’s 2005 statement would be something like “this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time,” a reference back to an earlier statement made by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of Iran’s Islamic Republic, as Guardian columnist Jonathan Steele explained in 2006.

Ahmadinejad essentially was predicting that Israel’s rule over Jerusalem would eventually come to an end, much like the once mighty Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. He and other Iranian leaders have repeated similar predictions since then, but without any suggestion that Iran would attack Israel. [For more, see “Wiped Off the Map – the Rumour of the Century” by Arash Norouzi.]

Earlier this month, Dan Meridor, Israel’s minister of intelligence and atomic energy, conceded the point in an interview with Al Jazeera. He agreed that Iranian leaders “didn’t say, ‘We’ll wipe [Israel] out,’ you’re right, but [said instead] ‘it will not survive. It is a cancerous tumor, it should be removed.’ They repeatedly said ‘Israel is not legitimate, it should not exist.’”

Though the “wiped off the map” phrase is a myth, it has been transformed into accepted wisdom in Official Washington by its endless repetition and remains a frequent refrain of U.S. politicians and the corporate media.

For instance, in an appearance last month on MSNBC, Mark Landler, the New York Times’ White House correspondent, said, “The Israelis feel the window for that [denying Iran the capability to build nuclear weapons] is closing and it’s closing really fast, and if they allow it to close without taking military action, they would find themselves in a position where the Iranians suddenly are in possession of nuclear weapons, which *they’ve threatened already to use against Israel.*” [Emphasis added]

The last part of Landler’s comment was an apparent reference to the Ahmadinejad

misquote, with the made-up addendum that Iran has threatened to use nuclear weapons to wipe Israel off the map. In fact, Iran has not threatened to use a nuclear bomb against Israel and has even disavowed any intent of developing a nuclear bomb. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Sloppy Comments on Iran's 'Nukes.'](#)"]

Also, last month, President Barack Obama repeated the “wiped off the map” fiction in front of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (to considerable applause), all the while assuring his audience of his preference for diplomacy in dealing with Tehran. In his speech, Obama said: “Let’s begin with a basic truth that you all understand: no Israeli government can tolerate a nuclear weapon in the hands of a regime that threatens to wipe Israel off the map.”

If President Obama were truly interested in the success of diplomatic engagement with Iran, then why would he continue to issue provocative and propagandistic lies about Iran, especially before the start of delicate negotiations between Iran and the UN P5 +1 (Security Council members plus Germany) regarding Iran’s nuclear facilities?

Loose talk and inflammatory propaganda can only cheapen the United States’ international image, inflicting preemptive harm on whatever prospects for diplomatic progress might be in the offing.

The President’s use of a discredited phrase also brings to mind the careless language depicting a “mushroom cloud” bandied about by then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice as part of President George W. Bush’s effort to whip the American public into a frenzy of pro-war hysteria against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

The late Walter Lippman referred to such tactics as “the manufacture of consent.” Hitler’s propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, called it “the Big Lie,” that is, a phrase which, if repeated often enough, would eventually pass for the truth.

Having an Iranian leader call into question the legitimacy of the Zionist system of government in Israel and predicting its eventual decline, of course, may be very insulting and offensive to the powers-that-be in Israel, but it is a far cry from a call to attack or wipe out the Israeli population.

This important nuance – acknowledged by no less than a member of the Israeli cabinet – seems to be missing from the discourse of U.S. corporate media and U.S. politicians. Instead, Ahmadinejad’s criticism of Israel has been deliberately distorted, mistranslated and spun out of context into a physical threat against Israel, ignoring the available factual information that indicates

otherwise.

Come to think of it, how did such an inaccurate phrase manage to worm its way into the text of President Obama's speech to AIPAC? As a rule, presidential speeches are carefully reviewed by experts at the White House, National Security Council and National Intelligence Council for integrity and accuracy. After all, especially in high-profile speeches, the President's reputation is at stake.

The intelligence officers involved in vetting a speech would have ready access to the Open Source Center's translation of Ahmadinejad's 2005 speech from the Persian if they had wanted to ensure the accuracy of the President's words. Whoever allowed this piece of propaganda to slip through either committed a grave error or had a separate agenda in mind.

This episode brings to mind the criticism of former President Bush for including in his 2003 State of the Union speech a falsehood about Iraq trying to procure yellowcake uranium from Africa – a fiction that helped lead the nation into a costly war and that subsequently brought an apology from CIA Director George Tenet.

In any case, President Obama's gaffe before AIPAC has certainly done nothing to burnish his reputation (despite the applause it received at the time) because much of the world knows better.

Elizabeth Murray served as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East in the National Intelligence Council before retiring after a 27-year career in the U.S. government, where she specialized in Middle Eastern political and media analysis. She is a member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Spy v. Spy: the First Patriots Day

From the Archive: The real Patriots Day not the Monday holiday observed in Massachusetts falls on April 19, honoring the Minutemen who rallied against a British strike at Lexington and Concord in 1775. The British were thwarted, in large part, because of a little known patriot, as Robert Parry recalled in 2011.

By Robert Parry (Originally published April 18-19, 2011)

Patriots Day commemorates the start of the American Revolution, the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, and the staggering British retreat to

Boston. What's less known is how the Americans outfoxed the British at one of their own strengths, intelligence.

Those opening clashes of the revolution revolved around a spy-v.-spy game when and how were the British going to surprise rebel leaders in Lexington and then destroy the stores of munitions at Concord.

And, after the day of fighting was over, there was a second "intelligence" competition over spreading news of the events, what today we might call "information warfare." The Americans won that contest, too.

Yet, 237 years later, these intelligence coups are little remembered. Casual historians may recall "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" which indeed was a dramatic part of thwarting the British surprise but few recall the exploits of Dr. Joseph Warren, arguably America's first spymaster.

Though involved with the Sons of Liberty and a member of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, a key body in organizing the Revolution, Warren moved within Boston's respected society as a physician and surgeon. Indeed, that may have put him in place to recruit one of the most important and still mysterious spies in American history.

