

# Not Learning from Mideast Mistakes

**Exclusive:** The neocon strategy of “regime change” has proved financially costly and strategically disastrous setting almost the entire Middle East on fire but almost no lessons have been learned, no accountability assessed, and no relevant questions asked, writes ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk.

By William R. Polk

Apparently, the United States, perhaps Great Britain and almost certainly Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are on the brink of a major escalation of war in what we now can call “the former Iraq and Syria.” But is this rational? Are we drawing lessons from our interventions in the past? Is there a realistic post-intervention plan? How much will intervention cost? And, finally, will it accomplish the presumed objective of making the situation better with more security for them and for us?

These are questions we should be asking *now* not after the fact. Perhaps somewhere deep in government council rooms these questions are being asked. If so, those asking them are certainly not sharing their answers, if they have any, with us. And since we will be paying the bills for whatever decisions are adopted, we have what in government usage is called a “Need to Know.”

I have no access to the thinking of the inner circles of any of the relevant governments, and from the sketchy and undemanding accounts in the media, it does not appear that anyone else has better access than I do. What I do have is 69 years of observation and study of the Middle East of which four were spent as the Member of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East.

This does not give me an up-to-the-minute “take” on events several journalists provide that much better than I could but perhaps my years of experience give me a framework in which to place current events. So let me sketch answers to the questions citizens should ask:

First, are we thinking rationally and not emotionally? As an old policy planner, that means to me, “are we weighing all the questions *before* jumping?” Unfortunately, the record demonstrates that we leap before we look.

In Libya, we didn’t like Muammar Gaddafi, who was not a very likeable fellow but did raise the living standards of his people dramatically and he mostly kept various tribes and political rivals from killing one another. After the U.S.-backed “regime change” in 2011, Gaddafi was killed but so too were the positive results of his rule. What replaced it? Chaos and more killing.

As the Prime Minister of Italy, whose government is now nearly overwhelmed by the flood of refugees, remarked, we should have thought about the consequences before we destroyed Libya's government.

In Iraq, we didn't like Saddam Hussein. He, too, was not a likeable fellow, but under his rule Iraq became one of the most advanced societies in Asia. Its citizens benefitted from free education, free health facilities and a high standard of living. Then, in 2003, the United States got rid of him, doing a very good job of destroying "his" Iraq but there has been nothing good to say about the leaders and institutions that took Saddam's place.

And, in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush was angry because the Taliban refused to turn over Osama bin Laden as demanded, with no thought as to why they wouldn't. The record shows that the Bush administration was hardly aware that Afghans had a cultural tradition with rules of their own regarding such matters.

Instead, the United States rushed in, took over Afghanistan and installed a group of people as rulers who *said* they were our kind of folks. We were delighted and never stopped to compare what they said with what they were doing. The policy? It was to throw money at the country, though little of it has stuck, except inside the pockets of corrupt officials.

Even the Afghan leader we installed as president, no piker himself when it came to making off with our money, complained that most of what the United States gave the country ended up in foreign bank accounts.

So, despite – or because of – whatever good the U.S. thought it was doing, Afghanistan fell apart; drug lords brutally oppressed the people in the countryside where opium cultivation and heroin production skyrocketed; even in downtown Kabul there was no law. There is not a single "secure" place in the country.

The human and financial costs of these interventions have been staggering. Hundreds of thousands dead with many more maimed; whole cities that took generations to build wrecked; perhaps \$5 trillion of U.S. taxpayers' money spent; and the whole area turned into a no man's land. Aren't those consequences something we should learn from?

Yet, I see no signs that any lessons have been learned. Far from the "best and the brightest" who made their own grievous mistakes in the Vietnam War America's current leaders appear to be the "most determined and closed minded." When one prescribed tactic fails, they loudly and repeatedly urge that it be implemented again in the next crisis.

In trying to find something positive to say about these adventures, all I can

come up with is that there were moments of tactical success amidst the absence of strategy. We know how to destroy buildings, to find and kill insurgents, and to dole out vast sums of money. We just don't know whether we should be doing any of these things or not.

We do them because we know how to and have the means to do so. But the outcomes are never as predicted. When the existing institutions are perverted or destroyed, insurgencies follow; all law and order breaks down; populations flee; and "collaterally" drug production and other criminal activities multiply.

U.S. taxpayers' money is wasted on a colossal scale while those locals who are supposedly helping us either sit on their hands or make the problem worse. But Americans apparently don't like to hear about failures and no one is held accountable for the staggering waste.

On July 1, the congressionally mandated Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued another one of his astonishing reports on incompetence, waste and corruption, this one dealing with the disappearance of a relatively small amount, only \$210 million, spent on facilities whose locations were described by bogus coordinates.

As the reporting officer said, "to prove meaningful oversight of these facilities, [we] need to know where they are." But "Thirteen coordinates were not located in Afghanistan, with one located in the Mediterranean Sea. Coordinates for 30 facilities were located in a province different from the one USAID reported. In 13 cases, USAID reported two different funded facilities at the same coordinates. 189 showed no physical structure within 400 feet of the reported coordinates, and a subset of 81, or just under half of these locations, showed no physical structure within a half mile of the reported coordinates. 154 coordinates did not clearly identify a specific building."

The U.S. military command tried to shut down SIGAR's disclosures by classifying the findings, so Americans would be kept from knowing what every peddler in the Kabul bazaar already knows, that U.S. aid is being plundered.

The hard truth is that U.S. officials had no feasible post-intervention plan in Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya and the costs for those interventions now include unending warfare measured in the trillions of dollars. And, rather than making the American people safer, the "collateral" damages, I predict, will include attacks on America, Europe and Western assets abroad. Derivatives of these events will include the growth of fear, the decline of trust in one another, and the eroding of our civic culture.

Who could put a cost figure on all that? Yet, when the next foreign policy

crisis arises, U.S. officials do the same destructive things all over again. In short, it would have been difficult to design policies more calculated to destroy our sense of well-being. After all, Americans got together as a nation-state in the late Eighteenth Century to, among other things, “secure The Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

As the first U.S. President, George Washington, warned us, “The peace often, sometimes perhaps the Liberty, of Nations has been the victim” of imprudent action. We should put his advice into a modern context and heed it.

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## How to Honor Memorial Day

**Exclusive:** Of all the world’s holidays commemorating wars, Memorial Day should be one of sober reflection on war’s horrible costs, surely not a moment to glorify warfare or lust for more wars. But many pols and pundits can’t resist the opportunity, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern describes.

By Ray McGovern

How best to show respect for the U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan and for their families on Memorial Day? Simple: Avoid euphemisms like “the fallen” and expose the lies about what a great idea it was to start those wars and then to “surge” tens of thousands of more troops into those fools’ errands.

First, let’s be clear on at least this much: the 4,500 U.S. troops killed in Iraq so far and the 2,350 killed in Afghanistan so far did not “fall.” They were wasted on no-win battlefields by politicians and generals cheered on by neocon pundits and mainstream “journalists” almost none of whom gave a rat’s patootie about the real-life-and-death troops. They were throwaway soldiers.

And, as for the “successful surges,” they were just P.R. devices to buy some “decent intervals” for the architects of these wars and their boosters to get space between themselves and the disastrous endings while pretending that those defeats were really “victories squandered” all at the “acceptable” price of

about 1,000 dead U.S. soldiers each and many times that in dead Iraqis and Afghans.

Memorial Day should be a time for honesty about what enabled the killing and maiming of so many U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama and the senior military brass simply took full advantage of a poverty draft that gives upper-class sons and daughters the equivalent of exemptions, vaccinating them against the disease of war.

What drives me up the wall is the oft-heard, dismissive comment about troop casualties from well-heeled Americans: "Well, they volunteered, didn't they?" Under the universal draft in effect during Vietnam, far fewer were immune from service, even though the well-connected could still game the system to avoid serving. Vice Presidents Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, for example, each managed to pile up five exemptions. This means, of course, that they brought zero military experience to the job; and this, in turn, may explain a whole lot – particularly given their bosses' own lack of military experience.

The grim truth is that many of the crÃ"me de la crÃ"me of today's Official Washington don't know many military grunts, at least not intimately as close family or friends. They may bump into some on the campaign trail or in an airport and mumble something like, "thank you for your service." But these sons and daughters of working-class communities from America's cities and heartland are mostly abstractions to the powerful, exclamation points at the end of some ideological debate demonstrating which speaker is "tougher," who's more ready to use military force, who will come out on top during a talk show appearance or at a think-tank conference or on the floor of Congress.

### **Sharing the Burden?**

We should be honest about this reality, especially on Memorial Day. Pretending that the burden of war has been equitably shared, and worse still that those killed died for a "noble cause," as President George W. Bush likes to claim, does no honor to the thousands of U.S. troops killed and the tens of thousands maimed. It dishonors them. Worse, it all too often succeeds in infantilizing bereaved family members who cannot bring themselves to believe their government lied.

Who can blame parents for preferring to live the fiction that their sons and daughters were heroes who wittingly and willingly made the "ultimate sacrifice," dying for a "noble cause," especially when this fiction is frequently foisted on them by well-meaning but naive clergy at funerals. For many it is impossible to live with the reality that a son or daughter died in vain. Far easier to buy into the official story and to leave clergy unchallenged as they gild the lilies

around coffins and gravesites.

Not so for some courageous parents Cindy Sheehan, for example, whose son Casey Sheehan was killed on April 4, 2004, in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City. Cindy demonstrated uncommon grit when she led hundreds of friends to Crawford to lay siege to the Texas White House during the summer of 2005 trying to get President Bush to explain what "noble cause" Casey died for. She never got an answer. There is none.

But there are very few, like Cindy Sheehan, able to overcome a natural human resistance to the thought that their sons and daughters died for a lie and then to challenge that lie. These few stalwarts make themselves face this harsh reality, the knowledge that the children whom they raised and sacrificed so much for were, in turn, sacrificed on the altar of political expediency, that their precious children were bit players in some ideological fantasy or pawns in a game of career maneuvering.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is said to have described the military disdainfully as "just dumb stupid animals to be used as pawns in foreign policy." Whether or not those were his exact words, his policies and behavior certainly betrayed that attitude. It certainly seems to have prevailed among top American-flag-on-lapel-wearing officials of the Bush and Obama administrations, including armchair and field-chair generals whose sense of decency is blinded by the prospect of a shiny new star on their shoulders, if they just follow orders and send young soldiers into battle.

This bitter truth should raise its ugly head on Memorial Day but rarely does. It can be gleaned only with great difficulty from the mainstream media, since the media honchos continue to play an indispensable role in the smoke-and-mirrors dishonesty that hides their own guilt in helping Establishment Washington push "the fallen" from life to death.

We must judge the actions of our political and military leaders not by the pious words they will utter Monday in mourning those who "fell" far from the generals' cushy safe seats in the Pentagon or somewhat closer to the comfy beds in air-conditioned field headquarters where a lucky general might be comforted in the arms of an admiring and enterprising biographer.

Many of the high-and-mighty delivering the approved speeches on Monday will glibly refer to and mourn "the fallen." None are likely to mention the culpable policymakers and complicit generals who added to the fresh graves at Arlington National Cemetery and around the country.

Words, after all, are cheap; words about "the fallen" are dirt cheap especially

from the lips of politicians and pundits with no personal experience of war. The families of those sacrificed in Iraq and Afghanistan should not have to bear that indignity.

### **'Successful Surges'**

The so-called "surges" of troops into Iraq and Afghanistan were particularly gross examples of the way our soldiers have been played as pawns. Since the usual suspects are again coming out the woodwork of neocon think tanks to press for yet another "surge" in Iraq, some historical perspective should help.

Take, for example, the well-known and speciously glorified first "surge;" the one Bush resorted to in sending over 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in early 2007; and the not-to-be-outdone Obama "surge" of 30,000 into Afghanistan in early 2010. These marches of folly were the direct result of decisions by George W. Bush and Barack Obama to prioritize political expediency over the lives of U.S. troops.

Taking cynical advantage of the poverty draft, they let foot soldiers pay the "ultimate" price. That price was 1,000 U.S. troops killed in each of the two "surges."

And the results? The returns are in. The bloody chaos these days in Iraq and the faltering war in Afghanistan were entirely predictable. They were indeed predicted by those of us able to spread some truth around via the Internet, while being mostly blacklisted by the fawning corporate media.

Yet, because the "successful surge" myth was so beloved in Official Washington, saving some face for the politicians and pundits who embraced and spread the lies that justified and sustained especially the Iraq War, the myth has become something of a touchstone for everyone aspiring to higher office or seeking a higher-paying gig in the mainstream media.

Campaigning Wednesday in New Hampshire, presidential aspirant Jeb Bush gave a short history lesson about his big brother's attack on Iraq. Referring to the so-called Islamic State, Bush said, "ISIS didn't exist when my brother was president. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was wiped out ... the surge created a fragile but stable Iraq. ..."

We've dealt with the details of the Iraq "surge" myth before both before and after it was carried out. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Reviving the Successful Surge Myth](#)"; "[Gen. Keane on Iran Attack](#)"; "[Robert Gates: As Bad as Rumsfeld?](#)"; and "[Troop Surge Seen as Another Mistake.](#)"]

But suffice it to say that Jeb Bush is distorting the history and should be

ashamed. The truth is that al-Qaeda did not exist in Iraq before his brother launched an unprovoked invasion in 2003. "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" arose as a direct result of Bush's war and occupation. Amid the bloody chaos, AQI's leader, a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pioneered a particularly brutal form of terrorism, relishing videotaped decapitation of prisoners.

Zarqawi was eventually hunted down and killed not during the celebrated "surge" but in June 2006, months before Bush's "surge" began. The so-called Sunni Awakening, essentially the buying off of many Sunni tribal leaders, also predated the "surge." And the relative reduction in the Iraq War's slaughter after the 2007 "surge" was mostly the result of the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad from a predominantly Sunni to a Shia city, tearing the fabric of Baghdad in two, and creating physical space that made it more difficult for the two bitter enemies to attack each other. In addition, Iran used its influence with the Shia to rein in their extremely violent militias.

Though weakened by Zarqawi's death and the Sunni Awakening, AQI did not disappear, as Jeb Bush would like you to believe. It remained active and when Saudi Arabia and the Sunni gulf states took aim at the secular regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria AQI joined with other al-Qaeda affiliates, such as the Nusra Front, to spread their horrors across Syria. AQI rebranded itself "the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" or simply "the Islamic State."

The Islamic State split off from al-Qaeda over strategy but the various jihadist armies, including al-Qaeda's Nusra Front, have now seized wide swaths of territory in Syria – and the Islamic State has returned with a vengeance to Iraq, grabbing major cities such as Mosul and Ramadi.

Jeb Bush doesn't like to unspool all this history. He and other Iraq War backers prefer to pretend that the "surge" in Iraq had won the war and Obama threw the "victory" away by following through on George W. Bush's withdrawal agreement with Maliki.

But the current crisis in Syria and Iraq is among the fateful consequences of the U.S./UK attack 12 years ago and particularly of the "surge" of 2007, which contributed greatly to Sunni-Shia violence, the opposite of what George W. Bush professed was the objective of the "surge," to enable Iraq's religious sects to reconcile.

Reconciliation, however, always took a back seat to the real purpose of the "surge" buying time so Bush and Cheney could slip out of Washington in 2009 without having an obvious military defeat hanging around their necks and putting a huge stain on their legacies.



The political manipulation of the Iraq “surge” allowed Bush, Cheney and their allies to reframe the historical debate and shift the blame for the defeat onto Obama, recognizing that 1,000 more dead U.S. soldiers was a small price to pay for protecting the “Bush brand.” Now, Bush’s younger brother can cheerily march off to the campaign trail for 2016 pointing to the carcass of the Iraqi albatross hung around Obama’s shoulders.

### **Rout at Ramadi**

Last weekend, less than a year after U.S.-trained and -equipped Iraqi forces ran away from the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, leaving the area and lots of U.S. arms and equipment to ISIS, something similar happened at Ramadi, the capital of the western province of Anbar. Despite heavy U.S. air strikes on ISIS, American-backed Iraqi security forces fled Ramadi, which is only 70 miles west of Baghdad, after a lightning assault by ISIS forces.

