

# How Not to Build a 'Great, Great Wall'

Trump's promise of an insurmountable barrier between the U.S. and Mexico is an exercise in proven futility, writes Greg Grandin in this guided tour of fortification efforts over several decades.

By [Greg Grandin](#)

[TomDispatch](#)



The point was less to actually build “the wall” than to constantly announce the building of the wall. “We started building our wall. I’m so proud of it,” Donald Trump [tweeted](#). “What a thing of beauty.”

In fact, [no wall](#), or certainly not the “[big, fat, beautiful](#)” one promised by Trump, is being built. True, miles of some kind of barrier –barbed wire, chain-link and steel-slat fencing, corrugated panels, and, yes, even lengths of what can only be described as concrete wall– have gone up along the U.S.-Mexico border, starting at least as far back as the administration of President William Taft, early in the last century. Trump has claimed repairs and expansions of these barriers as proof that he is fulfilling his signature campaign promise. [Plaques](#) have already been bolted onto upgrades in existing fencing, crediting him with work started and funded by previous administrations.

And yet Trump's phantasmagorical wall, whether it ever materializes or not, has become a central artifact in American politics. Think of his promise of a more than 1,000-mile-long, 30-foot-high ribbon of concrete and steel

running along the southern border of the United States as America's new myth. It is a monument to the final closing of the frontier, a symbol of a nation that used to believe it had escaped history, but now finds itself trapped by history, and of a people who used to believe they were captains of the future, but now are prisoners of the past.

### **From Open to Closed Borders**

Prior to World War I, the border—established in the late 1840s and early 1850s after the U.S. military invaded Mexico and took a significant part of that country's territory — was relatively unpoliced. As historian Mae Ngai has pointed out, before World War I the United States “had virtually open borders” in every sense of the term. The only exception: laws that explicitly excluded Chinese migrants. “You didn't need a passport,” says Ngai. “You didn't need a visa. There was no such thing as a green card. If you showed up at Ellis Island, walked without a limp, had money in your pocket, and passed a very simple [IQ] test in your own language, you were admitted.”

A similar openness existed at the border with Mexico. “There is no line to indicate the international *boundary*,” reported *Motor Age*, a magazine devoted to promoting automobile tourism, in 1909. The only indication that you had crossed into a new country, heading south, was the way a well-graded road turned into a “rambling cross-country trail, full of chuck-holes and dust.”

The next year, the State Department made plans to roll “great coils of barbed wire... in a straight line over the

plain” across the open borderland range where Texans and Mexicans ran their cattle. The hope was to build “the finest barbed-wire boundary line in the history of the world.” Not, though, to keep out people, as the border wasn’t yet an obstacle for the Mexican migrant workers who traveled back and forth, daily or seasonally, to work in homes, factories, and fields in the United States. That barbed-wire barrier was meant to quarantine tick-infested longhorn cattle. Both Washington and Mexico City hoped that such a fence would help contain “Texas Fever,” a parasitic disease decimating herds of cattle on both sides of the border and leading to a rapid rise in the cost of beef.

As far as I can tell, the first use of the word “wall” to describe an effort to close off the border came with the tumultuous Mexican Revolution. “American troops,” announced the Department of War in March 1911 during Taft’s presidency, “have been sent to form a solid military wall along the Rio Grande.” Yes, Donald Trump was not the first to deploy the U.S. Army to the border. Twenty thousand soldiers, a large percentage of that military at the time, along with thousands of state militia volunteers, were dispatched to stop the movement of arms and men not out of, but *into* Mexico, in an effort to cut off supplies to revolutionary forces. Such a “wall” would “prove an object lesson to the world,” claimed the Department of War. The point: to reassure European investors in Mexico that the U.S. had the situation south of the border under control. “The revolution in the republic to the south must end” was the lesson that the soldiers were dispatched to teach.

The revolution, however, raged on and borderland oil

companies like Texaco began building their own private border walls to protect their holdings. Then, in April 1917, the month the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law a set of sweeping constraints on immigration generally, including literacy tests, entrance taxes, and quota restrictions. From that point on, the border sharpened – literally, as lengths of barbed wire were stretched ever further on either side of port-of-entry customs houses.

What follows is a chronology of both the physical fortification of the U.S.-Mexico boundary and the psychic investment in such a fortification– the fantasy, chased by both Democrats and Republicans for more than half a century, that with enough funds, technology, cement, steel, razor ribbon, barbed wire, and personnel, the border could be sealed. This timeline illustrates how some of the most outward-looking presidents, men who insisted that the prosperity of the nation was inseparable from the prosperity of the world, also presided over the erection of a deadly run of border barriers, be they called fences or walls, that would come to separate the United States from Mexico.

## **A Chronology**

**1945:** The first significant physical barrier, a chain-link fence about five miles long and 10 feet high, went up along the Mexican border near Calexico, California. Its posts and wire mesh were recycled from California's Crystal City Internment Camp, which had been used during World War II to hold Japanese-Americans.