In the turbulent years leading up to hostilities, Warren collaborated with fellow patriot Paul Revere in constructing a remarkable intelligence network for its time, a loosely knit collection of sympathetic citizens who uncovered information about the British garrisoned in Boston. The network also included riders who could spread alarms quickly through the countryside.

Warren and Revere oversaw an effective system of propaganda, too, highlighting excesses committed by the British and pioneering the use of fast clipper ships to distribute their side of the story across the Atlantic, where there was a battle for the sympathies of British citizens and politicians.

Their intelligence network was tested in spring 1775 as the British prepared for what King George III hoped would be a decisive strike against the rebellious New Englanders, including the arrest of top leaders, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, hiding out in Lexington. Their whereabouts had been detected by British General Thomas Gage's own spies.

But the Warren-Revere network usually was a step ahead of Gage's team. Keeping a close tab on British movements, the patriot spies learned two key facts, that British agents had scouted routes toward Concord and that British longboats were lowered into Boston Harbor on April 6.

On April 8, expecting an imminent attack, Warren prepared an urgent warning to

the patriots in Concord, telling them that “we daily expect a Tumult” and that Concord would be the target with an assault possibly the next day. Revere carried Warren’s message by horseback. Although Warren’s date proved incorrect, he was right about one of the Redcoats’ key targets, Concord. The patriots were on high alert.

Thinking Ahead

On his way back to Boston, Revere had the prescient thought that the British might try to seal off Boston before their attack and thus he devised a signal with patriots across the Charles River in Charlestown that could be used as a back-up plan. Lanterns would be hung from Boston’s Old North Church, one if the attack came by land, two if by sea.

Gage soon learned from loyalist spies that Revere had carried Warren’s message to Concord. So, in readying the April 19 march on Lexington and Concord, Gage dispatched mounted patrols of 20 officers and sergeants into the countryside on April 18 to cut off warnings from American riders trying to spread the alarm to local militias.

The final chapter of this intelligence cat-and-mouse game would determine whether the British would retain an element of surprise, or whether Warren and Revere could ensure that the Redcoats would be met by an armed citizenry.

By the afternoon of April 18, a bustle of British activity in Boston had been detected by local residents sympathetic to the patriots. Reports were flowing into Warren’s medical office, his make-shift intelligence headquarters.

As described by historian David Hackett Fischer in *Paul Revere’s Ride*, “In the highly charged atmosphere of Boston, scarcely an hour passed without some new rumor or alarm. Doctor Warren had become highly skilled in diagnosing these political symptoms.

“On the afternoon of April 18, as these reports suddenly multiplied, he began to suspect that the Regulars were at last about to make the major move that had long been expected. Doctor Warren was a careful man, and he decided to be sure.

“For emergencies he had special access to a confidential informer, someone well connected at the uppermost levels of the British command. The identity of this person was a secret so closely guarded that it was known to Warren alone, and he carried it faithfully to his grave.”

Amid the growing signs of a British attack, Warren turned to this source and obtained the details of the British plan, that the British would cross the Charles River by boat and then march to Lexington with the goal of capturing

Samuel Adams and John Hancock and then on to Concord to burn the stores of weapons and ammunition.

Though the name of Warren's source remains a mystery, some historians have speculated, based on circumstantial evidence, that Warren's "deep throat" was Gage's wife, American-born Margaret Kemble Gage. She was believed to have secret sympathies for the cause of independence and was distraught that her husband was under orders to use violence to crush the incipient rebellion.

Mrs. Gage had confided to one friend that "she hoped her husband would never be the instrument of sacrificing the lives of her countrymen." After the battles of Lexington and Concord, Gen. Gage sent his wife back to England where they remained estranged even after Gage's return home.

Dispatching Riders

Armed with the confirmation from his source, Warren put his full intelligence apparatus in motion. On the evening of April 18, 1775, he passed a message to Revere, dispatching him to Lexington to warn Adams and Hancock.

Aware that Gage had placed teams on horseback at key chokepoints along the route, Warren decided on multiple riders. He also called upon William Dawes and possibly a third message carrier.

Dawes managed to get past the British sentry at the Boston Neck just before the only land route out of Boston was shut down. Revere activated his plan to have two lanterns placed in the North Church steeple while he navigated his own escape from Boston over the Charles River and then by horse inland.

The patriots' warning system proved remarkably successful. Alerted by Revere and Dawes, other riders set off across the New England countryside. Even though Revere was briefly captured by one of Gage's roving teams, any British hope for surprise was gone by the time the Redcoats reached Lexington early on April 19. Hancock and Adams had already fled.

After a brief clash with militiamen on Lexington Green, the British continued inland to Concord, where they encountered more Massachusetts militiamen who fought the Redcoats at Concord's North Bridge. That engagement started the British retreat back toward Lexington, as militias from across the region arrived to join the fight.

Somehow, Doctor Warren managed to slip out of Boston himself and met up with the growing rebel force. Warren joined Gen. William Heath, a self-taught military strategist who devised the harassing attacks that inflicted heavy casualties on the British forces while minimizing those of Americans.

Warren narrowly escaped death himself when a musket bullet struck a pin of his wig. He is reported later to have told his worried mother that “where danger is, dear mother, there must your son be. Now is no time for any of America[‘s] children to shrink from any hazard. I will set her free or die.”

Making the Case

Almost as soon as the British survivors had limped back into Boston, Warren and Revere began overseeing another important intelligence operation, the task of documenting what had happened and getting out the word. Nearly 100 depositions were taken from witnesses and put into print, along with a letter from Warren addressed to the “Inhabitants of Great Britain.”

The patriot leaders had riders carry news of the battle down the American coast, but equally important, a fast American schooner took the news to England, where the documents were slipped to the mayor of London, who was considered sympathetic to the American cause. It was a masterstroke of 18th Century propaganda as the Americans got their depositions and their side of the battles of Lexington and Concord into the British press some two weeks before Gage’s reports arrived by sea.

Back in America, the British forces were bottled up in Boston, and Doctor Warren was emerging as an important leader of the revolution. He was elected president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and was appointed general of the Massachusetts troops on June 14, 1775.