The ability of ISIS to strike just about everywhere in the area is reminiscent of the Tet offensive of January-February 1968 in Vietnam, which persuaded President Lyndon Johnson that that particular war was unwinnable. If there are materials left over in Saigon for reinforcing helicopter landing pads on the tops of buildings, it is not too early to bring them to Baghdad’s Green Zone, on the chance that U.S. embassy buildings may have a call for such materials in the not-too-distant future.

The headlong Iraqi government retreat from Ramadi had scarcely ended on Sunday when Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, described the fall of the city as “terribly significant” which is correct adding that more U.S. troops may be needed which is insane. His appeal for more troops neatly fits one proverbial definition of insanity (attributed or misattributed to Albert Einstein): “doing the same thing over and over again [like every eight years?] but expecting different results.”

By Wednesday, as Jeb Bush was singing the praises of his brother’s “surge” in Iraq, McCain and his Senate colleague Lindsey Graham were publicly calling for a new “surge” of U.S. troops into Iraq. The senators urged President Obama to do what George W. Bush did in 2007 replace the U.S. military leadership and dispatch additional troops to Iraq.

But Washington Post pundit David Ignatius, even though a fan of the earlier two surges, is not yet on board for this one. In a column published also on Wednesday, Ignatius warned that Washington should not abandon its current strategy:

“This is still Iraq’s war, not America’s. But President Barack Obama must reassure Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi that the U.S. has his back, and at the

same time give him a reality check: If al-Abadi and his Shiite allies don't do more to empower Sunnis, his country will splinter. Ramadi is a precursor, of either a turnaround by al-Abadi's forces, or an Iraqi defeat."

Ignatius's urgent tone is warranted. But what he suggests is precisely what the U.S. made a lame attempt to do with then-Prime Minister Maliki in early 2007. Yet, President Bush squandered U.S. leverage by sending 30,000 troops to show he "had Maliki's back," freeing Maliki to accelerate his attempts to marginalize, rather than accommodate, Sunni interests.

Perhaps Ignatius now remembers how the "surge" he championed in 2007 greatly exacerbated tensions between Shia and Sunni contributing to the chaos now prevailing in Iraq and spreading across Syria and elsewhere. But Ignatius is well connected and a bellwether; if he ends up advocating another "surge," take shelter.

### **Keane and Kagan Ask For a Mulligan**

The architects of Bush's 2007 "surge" of 30,000 troops into Iraq, former Army General Jack Keane and American Enterprise Institute neocon strategist Frederick Kagan, in testimony Thursday to the Senate Armed Services Committee, warned strongly that, without a "surge" of some 15,000 to 20,000 U.S. troops, ISIS will win in Iraq.

"We are losing this war," warned Keane, who previously served as Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. "ISIS is on the offense, with the ability to attack at will, anyplace, anytime. ... Air power will not defeat ISIS." Keane stressed that the U.S. and its allies have "no ground force, which is the defeat mechanism."

Not given to understatement, Kagan called ISIS "one of the most evil organizations that has ever existed. ... This is not a group that maybe we can negotiate with down the road someday. This is a group that is committed to the destruction of everything decent in the world." He called for "15-20,000 U.S. troops on the ground to provide the necessary enablers, advisers and so forth," and added: "Anything less than that is simply unserious."

(By the way, Frederick Kagan is the brother of neocon-star Robert Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century began pushing for the invasion of Iraq in 1998 and finally got its way in 2003. Robert Kagan is the husband of Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw the 2014 coup that brought "regime change" and bloody chaos to Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis also prompted Robert Kagan to urge a major increase in U.S. military spending. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"] )

What is perhaps most striking, however, is the casualness with which the likes of Frederick Kagan, Jack Keane, and other Iraq War enthusiasts advocate dispatching tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to fight and die in what would almost certainly be another futile undertaking. You might even wonder why people like Kagan are invited to testify before Congress given their abysmal records.

But that would miss the true charm of the Iraq “surge” in 2007 and its significance in salvaging the reputations of folks like Kagan, not to mention George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. From their perspective, the “surge” was a great success. Bush and Cheney could swagger from the West Wing into the western sunset on Jan. 20, 2009.

As author Steve Coll has put it, “The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes. By committing to the surge [the President] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, “even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones supporting me.” Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing. Suddenly, with some fancy footwork, it became Laura, Barney and new Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David Petraeus along with 30,000 more U.S. soldiers making sure that the short-term fix was in.

The fact that about 1,000 U.S. soldiers returned in caskets was the principal price paid for that short-term “surge” fix. Their “ultimate sacrifice” will be mourned by their friends, families and countrymen on Memorial Day even as many of the same politicians and pundits will be casually pontificating about dispatching more young men and women as cannon fodder into the same misguided war.

It has been difficult drafting this downer, this historical counter-narrative, on the eve of Memorial Day. It seems to me necessary, though, to expose the *dramatis personae* who played such key roles in getting more and more people killed. Sad to say, none of the high officials mentioned here, as well as those on the relevant Congressional committees, are affected in any immediate way by the carnage in Ramadi, Tikrit or outside the gate to the Green Zone in Baghdad.

And perhaps that’s one of the key points here. It is not most of us, but rather our soldiers and the soldiers and civilians of Iraq, Afghanistan and God knows where else who are Lazarus at the gate. And, as Benjamin Franklin once said, “Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served 30 years as an Army infantry/intelligence officer and CIA analyst and is now a member of the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

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## One More Casualty of US Wars

**From the Archive:** For many politicians, Memorial Day is just another chance to glorify war with little real remembrance of war's horrors and waste, like the death of one young veteran a year ago, as recalled by Richard L. Fricker in one of his last articles before his own death from heart failure last Sept. 12.

By Richard L. Fricker (Originally published May 27, 2014)

I knew Cody Young only in a peripheral way. He and my son were classmates and skateboard buds. My wife remembers he would come over for a homemade Orange Julius on hot summer days. Thus with great sadness, we learned of his death on May 21, 2014, in what Tulsa police are calling a standoff.

How did a young man, 22 years old, who once entertained dreams of being the next Tony Hawk become the target of a police kill shot? My son and many of Cody's other friends recall him as a non-violent kid with a big kind heart. What happened? War happened! At least that's part of the story.

The Tulsa Police Department says it responded to reports of someone shooting at parked cars from a second-floor apartment near 11<sup>th</sup> and Rockford Ave. at about 1 a.m. Nothing in the releases indicates that Young fired specifically at officers or anyone else, only that he had a long gun at the window. Reports vary as to whether the weapon was a rifle or shotgun.

But Cody's life began to unravel in 2009, just before graduation from Thomas A. Edison High School when he joined the Oklahoma National Guard. Thomas Edison was known as a preparatory school but there was no way it could have prepared Cody for his future.

Cody was nine when Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda attacked New York City's Trade Center and the Pentagon. A decade later, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were still going strong and it would be naive to think that he didn't know there was a good chance he would wind up in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But young men are prone to see themselves as immortal, impervious to injury and

death. This sense of immortality is joined at the hip by a desire for adventure, or just doing something different to get out of town. So, Cody traded in his skate board for weapons of war. He became a soldier in the Oklahoma National Guard, the Thunderbirds, whose motto is "Always Ready, Always There." The "there" in this case was Afghanistan.

The Oklahoma Thunderbirds have a proud combat tradition, fighting in many engagements in many wars. During World War Two, they were said to be the first guard unit into Europe and last unit out. Afghanistan would have its own deadly consequences.

As chronicled in Phillip O'Connor piece, "The Deadliest Day" about a patrol on Sept. 9, 2011, "The firefight lasts maybe 15 seconds. When it is over, Oklahoma and its 7,500-member Army National Guard are left to face the state's bloodiest day in combat since Korea. Three soldiers are dead and two seriously wounded."

Before Cody and the Thunderbirds returned home 14 men had died and scores were injured. One soldier cited by O'Connor affirmed what anyone who has been to war knows, "Everybody wants to see combat, until they see it."

Cody, like many others in his deployment, saw a lot. According to family and friends, Cody returned changed, he was distant. He told his mother "something was wrong." That something was Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), a war disease whose symptoms vary: flashbacks, disassociation, depression often self-medicated with drugs or alcohol, and, worst of all, nightmares and flashbacks.

During a flashback, you are in the present and the past simultaneously, unsure which is real. You don't know how you got to this moment; a song, an aroma, a sound, a conversation, a movie? Anything can trigger it and you're left with very little control. In your mind, you're in combat. Someone must guide you out or it continues until you wear out or pass out.

The nightmares arrive unannounced, until someone wakes you because they hear you screaming, or they run their course and you wake up shaken and confused. Then the long night begins, fighting sleep fearing the nightmare will return.

According to Cody's mother, he had all the classic PTSD symptoms. He had sought help, but almost nothing was working. Cody, according to reports, spent his last night watching a war movie with a friend. Then something happened.

Only Cody knew what triggered his taking up a weapon and firing at parked cars out the window. Did Cody try to tell the assembled police responders what it was? The police say he was "mumbling" something but they couldn't understand what he was saying. In a sense, Cody had been trying to say something since he returned from Afghanistan.

At some point, according to Tulsa police accounts, Cody raised his weapon. Only Cody knew where he thought he was or what he was seeing. We do know there were a lot of police around. We do know they brought in one of their armored vehicles. The police simply followed protocol, but did being surrounded and confronted by an armored vehicle have any meaning to Cody or was he in another reality?

Cody can't tell us now. Seventeen-year veteran officer Gene Hogan ended Cody's life with a single rifle shot. Nine days earlier, Hogan had led the fifth annual Jared Shoemaker Memorial Walk, named for a U.S. Marine and Tulsa police officer killed during a deployment to Iraq in 2006. It was not immediately known if Hogan was given a specific kill order or if the Tulsa Police Department leaves that decision up to individual officers.

According to Stacy Bannerman, author of "When the War Came Home: The Inside Story of Reservists and the Families They Leave Behind," writing for [Truthout.Org](http://Truthout.Org) on May 26, 2014, "National Guardsmen have been found to have rates of PTSD as much as three times higher than active duty troops after combat."

She continued, "The vast differentials in mental health outcomes between reserve and active duty are primarily due to: the lack of post-deployment unit support; markedly poorer post-deployment mental health services and follow-up; and the rapidity with which citizen soldiers return to civilian life after combat." Remarking on Cody's death, she said it was "not isolated."

Locally, H. Caldwell "Callie" O'Keefe, VFW Post 577 chaplain and U.S. Marine veteran of Vietnam, said, "The needs of these veterans are not being addressed by the VA [Veterans Administration]; there needs to be a lot more therapy."

Caldwell's remarks echo concerns that Defense Department and VA doctors have been encouraged to downgrade PTSD findings to lower levels, such as "personality disorder." Caldwell said, "If they call it personality disorder they (DoD and VA) don't have to pay as much."

In 2013, the Army completed a study of PTSD diagnoses at Madigan Army Medical Center which was prompted by the discovery of a memo released by the [Seattle Times](http://SeattleTimes) quoting a Center psychiatrist telling colleagues, a soldier who retires with a post-traumatic-stress-disorder diagnosis could eventually receive \$1.5 million in government payments.

The memo claims, "He (the psychiatrist) stated that we have to be good stewards of the tax payers dollars, and we have to ensure that we are just not 'rubber stamping' a soldier with the diagnoses of PTSD." Such findings, it was claimed, could cause the Army and VA to go broke. The Army has resisted media efforts to

release the complete study.

“People,” Caldwell said, “who have seen combat are getting fucked-up. The public has no idea how prevalent PTSD is and if they did it would scare them to death, as if they’d had to go there themselves.”

The VA has been under fire recently because of long delays in veterans getting treatment. There have been calls for Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki’s resignation. Sen. Richard Burr, R-North Carolina, ranking Republican on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, publicly chided veterans groups for not joining in calling for Shinseki to go. The groups responded to the senator, calling his attack a “cheap shot,” among other things. [Update: Shinseki resigned on May 30, 2014.]

In the end, Cody Young was a young man who served his country with honor and in the process came home a walking casualty. To those who knew him, it doesn’t really matter if he was killed by the Taliban or the Tulsa police; he will be missed by his family and friends no matter who ended his life.

We must ask what Cody has taught us about sending our young men and women into the meat grinder of war as well as understanding their needs when they return. The sad fates of Cody and the thousands of other veterans who have returned home to die of gun violence are not the stories that parades celebrate; they don’t make society feel good.

Looking back, it never occurred to me that the skateboard kid with the Orange Julius would, in a few short years, become, like me, a veteran who served at about the same age, me in the Vietnam theater and him in Afghanistan. If I realized what he was going through, I would have tried to know him better. In war, we all become casualties.

Cody’s name will not be on a marble wall, but he should be remembered by the people and the country that he served. I like to think that somewhere in the dimensions of the cosmos, Cody is skating half-pipes with no memory of what brought him to that place.

**Richard L. Fricker lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His last book, *The Last Day of the War*, is available at <https://www.createspace.com/3804081> .**

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## Losing the American Republic

Decades of letting neocons dictate a hawkish foreign policy have put the

American Republic in profound danger, just as presidents from George Washington to Dwight Eisenhower predicted, warnings that Americans must finally take to heart, says ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk.

By William R. Polk

In *The Financial Times* of April 23, Philip Stephens begins a perceptive article with the obvious statement that “It is easier to say that Obama never gets it right than to come up with an alternative strategy.”

Of course it is. It was never easy to construct a coherent policy, but it was never impossible. The problem we face today is different. It is that for a long time we have not been presented by our leaders with *any* strategy. So the obvious question a citizen (and a taxpayer) should demand be answered is why, despite all the effort, all the proclamations and all the lives and money we are spending, does almost every observer believe that we do not have a policy that we can afford and that accomplishes our minimal national objectives? In this first part of a two-part essay, I will address that problem.

In short, where is the problem? It is tempting to say that it is our lack of statesmen. Where are the heirs to the men who put the world back together again after the Second World War? By comparison to those who we empower today, those earlier leaders appear heroic figures.

True, they had monumental faults and made costly mistakes, but they thought and acted on an epic scale and tried to cope with unprecedented problems – the reconstruction of Europe, the ending of colonialism in Africa and imperialism in India, the amalgamation of scores of new nations into an acceptable structure of the world community and the containing of unprecedented dangers from weapons of mass destruction.

Today, only half joking, Europeans say that they see only one world-class statesman – German Chancellor Angela Merkel. I seek but find no comparable leaders on the American scene. As Mr. Stephens judged, “Barack Obama has led from behind on the global stage [while] Republicans [are thinking only in terms of] a bumper sticker world.”

We may lament our poverty of leadership, but there are ways to make it function. “Princes,” since long before Machiavelli have always used advisers; some even listened to them. Surely the capable people among us – like the “wise men” who whispered in the ears of those earlier leaders – can guide today’s leaders toward more viable policies and away from the chaos that engulfs us.

Why is this not happening? Is it that what they have to say is not “popular” or that they cannot reach the decision makers? Or that the structures we have built



into our political and economic systems block them? Is it the enormity of the problems we face? Or is it that we lack information? Or is it the want of a matrix or framework in which to place what we know and to decide on the feasibility and affordability of what we want?

More fundamentally, could it be that we, the citizenry, the voters and the taxpayers, simply do not care enough or keep ourselves well enough informed to make our leaders perform the tasks they avidly seek and we pay them to do?

Each of these possible causes of our current malaise urgently demands our attention. Let me briefly look at them and then move, in my second essay, toward a guide to a viable policy.

### **Complex World**

First, let us admit that the world is indeed more complex today than in earlier times. There are more “actors” and at least some of them have to perform in front of audiences that are more “politicized” than they used to be. Nationalism affects more people than a century ago, and today it is laced with religion in an explosive mixture. A spreading and intensifying sense of fairness and minimal rights shapes actions among peoples who used humbly to submit. Bluntly put, fewer people today are willing to suffer or starve than were their grandparents.

Second, nations that hardly existed are caught up in insurgencies, guerrilla wars and various forms of violence. Supra- or non-national religious movements are not new, but they have become very “worldly” and are now sweeping through Africa and Asia. Some are sowing hatred and massacring or driving into exile whole populations. At the same time, corrupt governments and “warlords” impoverish societies while outside manipulation by force of arms and “dirty tricks” further destabilizes or even destroys political order, leaving trails of shattered lives.