However, on June 17, before his commission took effect, the British moved to break out of Boston by assaulting American militia forces dug in across the Charles River near Bunker Hill (actually at Breeds Hill). Warren volunteered as a private soldier, rebuffing offers of a command position.

He then put himself in the middle of the battle as two British infantry charges were repelled at great loss of life to the Redcoats. On the third charge, with the Americans out of ammunition and falling back, Warren rallied a final defense of the retreat and was shot in the head.

Warren’s lifeless body was recognized by a British officer who had Warren’s clothes stripped off and the body mutilated by bayonets before being dumped into a mass grave. Doctor Warren had just turned 34.

British Captain Walter Laurie, who had commanded British forces at Concord’s North Bridge, was later quoted as saying that he “stuffed the scoundrel with another rebel into one hole, and there he and his seditious principles may remain.”

Gen. Gage reportedly hailed Warren's death as an important blow against the rebellion, but Warren quickly became a martyr to the cause of freedom, exemplifying the willingness of Americans to give their lives for independence from the King of England.

After the war moved away from Boston, Paul Revere and two of Warren's brothers located the grave, exhumed Warren's body (which Revere identified based on artificial teeth that he had wired into Warren's mouth) and reburied him in the Granary Burial Ground in Boston (Warren's remains were later moved to a family funeral vault in Jamaica Plain).

Though his sacrifice has faded from the national memory, Warren was an inspiration to many of his fellow patriots. As historian Fischer noted, Paul Revere named his next-born son, Joseph Warren Revere, and a portrait of Warren was kept in a place of honor over the parlor fireplace in the Adams family home.

Warren also impressed on his fellow American revolutionaries the need for accurate intelligence about the enemy's planning and the value of using documented truth to rally the people of the world to a worthy cause.

[To read Robert Parry's writings on more recent American history, you can now order two of his books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details, [click here](#).]

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Misguided Scheme from NYT's Friedman

Exclusive: New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, who once dubbed himself a "Tony Blair Democrat," is now a "Mike Bloomberg Independent," as he seeks a "centrist" challenge to the two parties, even if it might lead to consolidated Republican control of the United States, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If you relied on one signpost for where not to go, it might be the columns of

New York Times star Thomas L. Friedman: If he's pointing in one direction, like some humorless Cheshire Cat, it's usually a safe bet that you should go the other way.

Sure, he's not always wrong. Sometimes, he does recognize the obvious. I suppose the world has gotten "flatter."

But Friedman has been grievously wrong many other times at great cost to America and the world and his newest election scheme of pushing a "centrist" alternative for President could be just his latest catastrophic idea. It's also not the first time he helped mess up the selection of a new President.

In December 2000, Friedman praised Republican suppression of vote-counting in Florida because he put George W. Bush's fragile "legitimacy," as a popular-vote loser being made President, above determining the actual will of the voters.

Then, in 2003, Friedman waved the United States into the unprovoked invasion of Iraq. It was time, he said, to "give war a chance." As the ill-fated war dragged on, he kept insisting that the nation wait intervals of "six months" before judging the bloody mission to be a failure.

More recently, Friedman helped create the crisis with Iran by disparaging a Brazilian-Turkish breakthrough in 2010 that would have had Tehran's swap much of its low-enriched uranium for medical isotopes, a plan that is finally back on the table after two years of escalating tensions and higher-than-necessary gas prices.

Indeed, it's hard sometimes to comprehend the conscienceless egotism of Friedman who can be so wrong so often leaving hundreds of thousands dead and wasting trillions of dollars but who still pontificates about what Americans should do next.

Friedman's latest reckless scheme is to have some third-party candidate (his choice is New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg) compete in this fall's presidential election as a way to "give our two-party system the shock it needs."

By taking this stance, Friedman gets to position himself as champion of the trendy disdain for the two major parties. But Friedman's idea is really just another dodge to avoid making the tough assessment about the truly serious political threat facing the nation, the reality of today's Republican extremism.

The 'Liberal' Label

You see the key thing for Friedman and other "centrist" journalists is to avoid ever being pigeonholed as "liberal." For Friedman, his status as an

“independent” thinker is also crucial to his lucrative career as a best-selling author. To maintain this valuable financial perch in the middle, Friedman and other “centrists” routinely make “smart plays” for themselves even if they end up aiding and abetting many right-wing positions.

It was “smart” for Friedman to embrace Bush’s “legitimacy” in 2000, cheer the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and posture as a tough-guy on Iran now. And, it’s the “smart play” to take this stance on Election 2012, issuing a “plague on both your houses” commentary without having to confront the rabid elephant in the room, quite literally.

If Friedman had written a column about how the American voters must break the back of GOP extremism before any of the country’s pressing issues can be seriously addressed, he would have been denounced by the powerful right-wing attack machine as a Democratic “partisan,” not good for his next book tour.

So, instead of taking on right-wing extremism, which has taken over the Republican Party, Friedman pretends that the U.S. political crisis is just the lack of a reasonable person in the middle willing to debate the nation’s complex problems.

Thus, Friedman wants to see Mike Bloomberg starring in the presidential debates and raising the “hard choices.” Except that this scheme more likely would mean splitting the “responsible” vote, undercutting President Barack Obama and clearing the way for a victory by Republican Mitt Romney and the right-wing forces most opposed to what Friedman purports to want.

Losing Cellphone Service

Friedman starts off his Wednesday column complaining about the collapsing American infrastructure the “roller-coaster” asphalt around Washington’s Union Station and the shortcomings of Amtrak’s rail service to New York, even as he rode the more expensive, faster Acela train.

“I had so many dropped calls on my cellphone that you’d have thought I was on a remote desert island, not traveling from Washington to New York City,” Friedman wrote. He also complained that when he got back to DC, the Union Station escalator was broken.

“Maybe you’ve gotten used to all this and have stopped noticing,” Friedman told his readers. “I haven’t. Our country needs a renewal. And that is why I still hope Michael Bloomberg will reconsider running for president as an independent candidate.”

Friedman did acknowledge that “President Obama has significant achievements to

his record. He has done a solid job stemming the economic crisis he inherited and a good job managing national security and initiating important reforms from health care to auto mileage standards.

“But with Europe in peril, China and America wobbling, the Arab world in turmoil, energy prices spiraling and the climate changing, we are facing some real storms ahead. We need to weather-proof our American house and fast in order to ensure that America remains a rock of stability for the world.”

You might stop here and remember that the nation’s predicament might have been a lot less severe if Friedman had lent his influential voice in December 2000 to demanding that all the votes in Florida be counted rather than worrying about Bush’s “legitimacy” as Bush moved to steal the election. Back then, after Bush won some lower state court rulings blocking the recounts, Friedman expressed the view of many mainstream journalists, welcoming the likely declaration of Bush as the “winner.”

“Slowly but surely, in their own ways, the different courts seem to be building a foundation of legitimacy for Governor George W. Bush’s narrow victory,” Friedman wrote. “That is hugely important. Our democracy has taken a hit here, and both Democrats and Republicans must think about how they can start shoring it up.”

Of course, it didn’t strike Friedman or his “centrist” colleagues that the best way for Bush or any other politician to have “legitimacy” would be to allow all the votes to be counted and declare the candidate with the most to be the winner.

Al Gore surely had faults but he was a serious public servant who had spent a career addressing the “big, hard decisions” that Friedman is now wringing his hands over. For example, Gore was deeply interested in global warming, alternative energy, a modern infrastructure, including mass transit like high-speed rail.

However, when Gore’s election victory was being reversed by Bush and the Republicans in December 2000, Friedman was all atwitter about the harm to the nation if Bush’s “election” wasn’t viewed as “legitimate.” [For details, see [Neck Deep.](#)]

The Bush Disaster

The ensuing eight years were a disaster for addressing those “big, hard decisions.” By giving massive tax cuts to the rich, Bush turned a record budget surplus into a record deficit. He squandered a trillion dollars or more on wars, including an unprovoked invasion of Iraq. Bush disdained the science on global

warming and took no action on that front. He encouraged Americans to buy gas-guzzling vehicles and to keep on spending as their personal debt exploded.

By further deregulating the financial industry, Bush positioned the U.S. economy on a giant bubble in the housing market. When the bubble burst, millions of Americans were thrown out of work and the world's economy was destabilized. At the end of Bush's eight years, problems, which might have been manageable if Gore had been allowed to become president, were now unmanageable.

One might think that Friedman would pause and express some self-criticism for his failure to understand the risks of a Bush presidency or the destructiveness of Bush's wars. But no. Friedman simply moves on as if it would be impolite of him to note the havoc that he has left in his wake.

During the run-up to war in Iraq, for instance, Friedman was smitten by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's glib oratory about forcibly planting seeds of "democracy" in Iraq. Friedman went so far as to dub himself a pro-war "Tony Blair Democrat." He also made the witty observation that it was time to "give war a chance" in Iraq.

Today, it might seem obvious that anyone foolish enough to call himself "a Tony Blair Democrat" after Blair has gone down in history as "Bush's poodle" or to twist John Lennon's advice to "give peace a chance" into its opposite should have the decency to just hang it up as a pundit. Instead, Friedman moves from one reckless point of view to the next.

His latest positioning on Election 2012 is another self-serving scheme as he strikes a "both-sides-are-equally-wrong" pose, sparing him the career risk of putting the blame where it primarily belongs, on Republican extremism.

If Friedman had any journalistic integrity, he would have declared that today's extremist Republican Party has become the chief threat to the nation's wellbeing and indeed the planet's survival. He would say that only the decisive defeat of this Ayn Rand radicalism offers a pathway to the future. However, to do that would put his cherished (and profitable) status as a "centrist" in danger. So, he undertakes his "evenhanded" denunciation of both sides.

'Hard Choices'

Friedman wrote: "This election has to be about those hard choices, smart investments and shared sacrifices, how we set our economy on a clear-cut path of near-term, job-growing improvements in infrastructure and education and on a long-term pathway to serious fiscal, tax and entitlement reform. The next president has to have a mandate to do all of this."

“But, today, neither party is generating that mandate, talking seriously enough about the taxes that will have to be raised or the entitlement spending that will have to be cut to put us on sustainable footing, let alone offering an inspired vision of American renewal that might motivate such sacrifice.

“Mitt Romney can’t do that because of his ludicrous opposition to any tax hikes. President Obama, who has a plan to cut, tax and invest, albeit insufficiently, could lead, but, for now, he seems preoccupied with some rather uninspiring small ball, preferring proposals like ‘the Buffett tax’ over comprehensive tax reform that would lower all rates, eliminate deductions and raise more revenue.”

So, Friedman’s electoral scheme also being promoted by other “radical centrists” like Matt Miller in the Washington Post proposes that Bloomberg jump into the race to push these supposedly courageous ideas.

(You might note that President Obama has spent months advocating for much of what Friedman is describing, including a major jobs program that would invest substantially in modernizing American infrastructure. Last year, Obama also pushed unsuccessfully for a “grand bargain” with Republicans that would have raised taxes and cut entitlement spending.)

But Friedman can’t be honest because it would endanger his “centrist” positioning. He also doesn’t think through what the likely outcome would be if Bloomberg entered the race and siphoned off enough “responsible” votes to elect Romney.

Instead, Friedman wrote: “Bloomberg doesn’t have to win to succeed, or even stay in the race to the very end. Simply by running, participating in the debates and doing respectably in the polls, 15 to 20 percent, he could change the dynamic of the election and, most importantly, the course of the next administration, no matter who heads it.

“By running on important issues and offering sensible programs for addressing them, and showing that he had the support of the growing number of Americans who describe themselves as independents, he would compel the two candidates to gravitate toward some of his positions as Election Day neared.”

Sophomoric Thinking

This dreamy analysis might be understandable for, say, some freshman in a political science class, but it is dangerously sophomoric for one of the nation’s most prominent columnists. The more likely result would be that Bloomberg whether he quits the race after the debates or not would draw substantial votes away from the candidate closest to his positions, i.e. President Obama.