The outside quest for “regime change” has plunged many developing countries into chaos. Floods of migrants pour out in desperate quest for safety while many of those who remain will die wretchedly as they watch their children grow to adulthood stunted from sickness and hunger. We and several “theys” are stirring the pot. But, regardless of who created these problems, they must be faced today. And they are certainly complex.

Third, while events are certainly complex, we know an astonishing amount about them. Never in human affairs have so many studied so much. So our leaders are primed to do their jobs. At least they should be. Information is not lacking.

In the United States, we employ some 17 intelligence agencies manned by upwards of 100,000 presumably skilled people, a Department of State and associated

agencies employing (at my last count) nearly 20,000 officers, a White House staff including the National Security Council numbering in the hundreds, a galaxy of war colleges through which pass most of the senior officers of over half of the world's military and security services, dedicated staffs and subsidized "think tanks" like RAND and more or less independent think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations, Brookings, etc.

The media doesn't do as much as it used to do to educate us, but it is now augmented by "blogs," opinion pieces, reports and memoirs. Multiple organizations of the United Nations and hundreds of non-governmental organizations provide almost daily accounts of every human activity. And some people still read and even write books.

Even those of us who, by government criteria, have no "need to know," have access to most of this flood of information. Some is withheld from those of us our Government does not "clear" to receive it, but most of the withheld or at least delayed information is actually about "us" – the covert activities, foibles, misdemeanors and crimes of our team.

Our leaders are keen to inform us about the (false) beliefs and (dangerous) actions of foreigners. And even if Government often does not help us to understand other peoples, most of what we need to know about them is available in the public domain beyond the reach of government censorship.

So censorship is not the only reason we are not well informed. We citizens must accept much of the blame. Many of us sit on vast "dry" islands where the floodtide of information does not reach or where we or others have built dykes to keep it out. We have allowed the media to drop the pretense of informing us; its job is to entertain us.

When "news" is read out by attractive "presenters," it is also a form of entertainment. Television is not conducive to difficult issues. It is best on "sound bytes." But it is not only the nature of the media that is formative: most observers believe that it is in large part our laziness or lack of concern that keeps us ill-informed and little engaged. We read little and seek reassurance more than knowledge. Above all, we wish to avoid being challenged.

### **Easy Opinions**

As Alex de Tocqueville observed of us, "the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own."

And it is not just opinions or judgments on contemporary affairs, but even general knowledge that is missing. Surveys show that many Americans do not know

where Vietnam, Ukraine and Afghanistan are. Some could not find our national capital on a map. As Aaron Burke remarked in the Feb. 14, 2014 *Washington Post*, some of our would-be ambassadors knew nothing of the character, politics, language, religious affiliation of even those countries to which they were being sent.

Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, was filmed on C-Span commenting that some of the nominees were “totally unqualified.” In this, sadly, they represent us. [See: Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (1996). Chapter 6, “The Consequences of Political Knowledge and Ignorance.”]

Is this ignorance important? The French conservative philosopher, Josef de Maistre answered that it is because “every nation gets the government it deserves.” If citizens are uneducated or passive, they can be controlled, as the Roman emperors controlled their peoples with bread and circuses, or as other dictatorships have with “patriotic” demonstrations or manufactured threats.

Indeed, a people can make themselves willing dupes as the Germans did when they voted Hitler into power in a free election. Ignorance and apathy are the pathogens of representative government. Under their influence, constitutions are weakened or set aside, legislatures become rubber stamps, courts pervert the law and the media becomes a tool. So, even in a democracy, when we duck our civic duties in favor of entertainment and do not inform ourselves, the political process is endangered.

Danger, as our Founding Fathers told us, is ever present. They thought of our system as an experiment and doubted that we could maintain it over time. We have come close to losing it. And today we see signs of its fragility.

American ignorance and apathy extend even to issues immediately affecting the lives of most of us – like jobs, housing, food and health – and when it comes to devoting attention to such possibly terminal issues as nuclear war, baseball always wins. The choice, as the expression goes, is a “no brainer.”

This can be disastrous because, as our first president warned us, unscrupulous politicians can manipulate the public. George Washington found this particularly dangerous in foreign affairs. As he wrote in his Farewell Address, the dangers inherent in dealing with other countries may lead to “the necessity of those overgrown military establishments, which under any form of Government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.”

His words demand our attention because we all welcome comfortable simplicity in

place of confusing complexity, and it is in military affairs where the lack of statesmanship among the leaders and ignorance among the people is most clear.

In one of the great theatrical gestures known to history (or legend), that eagle among the hawks, Alexander the Great, demonstrated the easiest way to deal with complexity. To untie the Gordian knot – the very symbol of complexity – he simply cut it. His point was that there is no need to understand if one has a sharp knife.

Alas, as the decades of the cutting of knots in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other places has shown, no matter how sharp the knife, the knot may not be so neatly sliced as Alexander thought. Indeed, as we have observed in our recent wars, “knots” prove capable of reuniting their coils.

### **President Washington’s Wisdom**

George Washington, judged by today’s standards, was neither so well informed nor so lavishly advised as are modern American leaders, but at least on war and peace his instinct was sure and at the end of his career, he embodied the American myth of national decency.

In his “Farewell Address,” he told us that the only safe – because moral – policy is to “Observe good faith and justice towards all Nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all. ... In the execution of such a plan nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular Nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded [because] The Nation, prompted by ill will and resentment sometime impels to War the Government, contrary to the best calculations of policy. ... The peace often, sometimes perhaps the Liberty, of Nations has been the victim. ... Real Patriots ... are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.”

Partially echoing the values Washington hoped would underlie American action and reacting to the far stronger forces that have grown as America grew, Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed during the 1956 joint Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt that we must all be governed by “One Law,” not one law for us and our friends and another for other states.

On the eve of his departure from the White House, Eisenhower picked up and expanded another of Washington’s – and the Founding Fathers’, (who were deeply suspicious of the military and of the people’s ability to control it) – main themes, the danger of “those overgrown military establishments, which under any form of Government are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.”

Against the power of "the military-industrial complex," Eisenhower memorably warned that "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. ...

"This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."

To judge how little we have heeded his warning, just multiply the figures Eisenhower cites for the costs of the guns, warships, rockets and planes. When he spoke, our aggregate cost of all the tools of war was about \$320 billion; today the cost (in inflation adjusted dollars) is more than double that amount and also is larger than the aggregate outlay of all other nations.

And, beyond the monetary cost thus measured is the security cost – the world has become far more dangerous at least in part *because of* our emphasis on our military role. So, Eisenhower questioned, is this "the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking?"

Is anyone who has his hand on the wheel, that is any responsible leader, seriously considering whether there is a smoother, safer, more economical and less painful road? If so, I have failed to identify him or her. And, apparently, neither has Mr. Stephens of *The Financial Times*.

### **Bowing to the Military**

One aspect of this problem is that the military, drawing on the prestige it gains as our defender, is vastly over funded and catered to by both the Executive Branch and the Legislature. As Washington and Eisenhower feared, they have become a state within our nation. This is evident in almost every aspect of the comparison between the military and civilian parts of our government.

Consider the contrast with the Civil Service. The contrast is as sharp in America as in "tin pot" dictatorships in the Third World. When I served in government, I observed that any general and many colonels could summon up an Air Force plane for a junket whereas even the Under Secretary of State had to get special clearance from the President and then negotiate with the Pentagon for

official trips; then there were and still are wildly disproportional side benefits given to the military and what amount to penalties assessed to the civilians.

For example, roughly half of all ambassadorial appointments were removed from the Foreign Service and given to non-professionals. As Edward Luce wrote in the Dec. 7, 2014 *Financial Times*, “imagine how [much] harder it would be ... to recruit talented military officers if plum generalships were handed out to amateurs who had never worn a uniform.”

The transformation of America into a military culture has deep roots. Arguably it began long before the formation of the Republic in the settler wars with the Native Americans. In the “young republic,” it was carried forward in the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson’s push into “the Floridas” and James K. Polk’s war with Mexico. Then, during and after the Civil War, Americans became truly a warring people. (This is the title of the interpretive history of the American people on which I am at work.)

This legacy was carried forward in two world wars, hundreds of smaller military actions and a half century of Cold War. In 2013, Richard F. Grimmett and Barbara Salazar Torreon reported to Congress on “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad” from 1798. They found five declared war, six undeclared wars and hundreds of other military actions. [Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service.]

Few Americans, I suspect, are fully aware – despite scores of books and hundreds of articles – of the dimensions of our country’s commitment to the military establishment and the “security” culture embedded in it. Eisenhower’s Military-Industrial Complex has grown not only in size but in spread. It now shapes Congressional action, influences media reporting and convinces labor to cooperate in its projects. Indeed, it is built into the fabric of American society and economy to an extent that would have terrified the Founding Fathers.

Beyond the Military-Industrial-Congressional-Media-Labor Complex, as it has become, are three other powerful aspects of the “security state.” The first of these is the creation of a more or less autonomous elite army within the standing army which, itself, is apart from what the Founding Fathers thought of as our prime military force, the state militias.

This Special Operations Force, according to the Congressional Research Service in 2013 (the latest available figures) was composed of some 67,000 troops and operated under a separate budget of about \$7.5 billion. It has its own “think tank,” sources of intelligence, school and even its own magazine (*Special Warfare*) that prints favorable articles by journalists from all over the world

on “politico-military” affairs.

The second aspect of the growth of the military is in overseas bases. They are believed to number over 1,000 and are located in about 63 countries. These figures do not include the “floating bases” on aircraft carriers, troopships and “insertion” vessels nor, for the most part, the bases jointly operated with other countries and special intelligence facilities.

The third aspect is the extension of the military into “security” and intelligence fields that are partly or wholly funded by the Defense Department and often are commanded by serving military officers. According to a recent book, 1,074 new federal government organizations, the existence of which is “classified” and generally withheld from public knowledge, and nearly 2,000 private companies work out of at least 17,000 locations within the United States and an unknown number abroad.

### **Exceeding Authority**

More unsettling but not surprising is that with so much power behind them, some senior military commanders feel able to step outside of their statutory roles to pontificate on affairs beyond their competence and authority. One who this year frightened our European allies was U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the head of NATO’s operational command. He was taken to task by German Chancellor Merkel, as reported in the March 7, 2015 issue of the respected German weekly *Der Spiegel*, for “dangerous propaganda” in publicly recommending policies verging on warfare with Russia.

German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier intervened personally with the NATO General Secretary because of Breedlove’s statements. Breedlove’s action was not unprecedented. General David Petraeus essentially ran American affairs in Afghanistan and Iraq while treating the statutory American authority, the ambassador, as a junior partner.

In “The Killing Machines” (*The Atlantic*, September 2013), Mike Bowden recounts the argument between U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Cameron Munter in 2011 and CIA Director Leon Panetta over the ambassador’s authority to veto assassinations. Munter quoted Title 22 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations that made the ambassador the chief American authority in the country to which he was appointed. “That means,” commented Bowden, “no American policy should be carried out in any country without the ambassador’s approval.”

Panetta took the dispute to President Obama who ruled in favor of the CIA. Elsewhere also, senior military officers have frequently violated the word and the intent of the Framers of the Constitution in forming and proclaiming

policies. In the most famous case of assumption of such powers in the past, President Harry Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur. That was long ago.

It isn't only, as the American psychologist Abraham Maslow is quoted as saying, "if you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail," but also that ambitious men naturally seek opportunities. In business, they seek money; in the military they seek promotion. Pursuing these goals is often admirable but unchecked it also creates dangers or harms the public interest.

History writings are full of accounts of generals who destroyed civilian regimes and often destroyed republican liberty. A prudent people will insist that its government both *use* its military when necessary and always *control* it. Fear that the people would fail to do so animated the discussions of our Founding Fathers when they were writing our Constitution in 1787. [Madison, *Notes*, passim.] Our first military leader warned us of the danger as I have quoted him above.

### **The Iraq War Disaster**

So now consider what we have been doing on the two major American wars of the post-Vietnam years. Because I have written on them in detail elsewhere, I will only touch on those aspects that will flesh-out the skeleton I have sketched above or illustrate why we need to avoid tactical lunges and adopt strategic thinking.

I begin with Iraq. Iraq illustrates failure to understand the context in which we act, our propensity to jump before looking and our role in creating a security threat. [I have dealt with Iraq intensively in *Understanding Iraq* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).]

Consider first the context: Iraq was one of the many countries that evolved from the collapse of imperialism. Put together by the British at the end of the First World War from three provinces of the Ottoman Empire under an imported and British-controlled monarchy, it never found a secure political identity. To control the country, the British built a military organization that in comparison with other aspects of the regime and the society was strong. Consequently, Iraq suffered military coup after coup.

Most incoming dictators were simply predatory, but the last in the sequence, Saddam Hussein, made Iraq socially and economically one of the most advanced countries in Africa and Asia. Profiting from increasing oil wealth, he promoted the growth of a middle class, secularized the regime and provided the public with free health services and free education. Whereas in 1920, under the British, only 30 Iraqis were receiving secondary education (and the British thought that was too many), in 1985 the student population reached nearly one



and a half million.

The number of doctors went from 1:7,000 to 1:1,800 and life expectancy rose from 40 to 57 years. Schools, universities, hospitals, factories, theaters and museums proliferated. Saddam's aim was power, and like many Third World leaders he was not an attractive person, but perhaps without meaning to do so, he set in motion events that would have forced Iraq to become a more democratic society. "Would have," that is, had development not been short-circuited by war.

The first war began in September 1980 with an Iraqi attack on America's enemy, the revolutionary Iranian government led by Ayatollah Khomeini, that had overthrown the government of America's ally, the Shah. The American government took a short-sighted view of the war and assisted the Iraqis with provision of the most sophisticated intelligence then available (which enabled the outnumbered Iraqis to defeat the Iranians in crucial battles), but at the same time it supplied Iran with lethal military equipment (in the Iran-Contra affair).

Both the Iraqis and the Iranians realized that America was playing a cynical game. Henry Kissinger summed it up by saying, "It's a pity they both can't lose." It does not seem, in retrospect, that serious thought was given to how war would impact on both societies and on American interests. This is borne out by the extension of the war to Kuwait.

Kuwait was another of the legacies of imperialism. In the eyes of every Iraqi leader, including its British-installed and American-favored three kings, Kuwait was an Iraqi province. It was the British who had forced the Ottoman Empire to give it quasi-autonomous status in 1913 – and in 1923 got both the puppet Iraqi government and the precursor of the Saudi state to recognize its frontiers.

Initially, Britain was interested in using it to block any threat to its Indian empire. Following Indian independence in 1947, that interest was replaced by the special relationship under which newly oil-rich Kuwait invested heavily in cash-starved England. Additionally, both Britain and America were keen that it keep its separate status so that no one Middle Eastern power dominate oil production. Then, for reasons that are still obscure but certainly evinced a lack of strategic thinking, the American government gave the impression that it would not oppose the Iraqi attempt to take over Kuwait.

It happened like this: The war with Iran lasted eight years, killed tens of thousands Iraqis and cost about \$15 billion yearly. (Proportionally, the Iraq-Iran war was more costly than the American war in Vietnam.) Saddam Hussein proclaimed that he was fighting Iran on behalf of the Arabs and particularly of the Kuwaitis who had a deep fear of Iranian aggression. [For more background on

Iraq's invasion of Iran, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Saddam's Green Light.](#)" ]

### **Souring on Saddam**

Initially at least, the Kuwaitis (and other Arab leaders) agreed with him and supported his war effort. But as the fighting stalemated, they not only stopped their aid to Iraq but demanded repayment of what they had lent. Saddam had used up all of Iraq's reserves. The price of oil fell below what could sustain his regime. He became desperate. He begged and pleaded but to no avail.

A violent man, Saddam decided to take what the Kuwaitis would not give, but, himself a crafty politician, Saddam sought American approval. He probably thought America "owed him one" for having fought its enemy, Iran. So he thought America might agree to his reclaiming Kuwait.

When he met with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, she (on orders) told him that the U.S. Government "took no position on Arab frontiers." Saddam took this to be a "green light" – like President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger given to Indonesia's General Suharto to reclaim East Timor – and invaded. [Kissinger and others denied it at the time, but we now have access to the documents and know that they condoned and conspired a few years before, in 1975, with the Indonesian dictator General Suharto, certainly no more attractive a figure than Saddam, on the invasion. (See Briefing book 62 in the [nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB62/](http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB62/))]

The American ambassador told *The New York Times* that no one thought (with no sense of history and apparently no appreciation of Saddam's desperation) the Iraqis would take "all of Kuwait!"