That would probably ensure the election of Romney, who has committed himself to seeking further tax cuts favoring the rich, repealing regulations on the banks, adopting a more aggressive foreign policy that would include boosting military spending, and savaging domestic programs (including money for Friedman's beloved infrastructure).

Surely, under a Romney administration especially with continued Republican dominance of Congress there would be even less money to even out those bumpy roads around Washington's Union Station or upgrade cellphone reception on Amtrak or for that matter, build new high-speed rail, invest in the nation's crumbling infrastructure or confront existential issues like global warming, which Republican extremists don't even think is real.

Friedman's pitch for his "radical centrist" option is just another of his harebrained, self-serving and dangerous opinion pieces. We already have seen the dark places where some of his earlier ideas have taken the nation.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President

From the Archive: Three years ago, President Obama ignored warnings about an Afghan quagmire and followed the advice of Bush administration holdovers into a series of troop "surges" that have cost many lives but not turned around the war, a result that ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern foresaw at the time.

By Ray McGovern (Originally published March 28, 2009)

I was wrong. I had been saying that it would be naive to take too seriously presidential candidate Barack Obama's rhetoric regarding the need to escalate the war in Afghanistan.

I kept thinking to myself that when he got briefed on the history of Afghanistan and the oft-proven ability of Afghan "militants" to drive out foreign invaders, from Alexander the Great, to the Persians, the Mongolians, Indians, British, Russians, he would be sure to understand why they call mountainous Afghanistan

the “graveyard of empires.”

And surely he would be fully briefed on the stupidity and deceit that left 58,000 U.S. troops, not to mention 2 million to 3 million Vietnamese, dead in Vietnam.

John Kennedy became President the year Obama was born. One cannot expect toddler-to-teenager Barack to remember much about the war in Vietnam, and it was probably too early for that searing, controversial experience to have found its way into the history texts as he was growing up.

But he was certainly old enough to absorb the fecklessness and brutality of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. And his instincts at that time were good enough to see through the Bush administration’s duplicity.

And, with him now in the White House, surely some of his advisers would be able to brief him on both Vietnam and Iraq, and prevent him from making similar mistakes, this time in Afghanistan. Or so I thought.

Deflecting an off-the-topic question at his March 24, 2009, press conference, Obama said, “I think that the last 64 days has been dominated by me trying to figure out how we’re going to fix the economy. Right now the American people are judging me exactly the way I should be judged, and that is, are we taking the steps to improve liquidity in the financial markets, create jobs, get businesses to reopen, keep America safe?”

Okay, it is understandable that President Obama has been totally absorbed with the financial crisis. But surely, unlike predecessors supposedly unable to do two things at the same time, our resourceful new President certainly could find enough time to solicit advice from a wide circle, get a better grip on the huge stakes in Afghanistan, and arrive at sensible decisions. Or so I thought.

Getting Railroaded?

It proved to be a bit awkward waiting for the President to appear a half-hour late for his own presentation about the future course on the Afghan War. Was he for some reason reluctant?

Perhaps he had a sense of being railroaded by his advisers. Perhaps he paused on learning that just a few hours earlier a soldier of the Afghan army shot dead two U.S. troops and wounded a third before killing himself, and that Taliban fighters had stormed an Afghan police post and killed 10 police earlier that morning. Should he weave that somehow into his speech?

Or maybe it was learning of the Taliban ambush of a police convoy which wounded

seven other policemen; or the suicide bomber in the Afghan border area of Pakistan who demolished a mosque packed with hundreds of worshippers attending Friday prayers, killing some 50 and injuring scores more, according to preliminary reports.

Or, more simply, perhaps Obama's instincts told him he was about to do something he will regret. Maybe that's why he was embarrassingly late in coming to the podium. One look at the national security advisers arrayed behind the President was enough to see wooden-headedness.

In her classic book, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, historian Barbara Tuchman described this mindset: "Wooden-headedness assesses a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions, while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs acting according to the wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts."

Tuchman pointed to 16th Century Philip II of Spain as a kind of Nobel laureate of wooden-headedness. Comparisons can be invidious, but the thing about Philip was that he drained state revenues by failed adventures overseas, leading to Spain's decline.

It is wooden-headedness, in my view, that permeates the "comprehensive, new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan" that the President announced on March 27, 2009. Author Tuchman points succinctly to what flows from wooden-headedness:

"Once a policy has been adopted and implemented, all subsequent activity becomes an effort to justify it. Adjustment is painful. For the ruler it is easier, once he has entered the policy box, to stay inside. For the lesser official it is better not to make waves, not to press evidence that the chief will find painful to accept. Psychologists call the process of screening out discordant information 'cognitive dissonance,' an academic disguise for 'Don't confuse me with the facts.'"

It seems only right and fitting that Barbara Tuchman's daughter, Jessica Tuchman Mathews, president of the Carnegie Foundation, has shown herself to be inoculated against "cognitive dissonance."

A January 2009 Carnegie report on Afghanistan concluded, "The only meaningful way to halt the insurgency's momentum is to start withdrawing troops. The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban."

In any case, Obama explained his decision on more robust military intervention in Afghanistan as a result of a "careful policy review" by military commanders and diplomats, the Afghani and Pakistani governments, NATO allies, and

international organizations.

No Estimate? No Problem

Know why he did not mention a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) assessing the likely effects of this slow surge in troops and trainers? Because there is none. Guess why. The reason is the same one accounting for the lack of a completed NIE before the “surge” in troop strength in Iraq in early 2007.

Apparently, Obama’s advisers did not wish to take the risk that honest analysts, ones who had been around a while, and maybe even knew something of Vietnam and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, might also be immune to “cognitive dissonance,” and ask hard questions regarding the basis of the new strategy.

Indeed, they might reach the same judgment they did in the April 2006 NIE on global terrorism. The authors of that estimate had few cognitive problems and simply declared their judgment that invasions and occupations (in 2006 the target then was Iraq) do not make us safer but lead instead to an upsurge in terrorism.