The Americans and others, including the Russians, reacted sharply. Kuwait's assets were frozen out of Saddam's reach. The UN demanded an Iraqi withdrawal. And Saddam became even more desperate. Some in the American government apparently believed that the Iraqis might plunge into Saudi Arabia eastern province where its oil fields are located. So America put together a coalition, including Saudi Arabia and Syria, to chase the Iraqis out of Kuwait. It was successful. President George H.W. Bush ordered the invading forces to break Saddam's army but not to occupy the country.

However, the war against Saddam was allowed to spill over into actions that were not then foreseen by American leaders and for which the United States and Iraq would pay a fearful price. The U.S. acted in ways that increased Saddam's desperation and increased his sense of humiliation. It also allowed or perhaps even condoned actions that promoted sectarian – Sunni-Shiite – hostilities to a level not experienced in the Islamic world for centuries.

And, by giving the impression of hostility toward all aspects of Islam, the U.S. shifted such previously anti-Saddam activists as Osama bin Laden into leaders of a *jihād* against America. Little or no thought was given, apparently, to how the initial objective of getting the Iraqis out of Kuwait could be turned into a stable and constructive result.

Much worse, of course, was to follow a decade later in the George W. Bush administration. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was not caused by Saddam's attack on Kuwait but was a deliberate act of aggression. It was justified to the American public by the allegation that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons and allegation that Bush knew to be false; he simply ordered his Secretary of State, General Colin Powell, to lie to the public and America's allies.

Whereas George Washington had warned in his Farewell Address that "The Nation [that is, the public], prompted by ill will and resentment sometime impels to War the Government, contrary to the best calculations of policy," George W. Bush's Government deceived the Nation. As Washington also warned, the "Real Patriots" – who, in the Iraq case, realized what was happening and spoke out – "are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests."

Those interests included preservation of the lives of at least 4,500 soldiers who died and the several hundred thousand American soldiers who were wounded. Also of interest were the expenditure of some \$2 trillion in treasure, the 2.6 million men and women whose labor could have contributed to the American economy. Less tangible but no less real was the goodwill that America had long enjoyed among all Iraqis and other peoples and a peace that has been lost in unending war.

This was all predicted and much could have been avoided. It is notable that even David Kilcullen, Bush's strategist who had been recruited by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and relied upon by General David Petraeus, was quoted as saying that "Perhaps the most stupid thing about Iraq was invading the country in the first place." [Ken Sengupta, "David Kilcullen: The Australian helping to shape a new Afghanistan strategy," *The Independent*, July 9, 2009.]

## **The Afghan Quagmire**

I turn now to the failure of American policy in Afghanistan.

The people of Afghanistan at least since the time of Alexander the Great had repeatedly and violently demonstrated their determination not to be ruled by foreigners. In 1842, they inflicted the worst defeat the British army suffered in the Nineteenth Century. Soberly, the British then recognized that they were

not going to transform the Afghans and that attempting to do so was not worth the cost.

So, essentially, they played their new version of "the Great Game" by Afghan rules. They bribed, cajoled and flattered the Afghan rulers and where they could and at little cost fought a sort of French-Moroccan *Beau Geste* or American-style "Wild West" campaign on the Northwest Frontier against the tribal peoples. They recognized that what they really wanted – to keep the Russians out of South Asia – didn't require more.

When their turn came, the Russians were not willing to take such a detached approach. In 1979, they dived into Afghanistan and tried, as they were doing in their Turkish Central Asian provinces, to Russify and partially to Communize it. Their policy was more than a failure; it was a catastrophe. [The best account is Rodric Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011). Also see William R. Polk, *Violent Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) Chapt. 11.]

The war was a catastrophe both for the USSR, which the Afghans played a major role in destroying, and also for Afghanistan, which became a "failed state." It was that failed state – a shattered, warlord-plagued maelstrom – the Russians had left behind that the Taliban movement tried to overcome with a violent assertion of primitive "Afghanism."

Objectively, America never had any compelling interest in Afghanistan. It had no known major resources, was poor, backward and remote. Moreover, anyone with a slight knowledge of history would know that it had proven to be one of the most difficult countries in the world to rule, much less to "regime change" or "nation build."

Not only had the Afghans defeated the British and the Russians but they tolerated only a modicum of control by their own government. Each village or small neighborhood of villages ruled itself and was rigidly locked into traditional culture. Largely based on Islamic law but including elements that were pre-Islamic, the social code featured segregation of women, revenge for insult (*badal*), protection of refugees (*melmastia*) and absolute independence. In the south, it was known as the *Pukhtunwali*. That culture was not to America's liking, but it was Afghan's culture. Slowly and cautiously, it had been evolving toward a more "enlightened" and liberal pattern.

Evolving, that is, when left more or less to its own devices. When under attack, Afghan society closed upon itself and reverted to customs that the Russians had found (and Americans would find) objectionable. Generally, however, at least the Americans have not found disapproval of customs to be a sufficient

reason to invade other societies. What caused the American invasion was, ironically, a playing out of two commands of the *Pushtunwali*, the Afghan “way.”

### **Misunderstanding Afghanistan**

First was the absolute imperative of the Afghan way, the granting of protection (*malmastia*) to fleeing warriors. The Taliban honored this tradition by giving sanctuary to Osama bin Laden whose followers in the al-Qaeda movement had attacked America in 2001. The U.S. Government demanded that Osama be handed over. The Afghan Government refused. To have done so would have been, in Afghan eyes, a mortal sin.

So, second, America itself employed another recognized part of the Afghan code, *badal*, or revenge. It attacked. As the then Taliban Minister of War later told me, “we understood your desire for revenge. ... It is also our way.”

It was the Afghan way, but was it either necessary or useful to America? Put another way, could American objectives have been accomplished at lesser cost in another way?

To answer that question requires a definition of objectives: First was the objective of the American political leaders. They believed that they had to demonstrate toughness. About nine in 10 Americans (and between six and seven Britons) favored the invasion. It was easy for President Bush to ride the popular surge. Indeed, he not only rode but spurred on war fever.

Second, as George Washington had long before warned, “The Government sometimes ... adopts through passion what reason would reject.” Reason would have avoided a ruinous war. But instead of adopting the course demanded by the national interest, or trying to think with the public through the options, Bush played on popular emotion. The Taliban were bad and America had to punish them.

Third, on their side, the Taliban leaders knew that a war would be ruinous for them. They were not very adroit, but they tried to find a way to avoid it. They could do so only within the code by which they lived. To have met the American demand to surrender Bin Laden would have been a mortal sin, but they had some flexibility in applying *malmastia* – they had to *protect* Bin Laden but need not to *allow* him to act as he might wish. So they took him into “protective” custody and proclaimed that they would prevent him and his followers from engaging in further foreign activities. It is not clear that the Bush administration even considered any possible variation of that option.

So Bush ordered the attack. Despising the ragged, ill-armed guerrillas, the Americans struck. The war might have ended in a bloody but limited raid. Instead, without much thought, it morphed into a conflict that, *so far*, has

lasted nearly 14 years, has cost America 2,357 dead, perhaps 50,000 wounded and at least \$1 trillion.

The number of Afghans killed or wounded is not known but is certainly in the hundreds of thousands; the sick and malnourished amount to nearly half the population; a whole generation of children have been “stunted” and will never grow to full potential; the traditional civic order has been replaced by a corrupt and brutal collection of mafias that both engage in the largest drug business in the world and also steal (and ship abroad) billions of U.S. aid dollars. There is no light at the end of that tunnel.

I find no evidence that the U.S. government at any point from before the invasion to the present carefully considered whether or not it really had any strategic interest (the Russians were in full retreat and we no longer had a compelling interest in protecting India) in Afghanistan. It simply took whatever seemed to be the next step as the trajectory of events seemed to dictate and, since other than bribery it had little to offer, those steps were military.

During the last 14 years, we have relied almost exclusively on military action. At first, the action was “boots on the ground.” Recently, in our attempt to cut American casualties, we have shifted largely to “coercive air power.” [Robert Pape, *New York Times*. April 21, 2015.]

Our aim has been to “decapitate” the guerrilla forces and to beat down insurgent attacks. Both have failed. On the one hand, as we have killed more senior and experienced leaders, younger and more ambitious or violent men have replaced them, and, on the other hand, surveys show that guerrilla action has increased – not been suppressed – in and around areas that have been attacked by drones or special forces.

If we cannot win, have we tried negotiation? No, in fact we have made any form of negotiation virtually impossible. Among our moves, one stands out baldly: the American military and the CIA have maintained a “kill list” of insurgents to be shot on sight. Because the list is secret, no Talib can know if he is on the list. So he is apt to suspect that any offer of negotiation is really a trap, designed both to kill him and to divide and weaken his movement. [As discussed by Jo Becker and Scott Shane in the *New York Times*, May 29, 2012. I have discussed this and other aspects of the Afghan conflict in a series of essays in my book *Distant Thunder* (Washington 2011).]

The cost of our failure to win or negotiate is still being paid: we are still engaged in combat, still striking targets, still shoveling in billions of dollars to a failed puppet government. And in this unending war, we have created far more enemies than we have “pacified” or killed. Now they come not only from

Muslim Asia and Africa, but even from Europe and America. They are enemies we helped to create. We were sold a phony policy and self-defeating means to implement it: counterinsurgency never worked anywhere and certainly has not worked in Afghanistan.

### **Lessons Needed Learning**

It would be rewarding if one could say that our experience in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan has made us wiser in our approaches to Somalia, Syria, Libya and Yemen, but it is hard to substantiate that conclusion. Yet the lessons are there to be learned. There are more, but consider just these few:

- Military action can destroy but it cannot build;
- Counterinsurgency does not work and creates new problems;
- Nation building is beyond the capacity of foreigners;
- Piecemeal, uncoordinated actions often exacerbate rather than solve problems;
- The costs of military action are multifold and usually harm not only the attacked but also the attacker's society and economy;
- Reliance on military action and supply of weapons to the client state encourages it to undertake actions that make peace-seeking harder rather than easier;
- War radiates out from the battlefield so that whole societies are turned into refugees. In desperation they flee even far abroad and create unforeseen problems.
- The sense that the attacker is a bully spreads and converts outsiders into enemies;
- Failure to understand the society and culture even of the enemy is self-defeating;
- Angry, resentful people eventually strike back where they can and so create a climate of perpetual insecurity.

The result of such actions is deforming to the central objective of an intelligent, conservative and constructive American foreign policy – the preservation of our well-being. So, in the second part of this essay, I propose to show how we might begin to approach strategic thinking to accomplish our central national objective.

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## America as Dangerous Flailing Beast

Despite pretty talk about "democracy" and "human rights," U.S. leaders have become the world's chief purveyors of chaos and death from Vietnam through Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and many other unfortunate nations, a dangerous dilemma addressed by John Chuckman.

By John Chuckman

When I think of America's place in the world today, the image that comes to mind is of a very large animal, perhaps a huge bull elephant or even prehistoric mammoth, which long roamed as the unchallenged king of its domain but has become trapped by its own missteps, as caught in a tar pit or some quicksand, and it is violently flailing about, making a terrifying noises in its effort to free itself and re-establish its authority.

Any observer immediately knows the animal ultimately cannot succeed but certainly is frightened by the noise and crashing that it can sustain for a considerable time.

I think that is the pretty accurate metaphor for the situation of the United States today, still a terribly large and powerful society but one finding itself trapped after a long series of its own blunders and errors, a society certain ultimately to become diminished in its prestige and relative power with all the difficulties which that will entail for an arrogant people having a blind faith in their own rightness.

America simply cannot accept its mistakes or that it was ever wrong, for Americanism much resembles a fundamentalist religion whose members are incapable of recognizing or admitting they ever followed anything but the divine plan.

America has made a costly series of errors over the last half century, demonstrating to others that the America they may have been in awe of in, say, 1950, and may have considered almost godlike and incapable of mistakes, has now proved itself indisputably, in field after field, as often not even capable of



governing itself. The irony of a people who are seen as often unable to govern themselves advising others how to govern themselves brings a distinct note of absurdity to American foreign policy.

America's establishment, feeling its old easy superiority in the world beginning to slip away in a hundred different ways, seems determined to show everyone it still has what it takes, determined to make others feel its strength, determined to weaken others abroad who do not accept its natural superiority, determined to seize by brute force and dirty tricks advantages which no longer come to it by simply superior performance.

Rather than learn from its errors and adjust its delusional assumptions, America is determined to push and bend people all over the world to its will and acceptance of its leadership. But you cannot reclaim genuine leadership once you have been exposed enough times in your bad judgment, and it is clear you are on the decline, just as you cannot once others realize that they can do many things as well or better than you.

In the end, policies which do not recognize scientific facts are doomed. Policies based on wishes and ideology do not succeed over the long run, unless, of course, you are willing to suppress everyone who disagrees with you and demand their compliance under threat. The requirement for an imperial state in such a situation is international behavior which resembles the internal behavior of an autocratic leader such as Stalin, and right now that is precisely where the United States is headed.

Stalin's personality had a fair degree of paranoia and no patience for the views of others. He felt constantly threatened by potential competitors and he used systematic terror to keep everyone intimidated and unified under him.

Stalin's sincere belief in a faulty economic system that was doomed from its birth put him in a position similar to that of America's oligarchs today. They have a world imperial system that is coming under increasing strain and challenge because others are growing and have their own needs and America simply does not have the flexibility to accommodate them.

America's oligarchs are not used to listening to the views of others. Stalin's belief in a system that was more an ideology than a coherent economic model is paralleled by the quasi-religious tenets of Americanism, a set of beliefs which holds that America is especially blessed by the Creator and all things good and great are simply its due.

### **Dominion over the Earth?**

Americanism blurrily assumes that God's promise in the Old Testament that man

should have dominion over the earth's creatures applies now uniquely to Americans. Such thinking arose during many years of easy superiority, a superiority that was less owing to intrinsic merits of American society than to a set of fortuitous circumstances, many of which are now gone.

In Vietnam, America squandered countless resources chasing after a chimera its ideologues insisted was deadly important, never once acknowledging the fatal weaknesses built right into communism from its birth. Communism was certain eventually to fail because of economic falsehoods which were part of its conception, much as a child born with certain genetic flaws is destined for eventual death.

America's mad rush to fight communism on all fronts was in keeping with the zealotry of America's Civic Religion, but it was a huge and foolish practical judgment which wasted colossal resources.

In Vietnam, America ended in something close to total shame literally defeated on the battlefield by what seemed an inconsequential opponent, having also cast aside traditional ethical values in murdering great masses of people who never threatened the United States, murder on a scale (3 million) comparable to the Holocaust.

The United States used weapons and techniques of a savage character: napalm, cluster bombs, and secret mass terror programs. The savagery ripped into the fabric of America's own society, dividing the nation almost as badly as its Civil War once had. America ended reduced and depleted in many respects and paid its huge bills with devalued currency.

Following Vietnam, it has just been one calamity after another revealing the same destructive inability to govern, the same thought governed by zealotry, right down to the 2008 financial collapse which was caused by ignoring sound financial management and basically instituting a system of unlimited greed. The entire world was jolted and hurt by this stupidity whose full consequences are not nearly played out.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were completely unnecessary, cost vast sums, caused immense misery, and achieved nothing worth achieving. We now know what was kept hidden, that more than one million Iraqis died in an invasion based entirely on lies. These wars also set in motion changes whose long-term effects have yet to be felt. Iraq, for example, has just about had its Kurdish, oil-producing region hived off as a separate state.

### **Mishandling Russia**

America's primitive approach to the Soviet Union's collapse, its sheer

triumphalism and failure to regard Russia as important enough to help or with which to cooperate, ignored America's own long-term interests. After all, the Russians are a great people with many gifts, and it was inevitable that they would come back from a post-collapse depression to claim their place in the world.

So how do the people running the United States now deal with a prosperous and growing Russia, a Russia which reaches out in the soundest traditional economic fashion for cooperation and partnership in trade and projects? Russia has embraced free trade, a concept Americans trumpeted for years whenever it was to their advantage, but now for Russia is treated as dark and sinister.

Here America fights the inevitable power of economic forces, something akin to fighting the tide or the wind, and only for the sake of its continued dominance of another continent. Americans desperately try to stop what can only be called natural economic arrangements between Russia and Europe, natural because both sides have many services, goods, and commodities to trade for the benefit of all. America's establishment wants to cut off healthy new growth and permanently to establish its primacy in Europe even though it has nothing new to offer.

America's deliberately dishonest interpretation of Russia's measured response to an induced coup in Ukraine is used to generate an artificial sense of crisis, but despite the pressures that America is capable of exerting on Europe, we sense Europe only goes along to avoid a public squabble and only for so long as the costs are not too high.

The most intelligent leaders in Europe recognize what the United States is doing but do not want to clash openly, although the creation of the Minsk Agreement came pretty close to a polite rejection of America's demand for hardline tactics.

The coup in Ukraine was intended to put a hostile government in control of a long stretch of Russian border, a government which might cooperate in American military matters and which would serve as an irritant to Russia. But you don't get good results with malicious policy.

So far the coup has served only to hurt Ukraine's economy, security and long-term interests. It has a government which is seen widely as incompetent, a government which fomented unnecessary civil war, a government which may have shot down a civilian airliner, and a government in which no one, including in the West, has much faith.

Its finances are in turmoil, many important former economic connections are severed, and there is no great willingness by Europe, especially an

economically-troubled Europe, to assist it. It is not an advanced or stable enough place to join the EU because that would just mean gigantic subsidies being directed to it from an already troubled Europe.

And the idea of its joining NATO is absolutely a non-starter both because it can't carry its own weight in such an organization and because that act would cross a dangerous red line for Russia.

Kiev is having immense problems even holding the country together as it fights autonomous right-wing outfits like the Azov Battalion in the southeast who threaten the Minsk Agreement, as the regime tries to implement military recruiting in western Ukraine with more people running away than joining up, as it finds it must protect its own President with a Praetorian Guard of Americans from some serious threats by right-wing militias unhappy with Kiev's failures, as it must reckon with the de facto secession of Donetsk and the permanent loss of Crimea all this as it struggles with huge debts and an economy in a nosedive.

America is in no position to give serious assistance to Ukraine, just plenty of shop-worn slogans about freedom and democracy. These events provide a perfect example of the damage America inflicts on a people with malicious policy intended only to use them to hurt others.

There is such a record of this kind of thing by America that I am always surprised when there are any takers out there for the newest scheme. One remembers Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1975 encouraging the Iraqi Kurds to revolt against Saddam Hussein and then leaving them in the lurch when the dictator launched a merciless suppression.

I also think of the scenes at the end of the Vietnam War as American helicopters took off in cowardly fashion from the roof of the embassy leaving their Vietnamese co-workers, tears streaming down their faces, vainly grasping for the undercarriages of helicopters, a fitting and shameful end to a truly brainless crusade.

### **Messing up Ukraine**

I don't know but I very much doubt that the present government of Ukraine can endure, and it is always possible that it will slip into an even more serious civil war with factions fighting on all sides, something resembling the murderous mess America created in Libya. Of course, such a war on Russia's borders would come with tremendous risks.

The American aristocracy doesn't become concerned about disasters into which they themselves are not thrust, but a war in Ukraine could easily do just that. In ironic fashion, heightened conflict could mark the beginning of the end of

the era of European subservience to America. Chaos in Ukraine could provide exactly the shock Europe needs to stop supporting American schemes before the entire continent or even the world is threatened.

I remind readers that while Russia's economy is not as large as America's, it is a country with a strong history in engineering and science, and no one on the planet shares its terrifying experiences with foreign invasion. So it has developed and maintains a number of weapons systems that are second to none. Each one of its new class of ballistic missile submarines, and Russia is building a number of them, is capable of hitting 96 separate targets with thermo-nuclear warheads, and that capability is apart from rail-mounted ICBMs, hard-site ICBMs, truck-mounted missiles, air-launched cruise missiles, sea-launched cruise missiles, and a variety of other fearsome weapons.

Modern Russia does not make threats with this awesome power, and you might say Putin follows the advice of Theodore Roosevelt as he walks softly but carries a big stick, but I do think it wise for all of us to keep these things in mind as America taunts Russia and literally play a game of chicken with Armageddon.

I don't believe America has a legitimate mandate from anyone to behave in this dangerous way. Europe's smartest leaders, having lived at the very center of the Cold War and survived two world wars, do understand this and are trying very carefully not to allow things to go too far, but America has some highly irresponsible and dangerous people working hard on the Ukraine file, and accidents do happen when you push things too hard.

### **The Israel Obsession**

In another sphere of now constant engagement, instead of sponsoring and promoting fair arrangements in the Middle East, America has carried on a bizarre relationship with Israel, a relationship which is certainly against the America's own long term interests, although individual American politicians benefit with streams of special interests payments – America's self-imposed, utterly corrupt campaign financing system being ultimately responsible – in exchange for blindly insisting Israel is always right, which it most certainly is not.

An important segment of Israel's population is American, and they just carried over to Israel the same short-sightedness, arrogance and belligerence which characterize America, so much so, Israel may legitimately be viewed as an American colony in the Middle East rather than a genuinely independent state.

Its lack of genuine independence is reflected also in its constant dependence on huge subsidies, on its need for heavily-biased American diplomacy to protect it

in many forums including the United Nations, and on its dependence upon American arm-twisting and bribes in any number of places, Egypt's generous annual American pension requiring certain behaviors being one of the largest examples.

Here, too, inevitability has been foolishly ignored. The Palestinians are not going anywhere, and they have demonstrated the most remarkable endurance, yet almost every act of Israel since its inception, each supported by America, has been an effort to make them go away through extreme hardship and abuse and violence, looking towards the creation of Greater Israel, a dangerous fantasy idea which cannot succeed but it will fail only after it has taken an immense toll.

Despite America's constant diplomatic and financial pressure on other states to support its one-sided policy here, there are finally a number of signs that views are turning away from the preposterous notion that Israel is always right and that it can continue indefinitely with its savage behavior.

Recently, we have had a great last effort by America and covert partners to secure Israel's absolute pre-eminence in the Middle East through a whole series of destructive intrusions in the region the "Arab Spring," the reverse-revolution in Egypt, the smashing and now dismemberment of Iraq, the smashing and effective dismemberment of Libya, and the horrible, artificially-induced civil war in Syria which employs some of the most violent and lunatic people on earth from outside and gives them weapons, money and refuge in an effort to destroy a stable and relatively peaceful state.

I could go on, but I think the picture is clear: in almost every sphere of American governance, internally and abroad, America's poor political institutions have yielded the poorest decisions. America has over-extended itself on every front, has served myths rather than facts, has let greed run its governing of almost everything, and has squandered resources on achieving nothing of worth.

I view America's present posture in the world supporting dirty wars and coups in many places at the same time and treating others as game pieces to be moved rather than partners as a desperate attempt to shake the world to gain advantages it couldn't secure through accepted means of governance and policy.

America is that great beast, bellowing and shaking the ground, and for that reason, it is extremely dangerous.

**John Chuckman is former chief economist for a large Canadian oil company.**

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# Gen. Petraeus: Too Big to Jail

**From the Archive:** Retired Gen. David Petraeus confessed on Thursday to giving sensitive government secrets to his mistress and then lying about it to the FBI, but will get no jail time, only two years probation and a fine, showing that he is too big to jail, as ex -CIA analyst Ray McGovern predicted in March.

By Ray McGovern (Originally published on March 5, 2015)

The leniency shown former CIA Director (and retired General) David Petraeus by the Justice Department in sparing him prison time for the serious crimes that he has committed puts him in the same preferential, immune-from-incarceration category as those running the financial institutions of Wall Street, where, incidentally, Petraeus now makes millions. By contrast, “lesser” folks and particularly the brave men and women who disclose government crimes get to serve time, even decades, in jail.

Petraeus is now a partner at KKR, a firm specializing in large leveraged buyouts, and his hand-slap guilty plea to a misdemeanor for mishandling government secrets should not interfere with his continued service at the firm. KKR’s founders originally worked at Bear Stearns, the institution that failed in early 2008 at the beginning of the meltdown of the investment banking industry later that year.

Despite manifestly corrupt practices like those of subprime mortgage lenders, none of those responsible went to jail after the 2008-09 financial collapse which cost millions of Americans their jobs and homes. The bailed-out banks were judged “too big to fail” and the bankers “too big to jail.”

Two years ago, in a highly revealing slip of the tongue, Attorney General Eric Holder explained to Congress that it can “become difficult” to prosecute major financial institutions because they are so large that a criminal charge could pose a threat to the economy or perhaps what he meant was an even bigger threat to the economy.

Holder tried to walk back his unintended slip into honesty a year later, claiming, “There is no such thing as ‘too big to jail.’” And this bromide was dutifully echoed by Holder’s successor, Loretta Lynch, at her confirmation hearing in late January.

Words, though, are cheap. The proof is in the pudding. It remains true that not one of the crooked bankers or investment advisers who inflicted untold misery on ordinary people, gambling away much of their life savings, has been jailed. Not

one.

And now Petraeus, who gave his biographer/mistress access to some of the nation's most sensitive secrets and then lied about it to the FBI, has also been shown to be too big to jail. Perhaps Holder decided it would be a gentlemanly thing to do on his way out of office to take this awkward issue off Lynch's initial to-do list and spare her the embarrassment of demonstrating once again that equality under the law has become a mirage; that not only big banks, but also big shots like Petraeus who was Official Washington's most beloved general before becoming CIA director are, in fact, too big to jail.

It strikes me, in a way, as fitting that even on his way out the door, Eric Holder would not miss the opportunity to demonstrate his propensity for giving hypocrisy a bad name.

### **A Slap on Wrist for Serious Crimes**

The Justice Department let David Petraeus cop a plea after requiring him to admit that he had shared with his biographer/mistress eight black notebooks containing highly classified information and then lied about it to FBI investigators. Serious crimes? The following quotes are excerpted from "U.S. v. David Howell Petraeus: Factual Basis in support of the Plea Agreement" offered by the U.S. District Court for the Western District of North Carolina, Charlotte Division:

"17. During his tenure as Commander of ISAF in Afghanistan, defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS maintained bound, five-by-eight-inch notebooks that contained his daily schedule and classified and unclassified notes he took during official meetings, conferences, and briefings. A total of eight such books (hereinafter the "Black Books") encompassed the period of defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS'S ISAF [Afghanistan] command and collectively contained classified information regarding **the identities of covert officers**, war strategy, intelligence capabilities and mechanisms, diplomatic discussions, quotes and deliberative discussions from high-level National Security Council meetings, and defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS's discussions with the President of the United States of America. [emphasis added]

"18. The Black Books contained national defense information, including Top Secret//SCI and code word information."

Despite the sensitivity of the notebooks and existing law and regulations, Petraeus did not surrender them to proper custody when he returned to the U.S. after being nominated to become the Director of the CIA. According to the Court's "Factual Basis," Petraeus's biographer/mistress recorded a conversation



of Aug. 4, 2011, in which she asks about the "Black Books." The Court statement continues:

" [Petraeus] 'Umm, well, they're really I mean they are highly classified, some of them. I mean there's code word stuff in there.' On or about August 27, 2011, defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS sent an email to his biographer in which he agreed to provide the Black Books to his biographer. **On or about August 28, 2011, defendant DAVID HOWEL PETRAEUS delivered the Black Books to a private residence in Washington, D.C. where his biographer was staying. On or about September 1, 2011, defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS retrieved the Black Books from the D.C. private residence and returned them to his own Arlington, Virginia home.**" [emphasis added]

I would think it a safe guess that Petraeus's timing can be attributed to his awareness that his privacy and freedom of movement was about to be greatly diminished, once his CIA personal security detail started keeping close track of him from his first day on the job as CIA Director, Sept. 6, 2011.

"32. On or about October 26, 2012, defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS was interviewed by two FBI special agents. [He] was advised that the special agents were conducting a criminal investigation. PETRAEUS stated that (a) he had never provided any classified information to his biographer, and (b) he had never facilitated the provision of classified information to his biographer. **These statements were false.** Defendant DAVID HOWELL PETRAEUS then and there knew that he previously shared the Black Books with his biographer." [emphasis added]

Lying to the FBI? No problem. As "Expose Facts" blogger Marcy Wheeler immediately commented: "For lying to the FBI a crime that others go to prison for for months and years Petraeus will just get a two point enhancement on his sentencing guidelines. **The Department of Justice basically completely wiped out the crime of covering up his crime of leaking some of the country's most sensitive secrets to his mistress.**" [emphasis added]

Talk about "prosecutorial discretion" or, in this case, indiscretion giving Petraeus a fine and probation but no felony conviction or prison time for what he did! Lesser lights are not so fortunate. Just ask Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning who is serving a 35-year prison sentence for disclosing information to the public about U.S. war crimes and other abuses. Or Edward Snowden, who is stuck in Russia facing a U.S. indictment on espionage charges for informing the people about pervasive and unconstitutional U.S. government surveillance of common citizens.

Or former CIA officer John Kiriakou who was sent to prison for inadvertently revealing the name of one Agency official cognizant of CIA torture. Here's what

Neil MacBride, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, said then: "The government has a vital interest in protecting the identities of those involved in covert operations. Leaks of highly sensitive, closely held and classified information compromise national security and can put individual lives in danger."

When, on Oct. 23, 2012, Kiriakou acquiesced to a plea deal requiring two-and-a-half years in federal prison, then CIA Director Petraeus sent a sanctimonious Memorandum to Agency employees applauding Kiriakou's conviction and noting, "It marks an important victory for our agency **there are indeed consequences for those who believe they are above the laws that protect our fellow officers and enable American intelligence agencies to operate with the requisite degree of secrecy.**" [emphasis added]

Consequences for Kiriakou but not, as we now know, for Petraeus.

If you feel no discomfort at this selective application of the law, you might wish to scroll or page back to the "Factual Basis" for Petraeus's Plea Agreement and be reminded that it was just three days after his lecture to CIA employees about the sanctity of protecting the identity of covert agents that Petraeus lied to FBI investigators on Oct. 26, 2012 about his sharing such details with his mistress.

### **Why Did Petraeus Do It?**

Old soldiers like Petraeus (indeed, most aging but still ambitious men) have been known to end up doing self-destructive things by letting themselves be flattered by the attentions of younger women. This may offer a partial explanation human weakness even in a self-styled larger-than-life super-Mensch. But I see the motivation as mostly vainglory. (The two are not mutually exclusive, of course.)

Looking back at Petraeus's record of overweening ambition, it seems likely he was motivated first and foremost by a desire to ensure that his biographer would be able to extract from the notebooks some juicy morsels he may not have remembered to tell her about. This might enhance his profile as Warrior-Scholar-"King David," the image that he has assiduously cultivated and promoted, with the help of an adulating neocon-dominated media.

Petraeus's presidential ambitions have been an open secret. And with his copping a plea to a misdemeanor, his "rehabilitation" seems to have already begun. He has told friends that he would like to serve again in government and they immediately relayed that bright hope to the media.

Sen. John McCain was quick to call the whole matter "closed." A strong supporter

of Petraeus, McCain added this fulsome praise: "At a time of grave security challenges around the world, I hope that General Petraeus will continue to provide his outstanding service and leadership to our nation, as he has throughout his distinguished career."

And Michael O'Hanlon, Brookings' neocon military specialist who rarely gets anything right, spoke true to form to the New York Times: "The broader nation needs his advice, and I think it's been evident that people still want to hear from him. People are forgiving and I know he made a mistake. But he's also a national hero and a national treasure."

The "mainstream media" is trapped in its undeserved adulation for Petraeus's "heroism." It is virtually impossible, for example, for them to acknowledge that his ballyhooed, official-handout-based "success" in training and equipping tens of thousands of crack Iraqi troops was given the lie when those same troops ran away (the officers took helicopters) and left their weapons behind at the first sight of ISIL fighters a year ago.

Equally sham were media claims of the "success" for the "surges" of 30,000 troops sent into Iraq (2007) and 33,000 into Afghanistan (2009). Each "surge" squandered the lives of about 1,000 U.S. troops for nothing yes, nothing except in the case of Iraq buying time for President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to get out of town without a clear-cut defeat hanging around their necks.