The prevailing attitude this time fits the modus operandi of Gen. David Petraeus, who in late 2008 took the lead by default with the following approach: We know best, and can run our own policy review, thank you very much. Which he did, without requesting the formal NIE that typically precedes and informs key policy decisions.

It is highly regrettable that President Obama was deprived of the chance to benefit from a formal estimate. Recent NIEs have been relatively bereft of wooden-headedness. Obama might have made a more sensible decision on how to proceed in Afghanistan.

As one might imagine, NIEs can, and should, play a key role in such circumstances, with a premium on objectivity and courage in speaking truth to power. That is precisely why Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair appointed Chas Freeman to head the National Intelligence Council, the body that prepares NIEs, and why the Likud Lobby got him ousted.

Estimates on Vietnam

As one of the intelligence analysts watching Vietnam in the Sixties and Seventies, I worked on several of the NIEs produced before and during the war. Sensitive ones bore this unclassified title: “Probable Reactions to Various Courses of Action With Respect to North Vietnam.”

Typical of the kinds of question the President and his advisers wanted addressed

were: Can we seal off the Ho Chi Minh Trail by bombing? If the U.S. were to introduce X thousand additional troops into South Vietnam, will Hanoi quit? Okay, how about XX thousand?â€œOur answers regularly earned us brickbats from the White House for not being “good team players.” But in those days we labored under a strong ethos dictating that we give it to policymakers straight, without fear or favor. We had career protection for doing that.â€œOur judgments (the unwelcome ones, anyway) were often pooh-poohed as negativism.

Policymakers, of course, were in no way obliged to take them into account, and often didn’t. The point is that they continued to be sought. Not even Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon would decide on a significant escalation without seeking our best estimate as to how U.S. adversaries would likely react to this or that escalatory step. So, hats off, I suppose, to you, Gen. Petraeus and those who helped you elbow the substantive intelligence analysts off to the sidelines.

What might intelligence analysts have said on the key point of training the Afghan army and police? We will never know, but it is a safe bet those analysts who know something about Afghanistan (or about Vietnam) would roll their eyes and wish Petraeus luck. As for Iraq, what remains to be seen is against whom the various sectarian factions target their weapons and put their training into practice.

The Training Mirage

In his Afghanistan policy speech on March 27, 2009, Obama mentioned training 11 times. To those of us with some gray in our hair, this was all too reminiscent of the prevailing rhetoric at the start of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In February 1964, with John Kennedy dead and President Lyndon Johnson improvising on Vietnam, then-Defense Secretary Robert McNamara prepared a major policy speech on defense, leaving out Vietnam, and sent it to the President to review. The Johnson tapes show the President finding fault:

LBJ: “I wonder if you shouldn’t find two minutes to devote to Vietnam.”

McN: “The problem is what to say about it.”

LBJ: “I would say that we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. Our purpose is to train the [South Vietnamese] people, and our training’s going good.”

But our training was not going good then. And specialists who know Afghanistan, its various tribes and demographics tell me that training is not likely to go good there either. Ditto for training in Pakistan. Obama’s alliterative rhetoric aside, it is going to be no easier to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan with more combat forces and training than it was to

defeat the Viet Cong with these same tools in Vietnam.

Obama seemed to be protesting a bit too much: "Going forward, we will not blindly stay the course." No sir. There will be "metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable!" Yes, sir! And he will enlist wide international support from countries like Russia, India and China that, according to President Obama, "should have a stake in the security of the region." Right.

"The road ahead will be long," said Obama in conclusion. He has that right. The strategy adopted virtually guarantees that. That is why Gen. David McKiernan, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan publicly contradicted his boss, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in late 2008 when Gates, protesting the widespread pessimism on Afghanistan, started talking up the prospect of a "surge" of troops in Afghanistan.

McKiernan insisted publicly that no Iraqi-style "surge" of forces would end the conflict in Afghanistan. "The word I don't use for Afghanistan is 'surge,'" McKiernan stated, adding that what is required is a "sustained commitment" that could last many years and would ultimately require a political, not military, solution. McKiernan has that right. But his boss Mr. Gates did not seem to get it.

Bob Gates at the Gate

In late 2008, as he maneuvered to stay on as Defense Secretary in the new administration, Gates hotly disputed the notion that things were getting out of control in Afghanistan. "The argument that Gates used to support his professed optimism, however, made us veteran intelligence officers gag, at least those who remember the U.S. in Vietnam in the 1960s, the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and other failed counterinsurgencies.

"The Taliban holds no land in Afghanistan, and loses every time it comes into contact with coalition forces," Gates explained. Our Secretary of Defense seemed to be insisting that U.S. troops have not lost one pitched battle with the Taliban or al-Qaeda. (Engagements like the one on July 13, 2008, in which "insurgents" attacked an outpost in Konar province, killing nine U.S. soldiers and wounding 15 others, apparently do not qualify as "contact.")

Gates ought to read up on Vietnam, for his words evoke a similarly benighted comment by U.S. Army Col. Harry Summers after that war had been lost. In 1974, Summers was sent to Hanoi to try to resolve the status of Americans still listed as missing. To his North Vietnamese counterpart, Col. Tu, Summers made the mistake of bragging, "You know, you never beat us on the battlefield."

Colonel Tu responded, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."

I don't fault the senior military. Cancel that, I DO fault them. They resemble all too closely the gutless general officers who never looked down at what was really happening in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff of the time have been called, not without reason, "a sewer of deceit." The current crew is in better odor. And one may be tempted to make excuses for them, noting for example that if admirals/generals are the hammer, small wonder that to them everything looks like a nail. No, that does not excuse them.

The ones standing in back of Obama at his March 27, 2009, announcement have smarts enough to have said, NO; IT'S A BAD IDEA, Mr. President. That should not be too much to expect. Gallons of blood are likely to be poured unnecessarily in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan, probably over the next decade or longer. But not their blood.

Sound Military Advice

General officers seldom rise to the occasion. Exceptions are so few that they immediately spring to mind: French war hero Gen. Philippe LeClerc, for example, was sent to Indochina right after World War II with orders to report back on how many troops it would take to recapture Indochina. His report: "It would require 500,000 men; and even with 500,000 France could not win."