Many of the supposed successes of Petraeus's Iraqi "surge" also predated the "surge," including a high-tech program for killing top militants such as Al-Qaeda-in-Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the formation of the so-called Sunni Awakening, both occurring in 2006 under the previous field commanders. And, Bush's principal goal of the "surge" to create political space for a fuller Sunni-Shiite reconciliation was never accomplished. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["The Surge Myth's Deadly Result."](#)]

And last, it is important to note that David Petraeus does not have a corner on the above-the-law attitudes and behavior of previous directors of the CIA. The kid-gloves treatment he has been accorded, however, will increase chances that future directors will feel they can misbehave seriously and suffer no serious personal consequence.

The virtual immunity enjoyed by the well connected even when they lie to the FBI or tell whoppers in sworn testimony to Congress (as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper [has done](#)) feeds the propensity to prioritize one's own personal ambition and to delegate a back seat to legitimate national security concerns even basic things like giving required protection to properly

classified information, including the identity of covert officers.

One might call this all-too-common syndrome Self-Agrandizing Dismissiveness (SAD). Sadly, Petraeus is merely the latest exemplar of the SAD syndrome. The unbridled ambitions of some of his predecessors at CIA the arrogant John Deutch, for example have been equally noxious and destructive. But we'll leave that for the next chapter.

[For more on Petraeus's corruption and his close ties to self-interested neoconservatives, see "[Neocons Guided Petraeus on Afghan War.](#)"]

**Full Disclosure: Petraeus has not yet answered McGovern's letter of Feb. 3 regarding why McGovern was barred from a public speaking event by Petraeus in New York City on Oct. 30, 2014, and then was roughly arrested by police and jailed for the night. McGovern wonders if Petraeus failed to respond because he was pre-occupied working out his Plea Agreement.**

Ray McGovern worked for a total of 27 years in all four of CIA's main directorates. He served under seven Presidents and nine CIA Directors, and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPs). He now works for Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington.

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## Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?

**From the Archive:** As Democrats line up behind Hillary Clinton as their presumptive 2016 presidential nominee, many are whistling past the graveyard of her disastrous record on foreign interventions, judgments that raise doubts about her fitness for the job, as Robert Parry observed in 2014.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Feb. 10, 2014, with some updates.)

Most Democratic power-brokers appear settled on Hillary Clinton as their choice for President in 2016 and she holds lopsided leads over potential party rivals in early opinion polls but there are some warning flags flying, paradoxically, hoisted by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates in his praise for the former First Lady, U.S. senator and Secretary of State.

On the surface, one might think that Gates's glowing commendations of Clinton would further burnish her standing as the odds-on next President of the United States, but strip away the fawning endorsements and Gates's portrait of Clinton

in his memoir, *Duty*, is of a pedestrian foreign policy thinker who is easily duped and leans toward military solutions.

Indeed, for thoughtful and/or progressive Democrats, the prospect of a President Hillary Clinton could represent a step back from some of President Barack Obama's more innovative foreign policy strategies, particularly his readiness to cooperate with the Russians and Iranians to defuse Middle East crises and his willingness to face down the Israel Lobby when it is pushing for heightened confrontations and war.

Based on her public record and Gates's insider account, Clinton could be expected to favor a more neoconservative approach to the Mideast, one more in line with the traditional thinking of Official Washington and the belligerent dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

As a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State, Clinton rarely challenged the conventional wisdom or resisted the use of military force to solve problems. She famously voted for the Iraq War in 2002 falling for President George W. Bush's bogus WMD case and remained a war supporter until her position became politically untenable during Campaign 2008.

Representing New York, Clinton rarely if ever criticized Israeli actions. In summer 2006, as Israeli warplanes pounded southern Lebanon, killing more than 1,000 Lebanese, Sen. Clinton shared a stage with Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations Dan Gillerman who had said, "While it may be true and probably is that not all Muslims are terrorists, it also happens to be true that nearly all terrorists are Muslim."

At a pro-Israel rally with Clinton in New York on July 17, 2006, Gillerman proudly defended Israel's massive violence against targets in Lebanon. "Let us finish the job," Gillerman told the crowd. "We will excise the cancer in Lebanon" and "cut off the fingers" of Hezbollah. Responding to international concerns that Israel was using "disproportionate" force in bombing Lebanon and killing hundreds of civilians, Gillerman said, "You're damn right we are." [NYT, July 18, 2006]

Sen. Clinton did not protest Gillerman's remarks, since doing so would presumably have offended an important pro-Israel constituency.

### **Misreading Gates**

In November 2006, when Bush nominated Gates to be Defense Secretary, Clinton gullibly misread the significance of the move. She interpreted it as a signal that the war was being wound down when it actually presaged the opposite, that an escalation or "surge" was coming.

From her seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Clinton failed to penetrate the smokescreen around Gates's selection. The reality was that Bush had ousted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in part, because he had sided with Generals John Abizaid and George Casey who favored shrinking the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. Gates was privately onboard for replacing those generals and expanding the U.S. footprint.

After getting blindsided by Gates over what became a "surge" of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, Sen. Clinton sided with Democrats who objected to the escalation, but Gates quotes her in his memoir as later telling President Obama that she did so only for political reasons.

Gates recalled a meeting on Oct. 26, 2009, to discuss whether to authorize a similar "surge" in Afghanistan, a position favored by Gates and Clinton, with Secretary of State Clinton supporting even a higher number of troops than Defense Secretary Gates was. But the Afghan "surge" faced skepticism from Vice President Joe Biden and other White House staffers.

Gates wrote that he and Clinton "were the only outsiders in the session, considerably outnumbered by White House insiders. Obama said at the outset to Hillary and me, 'It's time to lay our cards on the table, Bob, what do you think?' I repeated a number of the main points I had made in my memo to him [urging three brigades].

"Hillary agreed with my overall proposal but urged the president to consider approving the fourth brigade combat team if the allies wouldn't come up with the troops."

Gates then reported on what he regarded as a stunning admission by Clinton, writing: "The exchange that followed was remarkable. In strongly supporting the surge in Afghanistan, Hillary told the president that her opposition to the surge in Iraq had been political because she was facing him in the Iowa primary [in 2008]. She went on to say, 'The Iraq surge worked.'

"The president conceded vaguely that opposition to the Iraq surge had been political. To hear the two of them making these admissions, and in front of me, was as surprising as it was dismaying." (Obama's aides have since disputed Gates's suggestion that the President indicated that his opposition to the Iraq "surge" was political, noting that he had always opposed the Iraq War. The Clinton team has not challenged Gates's account.)

But the exchange, as recounted by Gates, indicates that Clinton not only let her political needs dictate her position on an important national security issue, but that she accepts as true the superficial conventional wisdom about the

“successful surge” in Iraq.

While that is indeed Official Washington’s beloved interpretation in part because influential neocons believe the “surge” rehabilitated their standing after the WMD fiasco and the disastrous war the reality is that the Iraq “surge” never achieved its stated goal of buying time to reconcile the country’s financial and sectarian divides, which remain bloody to this day.

### **The Unsuccessful Surge**

The truth that Hillary Clinton apparently doesn’t recognize is that the “surge” was only “successful” in that it delayed the ultimate American defeat until Bush and his neocon cohorts had vacated the White House and the blame for the failure could be shifted, at least partly, to President Obama.

Other than sparing “war president” Bush the humiliation of having to admit defeat, the dispatching of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in early 2007 did little more than get nearly 1,000 additional Americans killed almost one-quarter of the war’s total U.S. deaths along with what certainly was a much higher number of Iraqis.

For example, WikiLeaks’s “Collateral Murder.” video depicted one 2007 scene during the “surge” in which U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters news staffers, walking down a street in Baghdad. The attack helicopters then killed a Good Samaritan, when he stopped his van to take survivors to a hospital, and severely wounded two children in the van.

A more rigorous analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 apparently beyond Hillary Clinton’s abilities or inclination would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the “surge” and were implemented in 2006 by Generals Casey and Abizaid.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid deployed a highly classified operation to eliminate key al-Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward al-Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the so-called “Awakening” in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the *de facto* ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves, thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the “surge” or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military's occupation indeed was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki insisted on and got a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush.

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that praised Bush's early war judgments, concluded that the "surge" was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence. In his book, *The War Within*, Woodward wrote, "In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge."

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of al-Qaeda extremists in Anbar province and the surprise decision of al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

However, in Washington, where the neocons remain very influential, the myth grew that Bush's "surge" had brought the violence under control. Gen. David Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as the military genius who achieved "victory at last" in Iraq (as Newsweek declared).

Even the inconvenient truth that the United States was unceremoniously ushered out of Iraq in 2011 and that the mammoth U.S. embassy that was supposed to be the command center for Washington's imperial reach throughout the region sat mostly empty did not dent this cherished conventional wisdom about the "successful surge."

### **Clinton's Conundrum**

Yet, it is one thing for neocon pundits to promote such fallacies; it is another thing for the Democratic front-runner for President in 2016 to believe this nonsense. And to say that she only opposed the "surge" out of a political calculation could border on disqualifying.

But that pattern fits with Clinton's previous decisions. She belatedly broke with the Iraq War during Campaign 2008 when she realized that her hawkish stance



was damaging her political chances against Obama, who had opposed the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Despite Clinton's shift on Iraq, Obama still managed to win the Democratic nomination and ultimately the White House. However, after his election, some of his advisers urged him to assemble a "team of rivals" a la Abraham Lincoln by asking Republican Defense Secretary Gates to stay on and recruiting Clinton to be Secretary of State.

Then, in his first months in office, as Obama grappled with what to do about the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, Gates and Clinton teamed up with Gen. David Petraeus, a neocon favorite, to maneuver the President into another 30,000-troop "surge" to wage a counterinsurgency war across large swaths of Afghanistan.

In *Duty*, Gates cites his collaboration with Clinton as crucial to his success in getting Obama to agree to the troop escalation and the expanded goal of counterinsurgency. Referring to Clinton, Gates wrote, "we would develop a very strong partnership, in part because it turned out we agreed on almost every important issue."

The hawkish Gates-Clinton tandem helped counter the move dovish team including Vice President Joe Biden, several members of the National Security Council staff and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who tried to steer President Obama away from this deeper involvement.

Gates wrote, "I was confident that Hillary and I would be able to work closely together. Indeed, before too long, commentators were observing that in an administration where all power and decision making were gravitating to the White House, Clinton and I represented the only independent 'power center,' not least because, for very different reasons, we were both seen as 'un-fireable.'"

When General Stanley McChrystal proposed the expanded counterinsurgency war for Afghanistan, Gates wrote that he and "Hillary strongly supported McChrystal's approach" along with UN Ambassador Susan Rice and Petraeus. On the other side were Biden, NSC aide Tom Donilon and intelligence adviser John Brennan, with Eikenberry supporting more troops but skeptical of the counterinsurgency plan because of weaknesses in the Afghan government, Gates wrote.

After Obama hesitantly approved the Afghan "surge" and reportedly immediately regretted his decision Clinton took aim at Eikenberry, a retired general who had served in Afghanistan before being named ambassador.

Pressing for his removal, "Hillary had come to the meeting loaded for bear," Gates wrote. "She gave a number of specific examples of Eikenberry's

insubordination to herself and her deputy. She said, 'He's a huge problem.'

"She went after the NSS [national security staff] and the White House staff, expressing anger at their direct dealings with Eikenberry and offering a number of examples of what she termed their arrogance, their efforts to control the civilian side of the war effort, their refusal to accommodate requests for meetings.

"As she talked, she became more forceful. 'I've had it,' she said, 'You want it [control of the civilian side of the war], I'll turn it all over to you and wash my hands of it. I'll not be held accountable for something I cannot manage because of White House and NSS interference.'"

However, when the protests failed to get Eikenberry and General Douglas Lute, a deputy national security adviser, fired, Gates concluded that they had the protection of President Obama and reflected his doubts about the Afghan War policy:

"It had become clear that Eikenberry and Lute, whatever their shortcomings, were under an umbrella of protection at the White House. With Hillary and me so adamant that the two should leave, that protection could come only from the president. Because I could not imagine any previous president tolerating someone in a senior position openly working against policies he had approved, the most likely explanation was that the president himself did not really believe the strategy he had approved would work."

Of the 2,357 American soldiers who have died in the 12-year-old Afghan War, about 1,725 (or nearly three-quarters) have died since President Obama took office. Many were killed in what is now widely regarded as the failed counterinsurgency strategy that Gates, Petraeus and Clinton pushed on Obama.

### **Getting Gaddafi**

In 2011, Secretary of State Clinton also was a hawk on military intervention in Libya to oust (and ultimately kill) Muammar Gaddafi. However, on Libya, Defense Secretary Gates sided with the doves, feeling that the U.S. military was already overextended in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and another intervention risked further alienating the Muslim world.

This time, Gates found himself lined up with Biden, Donilon and Brennan "urging caution," while Clinton joined with Rice and NSC aides Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power in "urging aggressive U.S. action to prevent an anticipated massacre of the rebels as Qaddafi fought to remain in power," Gates wrote. "In the final phase of the internal debate, Hillary threw her considerable clout behind Rice, Rhodes and Power."

President Obama again ceded to Clinton's advocacy for war and supported a Western bombing campaign that enabled the rebels, including Islamic extremists with ties to Al-Qaeda, to seize control of Tripoli and hunt Gaddafi down in Sirte, Libya, on Oct. 20, 2011. After Gaddafi was caught, he was tortured, including being sodomized by a knife, and then murdered.

Clinton expressed delight when she received the news of Gaddafi's capture and death, though she may not have known all the grisly details at the time. During a TV interview, she joked, "We came, we saw, he died," in a reference to Julius Caesar's famous phrase, "veni, vidi, vici," Latin for "I came, I saw, I conquered" after a decisive military victory in what is now Turkey.

But the overthrow and murder of Gaddafi cast Libya into civil war and chaos with Islamic terrorism spreading throughout Libya and surrounding areas. The violence included an assault on the U.S. mission in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. personnel, an incident that Clinton has called the worst moment in her four years as Secretary of State.

Gates retired from the Pentagon on July 1, 2011, and Clinton stepped down at the State Department on Feb. 1, 2013, after Obama's reelection. Afterwards, Obama charted a more innovative foreign policy course, collaborating with Russian President Vladimir Putin to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs on Syria and Iran, rather than seeking military solutions or more "regime changes" favored by the neocons.

In both cases, Obama had to face down hawkish sentiments in his own administration and in Congress, as well as Israeli and Saudi opposition. Regarding negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, the Israel Lobby pressed for new sanctions legislation that appeared designed to sabotage the talks and put the U.S. and Iran on a possible path to war.

(Later in February 2014, neocons inside the State Department, including Assistant of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who had been promoted by Secretary Clinton, sabotaged Obama's cooperation with Putin by orchestrating a coup in Ukraine on Russia's border. The crisis drove a wedge between Obama and Putin.)

### **Dealing with Iran**

As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton had been a hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue. In 2009-2010, when Iran first indicated a willingness to compromise, she led the opposition to any negotiated settlement and pushed for punishing sanctions.

To clear the route for sanctions, Clinton helped sink agreements tentatively negotiated with Iran to ship most of its low-enriched uranium out of the country. In 2009, Iran was refining uranium only to the level of about 3-4 percent, as needed for energy production. Its negotiators offered to swap much of that for nuclear isotopes for medical research.

But the Obama administration and the West rebuffed the Iranian gesture because it would have left Iran with enough enriched uranium to theoretically refine much higher up to 90 percent for potential use in a single bomb, though Iran insisted it had no such intention and U.S. intelligence agencies agreed.

Then, in spring 2010, Iran agreed to another version of the uranium swap proposed by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey, with the apparent backing of President Obama. But that arrangement came under fierce attack by Secretary of State Clinton and was derided by leading U.S. news outlets, including editorial writers at the New York Times who mocked Brazil and Turkey as being “played by Tehran.”

The ridicule of Brazil and Turkey as bumbling understudies on the world stage continued even after Brazil released Obama’s private letter to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva encouraging Brazil and Turkey to work out the deal. Despite the letter’s release, Obama didn’t publicly defend the swap and instead joined in scuttling the deal, another moment when Clinton and administration hardliners got their way.

That set the world on the course for tightened economic sanctions on Iran and heightened tensions that brought the region close to another war. As Israel threatened to attack, Iran expanded its nuclear capabilities by increasing enrichment to 20 percent to fill its research needs, moving closer to the level necessary for building a bomb.

Ironically, the nuclear deal reached in late 2013 (and reinforced by the framework agreement of April 2, 2015) essentially accepts Iran’s low-enrichment of uranium for peaceful purposes, pretty much where matters stood in 2009-2010. But the Israel Lobby quickly set to work, again, trying to torpedo the new agreement by getting Congress to approve new sanctions on Iran.

Clinton remained noncommittal for several weeks as momentum for the sanctions bill grew, but she finally declared her support for President Obama’s opposition to the new sanctions. In a Jan. 26 letter to Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, she wrote:

“Now that serious negotiations are finally under way, we should do everything we can to test whether they can advance a permanent solution. As President Obama

said, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed, while keeping all options on the table. The U.S. intelligence community has assessed that imposing new unilateral sanctions now 'would undermine the prospects for a successful comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran.' I share that view. "

Clinton's successor, Secretary of State John Kerry, also has pressed Israel and the Palestinian Authority to accept a U.S. framework for settling their long-running conflict (an effort that ultimately failed when Israeli leaders balked at meaningful concessions). The Obama administration's aggressiveness even in the face of Israeli objections stood in marked contrast to the behavior of previous U.S. administrations and, indeed, Obama's first term with Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State.

One key question for a Clinton presidential candidacy will be whether she would build on the diplomatic foundation that Obama has laid, or dismantle it and return to a more traditional foreign policy focused on military might and catering to the views of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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## Reasons for the Mideast's Despair

The West is quick to show disdain for the Muslim world and almost as quick to bomb it. But the only way to ultimately diffuse Islamic extremism is to understand the West's historic role in causing the problem and then pursuing practical ways to address legitimate concerns, as Alon Ben-Meir explains.

By Alon Ben-Meir

The intensified public discussion about the root causes of violent extremism among some Muslims has focused mainly on the socio-economic and political conditions that exist in Arab countries and among Arab communities in Europe and the U.S., which provide a breeding ground for extremism.

But to effectively counter violent extremism, we must also carefully consider how the development of events in the wake of World Wars I and II have impacted

the psychological disposition of the Arab population throughout the Middle East. Starting with the arbitrary division of the region by Western powers, the wars, revolutions and scores of violent conflicts that followed have added layer upon layer of deep resentment and hatred of the West, and the puppet Arab leaders who were installed to serve their Western masters.

The following provides a brief historic, panoramic view of what the vast majority of the Arab population has experienced, which has informed their perception of the world around them, left an indelible mark on their psyches, and framed the beliefs and behavior of many.

President Barack Obama stated at the Summit of Countering Violent Extremism that "the Muslim world has suffered historical grievances [and] does buy into the belief that so many of the ills in the Middle East flow from the history of colonialism or conspiracy."

Whether the colonial powers were only partially or fully to blame is hardly relevant because the Arab masses continue to believe that colonialism was behind the ills and suffering they endured. From the perspective of the majority of the Arabs, the developments of major events that followed the two World Wars simply confirmed their perception.

Even before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Britain and France reached a secret pact in 1916 (the Sykes-Picot Agreement) to divide Ottoman-held territories in the Middle East between the two powers irrespective of sect, ethnicity and religious affiliations. Dividing the "pie" between them was viewed as exploitive, arrogant and dismissive of the welfare of the indigenous populations, ushering in decades of strife and turmoil.

The creation of most of the Arab states following World War II hardly changed the plight of the Arabs living in these countries. The French and the British appointed governors, kings and emirs who ruled with iron fists, further intensifying hatred toward the Western powers and toward the authoritarian regimes under which they groaned.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was regarded as yet another Western conspiracy. The humiliation of the Arab armies by the nascent Israeli forces, the loss of substantial territory, and the creation of the Palestinian refugees have added a further layer of deep resentment. The Israeli occupation, which led to the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah, continues to feed the Palestinians a daily ration of indignity to this very day.

The 1953 overthrow of the freely-elected Mosaddegh government in Iran, engineered by the CIA and British intelligence because of the parliament's

decision to nationalize the oil industry, was seen as the most flagrant intervention in the internal affairs of a Muslim state. The installation of the Shah, a Western puppet, and his ruthless treatment of his subjects were never forgotten by the Iranians and still remain a source of anger and antipathy toward the U.S.

When Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was hailed as a nationalist hero, rose to power in Egypt and dared to challenge the West's dominance and "ownership" of the Suez Canal, the French and British, in cahoots with Israel, answered with war.

The war with Egypt once again trampled Arab pride as the retaking of the Canal and the occupation of the Sinai by Israel was viewed by the Arabs as a blatant manifestation of the West's vulgarity of self-entitlement and Israel's hunger for more Arab land.

And then came the 1967 Six Day War. In 144 hours, Israel conquered Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian territories more than three times its own size. Though the defeat of the Arab armies on the battlefield was humiliating, it was the psychological defeat that shattered the Arabs' self-esteem.

Although the 1973 Yom Kippur War salvaged Egypt's national pride (Egyptian forces were allowed to remain on the East side of the Suez Canal, which provided Anwar Sadat a political victory), it did little to allay the Arabs' humiliation as Israel continued to occupy Arab land on three fronts.

The 1979 Iranian revolution marked the first major Muslim country to revolt against the United States, sending a clear message to Arabs and Muslims that the West will no longer impose its whims with impunity. Unsurprisingly, the Mullahs' victory did not change the core resentment and hatred toward the West.

Although the 2001 Afghanistan war was arguably necessary to destroy al-Qaeda following the 9/11 attack, the prolongation of the war, its destructiveness and the death toll were and continue to be seen as consequences of the West's never-satisfied appetite for dominating Muslim/Arab lands.

The Afghanistan war produced a new generation of militant Muslims who operated both with and independent of al-Qaeda, ready to challenge Western powers and the autocratic Arab regimes that want to maintain the status quo.

Notwithstanding how much Saddam Hussein was reviled for his ruthlessness, the vast majority of Arab youth viewed the 2003 Iraq War as an unprecedented assault on the Arabs' heartland and people. Iraq was essentially dismantled, pitting Sunnis against the Shiite majority; tens of thousands were killed and violent Islamists converged into Iraq, which eventually led to the birth of ISIS while poisoning a new generation of young Arabs with intensely anti-Western

sentiments.

The Arab Spring, which ushered in great hope and promise for the future, turned out to be a cruel winter. The U.S. and the EU have selectively interfered in the various Arab Spring countries without any clear strategy, believing that pushing democracy down the throat of the people would provide a panacea for their political ills.

All considered, the vast majority of the Arab people accept their lot in silent desperation. But the relatively small minority who are engaged in violent extremism rose to defy by whatever means both Western powers and the authoritarian Arab regimes. These jihadists differ in age, financial ability, education and family prominence; they do not fit a single profile nor do they follow a single path to extremism.

However, they all have one thing in common: hatred of the West and the own corrupt leaders. They no longer believe that their governments will heed their call for change; they believe Western influence is a curse and only jihad can change their destiny and the course of history.

Religious extremism and the deliberate distortion of Islamic teaching provided the outlet that could justify any violent action to remedy decades of servitude and subjugation. Dying while fighting the enemy is extolled as martyrdom, the ultimate sacrifice that opens the gates of heaven and offers true freedom and dignity, of which they were deprived on earth.

Though the use of force is at times necessary to destroy an irredeemable foe such as ISIS, it is critical to recognize that no amount of military force can eradicate ideology and religious conviction. A multitude of measures are necessary to counter violent extremism, including education, economic assistance, job opportunities, integration, addressing grievances, engagement in social activities, and much more.

But to successfully combat this long-term problem, Western powers must act on a number of fronts to set the stage for reconciliation. Reconciliation must begin by recognizing and admitting to past mistakes. Regardless of the extent of the West's abuse and exploitation of Arab resources and people, acknowledging its long history of misguided policies is critical to establish a dialogue which is still largely missing in the strategy of countering violent extremism.

The West can offer a model of democratic government, but must not impose it arbitrarily. The Arab states will find their own way to reconcile religion with the form of democracy they choose, and the West must honor the outcome of fair and free elections.



The West owes many of the Arab states, especially those with overwhelmingly poor populations such as Egypt, the financial and technical support needed to embark on sustainable economic development projects that empower the people. Poor, hungry and despairing youth need food even before freedom, and job opportunities, healthcare and education before meaningless elections.

The U.S. must never cease its effort to diffuse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and bring an end to the occupation, which provides a continuing source of extremism. In doing so, the U.S. addresses one of the Arabs' foremost grievances against it, while strengthening Israel's national security.

Finally, since the West and the Arab states have a common interest in degrading, if not eliminating, radical militants, their collaboration must be strategic in order to avoid the potential of creating a new crisis. Does the U.S. know what the fate of Syria and Iraq will be once ISIS is defeated, and how that will impact the Sunni-Shiite "war" spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and Iran?

None of the above is meant to suggest that the Arab states have been merely the victims of imperialism. They have and continue to contribute to the plight of their people. The Arab world is rampant with inequality, gross human rights violations, and tens of millions of poverty-stricken young men and women with little prospect of finding a meaningful purpose to their lives.

If the Arab leaders want to end the scourge of violent extremism, they must assume some responsibility and not simply blame the West for their grievances and decades of socio-economic and political dislocation and despair.

Unless they invest now in economic development, education, healthcare and opportunities for growth, and allow for social and political freedom (albeit gradually), the radicalization of the young will only be intensified and the unforgiving storm will continue to sweep one country after another.

To be sure, countering violent radicalism will be a long and costly campaign. It will take foresight, courage and wisdom to learn from past mistakes. Together with the West, the Arab states must chart a new course of trust and mutual respect to tackle the herculean job that lies ahead.

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# Was Sgt. Bergdahl a Whistleblower?

Mainstream U.S. politicians and media were quick to condemn Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, after his years as a Taliban prisoner in Afghanistan were deemed “desertion.” But another possibility is that Bergdahl was captured after he left his base in a failed attempt to report wrongdoing, says ex-State Department official Matthew Hoh.

By Matthew Hoh

Last week, charges of Desertion and Misbehavior Before the Enemy were recommended against Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl. Tragically, Sergeant Bergdahl was once again crucified, without evidence or trial, throughout mainstream, alternative and social media.

Sergeant Bergdahl was offered as a sacrifice to primarily Republican politicians, bloggers, pundits, chicken hawks and jingoists, while Democrats mostly kept silent as Sergeant Bergdahl was paraded electronically and digitally in the latest Triumph of the Global War on Terror.

That same day, President Ashraf Ghani was applauded, in person, by the U.S. Congress. Such coincidences, whether they are arranged or accidental, often appear in literary or cinematic tales, but they do, occasionally, manifest themselves in real life, often appearing to juxtapose the virtues and vices of a society for the sake and advancement of political narratives.

The problem with this specific coincidence for those on the Right, indulging in the fantasy of American military success abroad, as well as for those on the Left, desperate to prove that Democrats can be as tough as Republicans, is that reality may intrude.

To the chagrin and consternation of many in DC, Sergeant Bergdahl may prove to be the selfless hero, while President Ghani may play the thief. Sergeant Bergdahl's departure from his unit in Afghanistan may come to be understood as just and his time as a prisoner of war principled, while President Barack Obama's continued propping up and bankrolling of the government in Kabul, at the expense of American service members and taxpayers, comes to be fully acknowledged as immoral and profligate.

Buried in much of the media coverage this past week on the charges presented against Sergeant Bergdahl, with the exception of CNN, are details of the Army's investigation into Sergeant Bergdahl's disappearance, capture and captivity.

As revealed by Sergeant Bergdahl's legal team, 22 Army investigators have

constructed a report that details aspects of Sergeant Bergdahl's departure from his unit, his capture and his five years as a prisoner of war that disprove many of the malicious rumors and depictions of him and his conduct.

As documented in his lawyers' statement submitted to the Army on March 25, in response to Sergeant Bergdahl's referral to the Article 32 preliminary hearing (which is roughly the military equivalent of a civilian grand jury), the following facts are now known about Sergeant Bergdahl and his time prior to and during his captivity as a prisoner of war:

- Sergeant Bergdahl is a "truthful person" who "did not act out of a bad motive."
- He did not have the intention to desert permanently nor did he have an intention to leave the Army when he left his unit's outpost in eastern Afghanistan in 2009.
- He did not have the intention of joining the Taliban or assisting the enemy.
- He left his post to report "disturbing circumstances to the attention of the nearest general officer." -While he was a prisoner of war for five years, he was tortured, but he did not cooperate with his captors. Rather, Sergeant Bergdahl attempted to escape 12 times, each time with the knowledge he would be tortured or killed if caught. -There is no evidence American soldiers died looking for Sergeant Bergdahl.

Again, these are the findings of the Army's investigation into Sergeant Bergdahl's disappearance. They are not the apologies or fantasies of his legal team, Marines turned anti-war peaceniks like myself, or Obama fawning conspirators. The details behind these facts are contained in the Army's report, authored by Major General Kenneth Dahl, which has not been publically released, but hopefully will be made available to the public after Sergeant Bergdahl's preliminary hearing next month or, if the desertion and misbehavior charges are pursued, during his court martial.

Just what events Sergeant Bergdahl witnessed that would compel him to risk his life, traveling unarmed through enemy controlled territory, to provide information to an American general, are not presently known.

We do know that the unit Sergeant Bergdahl belonged to underwent serious disciplinary actions both before and after Sergeant Bergdahl's capture, that several of his unit's leaders were fired and replaced both prior to and subsequent to his capture, and, from communications between Sergeant Bergdahl and his family prior to his capture, Sergeant Bergdahl was sickened and distraught over the actions of his unit, including its possible complicity in the death of an Afghan child.

It is quite possible Sergeant Bergdahl left his unit to report a war crime or

crimes or other serious crime or crimes committed by American forces. He may have been trying to report a failure of his immediate leadership or it may have been something, in hindsight, that we would now consider trivial.

Such an action on Sergeant Bergdahl's part would help to explain why his former platoon mates, quite possibly the very men whom Sergeant Bergdahl left to report on, have been so forceful in their condemnation of him, so determined not to forgive him for his disappearance, and so adamant in their denial to show compassion for his suffering while a prisoner of war.

This knowledge may explain why the Taliban believed Sergeant Bergdahl had fallen behind on a patrol rather than deserted. If he truly was deserting, then Sergeant Bergdahl most likely would have told the Taliban disparaging information about U.S. forces in an attempt to harvest friendship and avoid torture, but if he was on a personal mission to report wrongdoing, then he certainly would not relate such information to the enemy.

This may explain why Sergeant Bergdahl told his captors a lie rather than disclose his voluntary departure from the platoon outpost.

This would also justify why Sergeant Bergdahl left his base without his weapon or equipment. Before his departure from his outpost, Sergeant Bergdahl asked his team leader what would happen if a soldier left the base, without permission, with his weapon and other issued gear. Sergeant Bergdahl's team leader replied that the soldier would get in trouble.

Understanding Sergeant Bergdahl as not deserting, but trying to serve the Army by reporting wrongdoing to another base would explain why he chose not to carry his weapon and issued gear off the outpost. Sergeant Bergdahl was not planning on deserting, i.e. quitting the army and the war, and he did not want to get in trouble for taking his weapon and issued gear with him on his unauthorized mission.

This possible exposure to senior commanders – and ultimately to the media and American public – of civilian deaths or other offenses would also account for the non-disclosure agreement Sergeant Bergdahl's unit was forced to sign after his disappearance. Non-disclosure agreements may be common in the civilian world and do exist in military fields such as special operations and intelligence, but for regular infantry units they are rare.

Sergeant Bergdahl's capture by the enemy, possibly while en route to reveal war crimes or other wrongdoing, would certainly be the type of event an embarrassed chain of command would attempt to hide. Such a cover-up would certainly not be unprecedented in American military history.

Similar to the assertions made by many politicians, pundits and former soldiers that Sergeant Bergdahl deserted because, to paraphrase, he hated America and wanted to join the Taliban; the notion that he cooperated and assisted the Taliban while a prisoner of war has also been debunked by the Army's investigation.

We know that Sergeant Bergdahl resisted his captors throughout his five years as a prisoner of war. His dozen escape attempts, with full knowledge of the risks involved in recapture, are in keeping with the Code of Conduct all American service members are required to abide by during captivity by the enemy.