Equally relevant to Obama's fateful decision, Gen. Douglas MacArthur told another young President in April 1961: "Anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined."

When JFK's top military advisers, critical of the President's reluctance to go against that advice, virtually called him a traitor, for pursuing a negotiated solution to the fighting in Laos, for example, Kennedy would tell them to convince Gen. MacArthur first, and then come back to him. (Alas, there seems to be no comparable Gen. MacArthur today.)

Kennedy recognized Vietnam as a potential quagmire, and was determined not to get sucked in, despite the misguided, ideologically-salted advice given him by Ivy League patricians like McGeorge Bundy. Kennedy's military adviser, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, said later that MacArthur's statement made a "hell of an impression on the President."

MacArthur made another comment about the situation that President Kennedy had inherited in Indochina. This one struck the young President so much that he dictated it into a memorandum of conversation: Kennedy quoted MacArthur as saying to him, "The chickens are coming home to roost from the Eisenhower years, and you live in the chicken coop."

Well, the chickens are coming home to roost after eight years of Cheney and

Bush, but there is no sign that President Obama is listening to anyone capable of fresh thinking on Afghanistan. Obama has apparently decided to stay in the chicken coop. And that can be called, well, chicken.

Can't say I actually KNEW Jack Kennedy, but it was he who got so many of us down here to Washington to explore what we might do for our country. Kennedy resisted the kind of pressures to which President Obama has now succumbed. (There are even some, like Jim Douglass in his book *JFK and the Unspeakable*, who conclude that this is what got President Kennedy killed.)

Mr. Obama, you need to find some advisers who are not still wet behind the ears and who are not brown noses, preferably some who have lived Vietnam and Iraq and have an established record of responsible, fact-based analysis. You would also do well to read Douglass's book, and to page through the "Pentagon Papers," instead of trying to emulate the Lincoln portrayed in *Team of Rivals*.

I, too, am a big fan of Doris Kearns Goodwin, but Daniel Ellsberg is an author far more relevant and nourishing for this point in time. Read his *Secrets*, and recognize the signs of the times. There is still time to put the brakes on this disastrous policy. One key lesson of Vietnam is that an army trained and supplied by foreign occupiers can almost always be readily outmatched and outwaited in a guerrilla war, no matter how many billions of dollars are pumped in.

Professor Martin van Creveld of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the only non-American military historian on the U.S. Army's list of required reading for officers, has accused former President George W. Bush of "launching the most foolish war since Emperor Augustus in 9 BC sent his legions into Germany and lost them."

Please do not feel you have to compete with your predecessor for such laurels.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. In the Sixties he served as an infantry/intelligence officer and then became a CIA analyst for the next 27 years. He is on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

The Risk of Contagion Nation

Challenges to science are emerging across the political spectrum from Christian fundamentalists on the Right to skeptics on the Left who question the inherent good of progress with one result a growing resistance to vaccinations for

children, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship note.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

We haven't even turned the page on the controversy over contraceptives, health care and religious freedom, when another thorny one arises involving personal conscience and public health. A flurry of stories over the past few days coincided with seeing a movie that inspires more than passing interest in their subject.

Steven Soderbergh's film *Contagion* came out a few months ago and was inexplicably and completely frozen out of the Oscar nominations. But it is the most plausible experience of a global pandemic plague you're likely to see until the real thing strikes. With outstanding performances from an ensemble cast that includes Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Gwyneth Paltrow and Laurence Fishburne, *Contagion* is stark, beautiful in its own terrifying way, and all-too-believable.

The story tracks the swift progress of a deadly airborne virus from Hong Kong to Minneapolis and Tokyo to London – from a handful of peanuts to a credit card to the cough of a stranger on a subway. Rarely does a film issue such an inescapable invitation to think: it could happen; that could be us. What would we do?

With *Contagion* making such a powerful impression, for several days news articles seemed to keep popping up about contagious disease and the conflict between religious beliefs and immunization. There was nothing new about the basics: All 50 states require some specific vaccinations for kids, yet all of them grant exemptions for medical reasons say, for a child with cancer. Almost all of them grant religious exemptions. And 20 states allow exemptions for personal, moral, or other beliefs.

According to the Feb. 15 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, a number of pediatricians are dropping families from their practices when the parents refuse immunization for their kids. "In a study of Connecticut pediatricians published last year," the paper reported, "some 30% of 133 doctors said they had asked a family to leave their practice for vaccine refusal, and a recent survey of 909 Midwestern pediatricians found that 21% reported discharging families for the same reason.

"By comparison, in 2001 and 2006 about 6% of physicians said they 'routinely' stopped working with families due to parents' continued vaccine refusal and 16% 'sometimes' dismissed them, according to surveys conducted then by the American Academy of Pediatrics."

But some parents still fear a link between vaccinations and autism, a possibility science has largely debunked. Some parents just want to be in charge of what's put into their children's bodies, as one West Virginia politician puts it.

And some parents just don't trust science, period – a few have even been known to fake religion to avoid vaccinating their kids. So there are many loopholes. But now seven states are considering legislation to make it even easier for mothers and fathers to spare their children from vaccinations, especially on religious grounds.

In Oregon, according to a story by Jennifer Anderson in *The Portland Tribune*, the number of kindergartners with religious exemptions is up from 3.7 percent to 5.6 percent in just four years, and continuing to rise. This has public health officials clicking their calculators and keeping their eye on what's called "herd immunity."

A certain number of any population group needs to have been vaccinated 80 percent for most diseases, 92 percent for whooping cough to maintain the ability of the whole population "the herd" to resist the spread of a disease.

Ms. Anderson offers the example of what used to be called "the German measles" rubella. All it takes are five unvaccinated kids in a class of 25 for the herd immunity to break down, creating an opportunity for the disease to spread to younger siblings and other medically vulnerable people who can't be vaccinated. If you were traveling to Europe between 2009 and 2011, you may remember warnings about the huge outbreak of measles there, brought on by a failure "to vaccinate susceptible populations."