In his own words, Sergeant Bergdahl's description of his treatment reveals a ghastly and barbaric five years of non-stop isolation, exposure, malnutrition, dehydration, and physical and psychological torture. Among other reasons, his survival must be attested to an unshakeable moral fortitude and inner strength.

The same inherent qualities that led him to seek out an American general to report "disturbing circumstances" could well be the same mental, emotional and spiritual strengths that kept him alive through half a decade of brutal shackling, caging and torture.

It is my understanding the U.S. military's prisoner of war and survival training instructors are studying Sergeant Bergdahl's experience in order to better train American service members to endure future experiences as prisoners of war.

Susan Rice, President Obama's National Security Advisor, was roundly lampooned and criticized last year for stating that Sergeant Bergdahl "served with honor and distinction." It is only the most callous and politically craven among us who, now understanding the torture Sergeant Bergdahl endured, his resistance to the enemy that held him prisoner, and his adherence to the U.S. military's Code of Conduct for five years in horrific conditions, would argue that he did not serve with honor and distinction.

The moral, physical and mental courage the Army documents in its report on Sergeant Bergdahl stands in marked contrast to those Americans who offered such a laudatory welcoming to President Ghani last week.

President Ghani, who stole the Afghan presidential election last year in a manner incredibly gross and titanic, received a hero's welcome by members of both political parties, many of whom have vehemently argued that Sergeant Bergdahl should still be a prisoner of war.

As he did for President Hamid Karzai in 2009, when President Karzai stole that year's Afghan presidential election, President Obama ordered a similar muscular and fiscal continuation of American support for President Ghani.

Like President Karzai, President Ghani's government is composed of warlords and drug lords. Many of those in power in Afghanistan are like Afghanistan's Vice President, Rashid Dostum, known war criminals, while others are simply men who made vast fortunes aligning themselves with war criminals throughout Afghanistan's bloody decades of war, such as Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah (Abdullah Abdullah proved himself a competent ballot thief in last year's presidential election too and was awarded with the extra-constitutional position of Chief Executive).

For these men, for their power and for their profit, President Obama has ordered a slowdown in U.S. troop departure from Afghanistan. This will keep the government in Kabul stable, while the commensurate supply of American cash will allow the patronage network, which is the actual mechanism of the Afghan government, to function.

However, just as President Ghani needs President Obama to ensure the Afghan government's survival, President Obama looks to President Ghani to help preserve the pretense that the United States has been successful in its war in Afghanistan.

With American policies failing quite spectacularly throughout the Greater Middle East, at the cost of the suffering of tens of millions of people, President Obama cannot politically afford to see the Afghan government, a government the United States put and keeps in power, fall. So, at least until he leaves office, President Obama will continue keeping the Afghan government artificially alive.

As President Ghani visited Washington, the great lie of a war being won, so often seen in any empire's history, was evoked over and over again. For all the posturing of the Good War, particularly during President Obama's campaign in 2008 and his time in office, the reality of the war in Afghanistan is that hundreds of thousands have died, including 2,356 Americans, hundreds of thousands have been maimed, mutilated and wounded, and while the psychiatric casualties will probably fully never be known, the assumption must be that they number in the millions.

Afghanistan under Western occupation has remained a nation without an economy, sustained only by foreign assistance. The only industry to speak of is the drug trade, which provides the world over 90 percent of its opium and heroin and in which the Afghan government is heavily invested. Each year, under Western occupation, the drug lords have achieved near annual record crop yields.

The Afghan insurgency has prospered as well under American and NATO presence. The military victory against the Taliban, promised and assured by successive American generals, never materialized and now the Taliban are stronger than at

any point since 2001.

Fueled by anger at foreign occupation and the predations of a corrupt government dominated by ethnic, tribal and traditional rivals, the Pashtun people of Eastern and Southern Afghanistan continue to provide the support necessary for the Taliban to each year kill record numbers of fellow Afghans, both civilians and security forces.

So as President Ghani arrived with his hand out in Washington, the quid pro quo being the propping up of his regime for the propping up of the Lie of the Goodness of the Afghan War, Sergeant Bergdahl was tossed to the crowd.

The deaths of other young men are blamed on him, without obedience to the fact that those young men died because they were in a war in Afghanistan, not because of the actions or inactions of a 22-year-old young man from Idaho driven to follow his conscience, and, I would bet, his faith as well, by the absurdity, malfeasance and murder of the war. Meanwhile, our politics and media tell us if we possess a compassion for Sergeant Bergdahl and his family, then we cannot care or express love for the families of those dead young men. The converse is staked out as a universal truth and so our anger, frustration, confusion, guilt, shame and sorrow over the war are transferred onto pawns of individual suffering and sacrifice.

This war without purpose and without end; this war that was trumpeted as a crusade against evil, but, as can be attested by the moral injury that haunts me and my fellow veterans, living with the knowledge that the trope of evil can often be found in ourselves, has shown us as morally blighted as our enemies, even as the countless generals who sponsored and endorsed this war have never been held accountable for their failures or held to answer for their "optimism."

There has always been an Alice in Wonderland like quality to politics, public perception and war, more so in this day of never-ending political campaigns and hyper-partisanship. Up is down, small is big, and so on.

Such a phenomena is of no surprise as Sergeant Bergdahl, President Ghani and the Good War are juxtaposed, but the reality is that the war has failed and is far from good. President Ghani is not much more than an election crook surrounded by murderers, drug kingpins and war profiteers.

And Sergeant Bergdahl, well, from what we now know, he may just be the only decent man in any of this, a young man who sacrificed and suffered in war and who is now called a traitor and coward, because he simply may have just been trying to tell some truth about the Good War.

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State Department official, Hoh resigned in protest from his post in Afghanistan over U.S. strategic policy and goals in Afghanistan in September 2009. Prior to his assignment in Afghanistan, Hoh served in Iraq. When not deployed, Hoh worked on Afghanistan and Iraq policy and operations issues at the Pentagon and State Department from 2002-8. [This story originally appeared as a blog post at HuffingtonPost.]

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## A Family Business of Perpetual War

**Exclusive:** Victoria Nuland and Robert Kagan have a great mom-and-pop business going. From the State Department, she generates wars and from op-ed pages he demands Congress buy more weapons. There's a pay-off, too, as grateful military contractors kick in money to think tanks where other Kagans work, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Neoconservative pundit Robert Kagan and his wife, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, run a remarkable family business: she has sparked a hot war in Ukraine and helped launch Cold War II with Russia and he steps in to demand that Congress jack up military spending so America can meet these new security threats.

This extraordinary husband-and-wife duo makes quite a one-two punch for the Military-Industrial Complex, an inside-outside team that creates the need for more military spending, applies political pressure to ensure higher appropriations, and watches as thankful weapons manufacturers lavish grants on like-minded hawkish Washington think tanks.

Not only does the broader community of neoconservatives stand to benefit but so do other members of the Kagan clan, including Robert's brother Frederick at the American Enterprise Institute and his wife Kimberly, who runs her own shop called the Institute for the Study of War.

Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution (which doesn't disclose details on its funders), used his prized perch on the Washington Post's op-ed page on Friday to bait Republicans into abandoning the sequester caps limiting the Pentagon's budget, which he calculated at about \$523 billion (apparently not counting extra war spending). Kagan called on the GOP legislators to add at least \$38 billion and preferably more like \$54 billion to \$117 billion:



“The fact that [advocates for more spending] face a steep uphill battle to get even that lower number passed by a Republican-controlled Congress says a lot, about Republican hypocrisy. Republicans may be full-throated in denouncing [President Barack] Obama for weakening the nation’s security, yet when it comes to paying for the foreign policy that all their tough rhetoric implies, too many of them are nowhere to be found.

“The editorial writers and columnists who have been beating up Obama and cheering the Republicans need to tell those Republicans, and their own readers, that national security costs money and that letters and speeches are worse than meaningless without it.

“It will annoy the part of the Republican base that wants to see the government shrink, loves the sequester and doesn’t care what it does to defense. But leadership occasionally means telling people what they don’t want to hear. Those who propose to lead the United States in the coming years, Republicans and Democrats, need to show what kind of political courage they have, right now, when the crucial budget decisions are being made.”

So, the way to show “courage” in Kagan’s view is to ladle ever more billions into the Military-Industrial Complex, thus putting money where the Republican mouths are regarding the need to “defend Ukraine” and resist “a bad nuclear deal with Iran.”

Yet, if it weren’t for Nuland’s efforts as Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, the Ukraine crisis might not exist. A neocon holdover who advised Vice President Dick Cheney, Nuland gained promotions under former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and received backing, too, from current Secretary of State John Kerry.

Confirmed to her present job in September 2013, Nuland soon undertook an extraordinary effort to promote “regime change” in Ukraine. She personally urged on business leaders and political activists to challenge elected President Viktor Yanukovich. She reminded corporate executives that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their “European aspirations,” and she literally passed out cookies to anti-government protesters in Kiev’s Maidan square.

Working with other key neocons, including National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman and Sen. John McCain, Nuland made clear that the United States would back a “regime change” against Yanukovich, which grew more likely as neo-Nazi and other right-wing militias poured into Kiev from western Ukraine.

In early February 2014, Nuland discussed U.S.-desired changes with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt (himself a veteran of a “regime change”

operation at the International Atomic Energy Agency, helping to install U.S. yes man Yukiya Amano as the director-general in 2009).

Nuland treated her proposed new line-up of Ukrainian officials as if she were trading baseball cards, casting aside some while valuing others. "Yats is the guy," she said of her favorite Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

Disparaging the less aggressive European Union, she uttered "Fuck the EU" and brainstormed how she would "glue this thing" as Pyatt pondered how to "mid-wife this thing." Their unsecure phone call was intercepted and leaked.

### **Ukraine's 'Regime Change'**

The coup against Yanukovich played out on Feb. 22, 2014, as the neo-Nazi militias and other violent extremists overran government buildings forcing the president and other officials to flee for their lives. Nuland's State Department quickly declared the new regime "legitimate" and Yatsenyuk took over as prime minister.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had been presiding over the Winter Olympics at Sochi, was caught off-guard by the coup next door and held a crisis session to determine how to protect ethnic Russians and a Russian naval base in Crimea, leading to Crimea's secession from Ukraine and annexation by Russia a year ago.

Though there was no evidence that Putin had instigated the Ukraine crisis and indeed all the evidence indicated the opposite the State Department peddled a propaganda theme to the credulous mainstream U.S. news media about Putin having somehow orchestrated the situation in Ukraine so he could begin invading Europe. Former Secretary of State Clinton compared Putin to Adolf Hitler.

As the new Kiev government launched a brutal "anti-terrorism operation" to subdue an uprising among the large ethnic Russian populations of eastern and southern Ukraine, Nuland and other American neocons pushed for economic sanctions against Russia and demanded arms for the coup regime. [See Consortiumnews.com's "What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis."]

Amid the barrage of "information warfare" aimed at both the U.S. and world publics, a new Cold War took shape. Prominent neocons, including Nuland's husband Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century which masterminded the Iraq War, hammered home the domestic theme that Obama had shown himself to be "weak," thus inviting Putin's "aggression."

In May 2014, Kagan published a lengthy essay in *The New Republic* entitled "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire," in which Kagan castigated Obama for failing

to sustain American dominance in the world and demanding a more muscular U.S. posture toward adversaries.

According to a New York Times [article](#) about how the essay took shape and its aftermath, writer Jason Horowitz reported that Kagan and Nuland shared a common world view as well as professional ambitions, with Nuland editing Kagan's articles, including the one tearing down her ostensible boss.

Though Nuland wouldn't comment specifically on her husband's attack on Obama, she indicated that she held similar views. "But suffice to say," Nuland said, "that nothing goes out of the house that I don't think is worthy of his talents. Let's put it that way."

Horowitz reported that Obama was so concerned about Kagan's assault that the President revised his commencement speech at West Point to deflect some of the criticism and invited Kagan to lunch at the White House, where one source told me that it was like "a meeting of equals." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama's True Foreign Policy 'Weakness.'](#)"]

### **Sinking a Peace Deal**

And, whenever peace threatens to break out in Ukraine, Nuland jumps in to make sure that the interests of war are protected. Last month, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande hammered out a plan for a cease-fire and a political settlement, known as Minsk-2, prompting Nuland to engage in more behind-the-scenes maneuvering to sabotage the deal.

In another overheard conversation – in Munich, Germany – Nuland mocked the peace agreement as "Merkel's Moscow thing," according to the German newspaper *Bild*, citing unnamed sources, likely from the German government which may have bugged the conference room in the luxurious Bayerischer Hof hotel and then leaked the details.

Picking up on Nuland's contempt for Merkel, another U.S. official called the Minsk-2 deal the Europeans' "Moscow bullshit."

Nuland suggested that Merkel and Hollande cared only about the practical impact of the Ukraine war on Europe: "They're afraid of damage to their economy, counter-sanctions from Russia." According to the *Bild* story, Nuland also laid out a strategy for countering Merkel's diplomacy by using strident language to frame the Ukraine crisis.

"We can fight against the Europeans, we can fight with rhetoric against them," Nuland reportedly said.

NATO Commander Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove was quoted as saying that sending more weapons to the Ukrainian government would “raise the battlefield cost for Putin.” Nuland interjected to the U.S. politicians present that “I’d strongly urge you to use the phrase ‘defensive systems’ that we would deliver to oppose Putin’s ‘offensive systems.’”

Nuland sounded determined to sink the Merkel-Hollande peace initiative even though it was arranged by two major U.S. allies and was blessed by President Obama. And, this week, the deal seems indeed to have been blown apart by Nuland’s hand-picked Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, who inserted a poison pill into the legislation to implement the Minsk-2 political settlement.

The Ukrainian parliament in Kiev added a clause that, in effect, requires the rebels to first surrender and let the Ukrainian government organize elections before a federalized structure is determined. Minsk-2 had called for dialogue with the representatives of these rebellious eastern territories en route to elections and establishment of broad autonomy for the region.

Instead, reflecting Nuland’s hard-line position, Kiev refused to talks with rebel leaders and insisted on establishing control over these territories before the process can move forward. If the legislation stands, the result will almost surely be a resumption of war between military forces backed by nuclear-armed Russia and the United States, a very dangerous development for the world. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Ukraine’s Poison Pill for Peace Talks.”](#)]

Not only will the Ukrainian civil war resume but so will the Cold War between Washington and Moscow with lots of money to be made by the Military-Industrial Complex. On Friday, Nuland’s husband, Robert Kagan, drove home that latter point in the neocon Washington Post.

### **The Payoff**

But don’t think that this unlocking of the U.S. taxpayers’ wallets is just about this one couple. There will be plenty of money to be made by other neocon think-tankers all around Washington, including Frederick Kagan, who works for the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, and his wife, Kimberly, who runs her own think tank, the Institute for the Study of War [ISW].

According to ISW’s annual reports, its original supporters were mostly right-wing foundations, such as the Smith-Richardson Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, but it was later backed by a host of national security contractors, including major ones like General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman and CACI, as well as lesser-known firms such as DynCorp International, which provided training for Afghan police, and Palantir, a technology company founded

with the backing of the CIA's venture-capital arm, In-Q-Tel. Palantir supplied software to U.S. military intelligence in Afghanistan.

Since its founding in 2007, ISW has focused mostly on wars in the Middle East, especially Iraq and Afghanistan, including closely cooperating with Gen. David Petraeus when he commanded U.S. forces in those countries. However, more recently, ISW has begun reporting extensively on the civil war in Ukraine. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Neocons Guided Petraeus on Afghan War](#)."] ]

In other words, the Family Kagan has almost a self-perpetuating, circular business model working the inside-corridors of government power to stimulate wars while simultaneously influencing the public debate through think-tank reports and op-ed columns in favor of more military spending and then collecting grants and other funding from thankful military contractors.

To be fair, the Nuland-Kagan mom-and-pop shop is really only a microcosm of how the Military-Industrial Complex has worked for decades: think-tank analysts generate the reasons for military spending, the government bureaucrats implement the necessary war policies, and the military contractors make lots of money before kicking back some to the think tanks – so the bloody but profitable cycle can spin again.

The only thing that makes the Nuland-Kagan operation special perhaps is that the whole process is all in the family.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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