Here in the United States, several recent outbreaks of measles have been traced to pockets of unvaccinated children in states that allow personal belief exemptions. The Reuters news service recently reported 13 confirmed cases of measles in central Indiana. Two of them were people who showed up to party two days before the Super Bowl in Indianapolis. Patriots and Giants fans back east were alerted. So far, no news is good news.

But this is serious business, made more so by complacency. Older generations remember when measles killed up to 500 people a year before we started vaccinating against them in 1963. The great flu pandemic of 1918 killed ten times more Americans than died in the Great World War that ended that year and took the lives of as many as 40 million globally. Our generation was also stalked by small pox, polio and whooping cough before there were vaccinations.

In a country where few remember those diseases, it's easy to think, "What's to

worry?" But as the movie *Contagion* so forcefully and hauntingly reminds us, the earth is now flat. Seven billion people live on it, and our human herd moves on a conveyor belt of perpetual mobility, so that a virus can travel as swiftly as a voice from one cell phone to another.

When and if a contagion strikes, we can't count on divine intervention to spare us. That's when you want a darn good scientist in a research lab. We'll need all the help we can get from knowledge and her offspring.

Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship is senior writer of the new weekly public affairs program, "Moyers & Company," airing on public television. Check local airtimes or comment at www.BillMoyers.com.

US Media Hypes Iran Inspection Flap

Major U.S. news outlets spin any event regarding Iran's nuclear program in the most negative way, now hyping a dispute about conditions for visiting a military site as supposed proof that Iran has something to hide. But Gareth Porter points out that the media is missing key nuances.

By Gareth Porter

News media reported last week that Iran had flatly refused the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to its Parchin military test facility, based on a statement to reporters by IAEA Deputy Director General, Herman Nackaerts, that "We could not get access."

Now, however, explicit statements on the issue by the Iranian Ambassador to the IAEA and the language of the new IAEA report indicate that Iran did not reject an IAEA visit to the base per se but was only refusing access as long as no agreement had been reached with the IAEA governing the modalities of cooperation.

That new and clarifying information confirms what I [reported](#) Feb. 23. Based on the history of Iranian negotiations with the IAEA and its agreement to allow two separate IAEA visits to Parchin in 2005, the Parchin access issue is a bargaining chip that Iran is using to get the IAEA to moderate its demands on Iran in forging an agreement on how to resolve the years-long IAEA investigation into the "Possible Military Dimensions" of the Iranian nuclear program.

In an email to me and in interviews with Russia Today, Reuters, and the Fars News Agency, the Iranian Permanent Representative to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, said Iran told the high-level IAEA mission that it would allow access to Parchin once modalities of Iran-IAEA cooperation had been agreed on.

“We declared that, upon finalization of the modality, we will give access [to Parchin],” Soltanieh wrote in an email to me.

In the Russia Today interview on Feb. 27, reported by Israel’s Haaretz and The Hindu in India but not by western news media, Soltanieh referred to two IAEA inspection visits to Parchin in January and November 2005 and said Iran needs to have “assurances” that it would not “repeat the same bitter experience, when they just come and ask for the access.”

There should be a “modality” and a “frame of reference, of what exactly they are looking for, they have to provide the documents and exactly where they want [to go],” he said.

But Soltanieh also indicated that such an inspection visit is conditional on agreement about the broader framework for cooperation on clearing up suspicions of a past nuclear weapons program. “[I]n principle we have already accepted that when this text is concluded we will take these steps,” Soltanieh said.

The actual text of the IAEA report, dated Feb. 24, provides crucial information about the Iranian position in the talks that is consistent with what Soltanieh is saying. In its account of the first round of talks in late January on what the IAEA is calling a “structured approach to the clarification of all outstanding issues,” the report states:

“The Agency requested access to the Parchin site, but Iran did not grant access to the site *at that time* [emphasis added].” That wording obviously implies that Iran was willing to grant access to Parchin if certain conditions were met.

On the Feb. 20-21 meetings, the agency said that Iran “stated that it was still not able to grant access to that site.” There was likely a more complex negotiating situation behind the lack of agreement on a Parchin visit than had been suggested by Nackaerts and reported in western news media.

But not a single major news media report has reported the significant difference between initial media coverage on the Parchin access issue and the information now available from the initial IAEA report and Soltanieh. None have reported the language of the report indicating that Iran’s refusal to approve a Parchin visit in January was qualified by “at that time”.

Only AFP and Reuters quoted Soltanieh at all. Reuters, which actually

interviewed Soltanieh, quoted him saying, "It was assumed that after we agreed on the modality, then access would be given." But that quote only appears in the very last sentence of the article, several paragraphs after the reiteration of the charge that Iran "refused to grant [the IAEA] access" to Parchin.

The day after that story was published, Reuters ran another story focusing on the IAEA report without referring either to its language on Parchin or to Soltanieh's clarification.

The Los Angeles Times ignored the new information and simply repeated the charge that Iran "refused to allow IAEA inspectors to visit Parchin military base." Then it added its own broad interpretation that Iran "has refused to answer key questions about its nuclear development program." Iran's repeated assertions that the documents used to pose questions to it are fabricated were thus dismissed as non-qualified answers.

The Parchin access story entered a new phase today with a Reuters story quoting Deputy Director General Nackaerts in a briefing for diplomats that there "may be some ongoing activities at Parchin which add urgency to why we want to go." Nackaerts attributed that idea to an unnamed "Member State," which is apparently suggesting that the site in question is being "cleaned up."

The identity of that "Member State," which the IAEA continues to go out of its way to conceal, is important, because if it is Israel, it reflects an obvious interest in convincing the world that Iran is working on nuclear weapons.

As former IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei recounts on p. 291 of his memoirs, "In the late summer of 2009, the Israelis provided the IAEA with documents of their own, purportedly showing that Iran had continued with nuclear weapon studies until at least 2007."

The news media should be including cautionary language any time information from an unnamed "Member State" is cited as the source for allegations about covert Iranian nuclear weapons work. It could very likely be coming from a State with a political agenda. But the unwritten guidelines for news media coverage of the IAEA and Iran, as we have seen in recent days, are obviously very different.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published in 2006.