**1968:** Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" famously played to

the resentments of white southern Democrats who opposed civil rights. As it turned out, though, the president had another southern strategy in mind as well, a “border strategy.” As historian Patrick Timmons has written, running for president in 1968, Nixon promised to get tough on illegal drugs from Mexico –the “marijuana problem,” he called it. Shortly after winning the White House, he launched “Operation Intercept,” a brief but prophetic military-style, highly theatrical crackdown along the border. That operation created three weeks of chaos, described by National Security Archive analyst Kate Doyle as an “unprecedented slow-down of all plane, truck, car and foot traffic– legitimate or not – flowing from Mexico into the southern United States.” That it would be run by two right-wing figures, G. Gordon Liddy and Joe Arpaio, should be a reminder of the continuities between the Nixon era and the kind of demagoguery that now rules the country. Arpaio would become the racist sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, who gratuitously imposed humiliating, brutal and often deadly conditions on his overwhelmingly Latino prisoners. He would also become an early supporter of Donald Trump and would receive the first pardon of Trump’s presidency after a judge found him in criminal contempt in a racial-profiling case. Liddy, of course, went on to run Nixon’s “Plumbers,” the burglars who infamously broke into the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters at the Watergate Hotel, precipitating the president’s downfall. In his 1996 memoir, Liddy said Operation Intercept primarily wasn’t about stopping the flow of pot. Instead, its “true purpose” was “an exercise in international extortion, pure, simple, and effective, designed to bend Mexico to our will”

– to force that country to be more cooperative on a range of policies.

**1973-1977:** The United States had just lost a war in Vietnam largely because it proved impossible to control a border dividing the two parts of that country. In fact, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, desperate to keep North Vietnamese forces from infiltrating South Vietnam, had spent more than \$500 million on 200,000 spools of barbed wire and 5 million fence posts, intending to build a “barrier” – dubbed the “McNamara Line” – running from the South China Sea to Laos. That line failed dismally. The first bulldozed six-mile strip quickly became overgrown with jungle, while its wooden watch towers were, the *New York Times* reported, “promptly burned down.” It was as that war ended that, for the first time, rightwing activists began to call for a “wall” to be built along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Biologist Garrett Hardin, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was typical. In “Population and Immigration: Compassion or Responsibility?,” an essay in the *Ecologist*, he wrote: “We might build a wall, literally.” Hardin was an early exponent of what today is called “race realism,” which holds that, in a world of limited resources and declining white birth rates, borders must be “hardened.”

During these years, southern border conflicts were especially acute in California, where Ronald Reagan was then governor. As San Diego’s sprawl began to push against agricultural fields where migrant workers from Mexico toiled, racist attacks on them increased. Vigilantes drove around the back roads of the greater San Diego area shooting at Mexicans from the flatbeds of their pickup trucks. Dozens

of bodies were found in shallow graves.

Such anti-migrant violence was fueled, in part, by angry Vietnam veterans who began to carry out what they called “beaner raids” to break up migrant camps. Snipers also took aim at Mexicans crossing the border. Led by the 27-year-old David Duke, the Ku Klux Klan set up a “border watch” in 1977 at the San Ysidro point of entry and received significant support from local Border Patrol agents. Other KKK groups soon set up similar patrols in south Texas, placing leaflets stamped with skulls and crossbones on the doorsteps of Latino residents. Around this time, in the swampy Tijuana estuary, an area that border vigilantes began calling “Little ‘Nam,” U.S. border agents reported finding pitfall traps modeled on the punji traps the Vietnamese had set for American soldiers.

**1979:** President Jimmy Carter’s administration offered a plan to build a fence along heavily trafficked stretches of the border, but scuttled the idea as the 1980 presidential election approached.

**1980-1984:** “You don’t build a 9-foot fence along the border between two friendly nations,” Ronald Reagan said on a presidential campaign swing through Texas in September 1980. By taking a swipe at the Carter administration’s plans, he was making a play for that state’s Latino vote, 87 percent of which had gone to Carter four years earlier. “You document the undocumented workers and let them come in here with a visa,” Reagan said, and let them stay “for whatever length of time they want to stay.”

Then, four years later, President Reagan shifted gears. “Our

borders are out of control," he insisted in October 1984. As he ran for reelection, his administration started pushing the idea that the border could indeed be "sealed" and that the deployment of "high tech" equipment – infrared scopes, spotter planes, night-vision goggles – might provide just such effective control. "New stuff," claimed a Border Patrol official, though some of the ground sensors being set out along that border were leftovers from Vietnam. In his second term, Reagan did get an immigration reform bill passed that helped more than 2 million undocumented residents obtain citizenship. But his administration, looking to appease a growing caucus of nativists in the Republican Party, also launched Operation Jobs, sending federal agents into workplaces to round up and deport undocumented workers. In 1984, the Border Patrol saw the largest staff increase in its 60-year history.

**1989:** In March 1989, a few months before the Berlin Wall fell, the new administration of President George H. W. Bush proposed building a 14-foot-wide, 5-foot-deep border trench south of San Diego. Some likened it to a "moat," since it would be filled with run-off rainwater. "The only thing they haven't tried is mining the area," quipped Robert Martinez, the director of San Diego's American Friends Service Committee. Opponents called it an "inverted Berlin Wall," while the White House claimed that the trench would solve both drainage and immigration problems. The idea was shelved.

**1992:** Richard Nixon's former speechwriter Patrick Buchanan provided an unexpectedly strong challenge to a sitting president for the Republican nomination, calling, among

other things, for a wall or a ditch – a “Buchanan trench,” as he put it – along the U.S.-Mexico border and for the Constitution to be amended so that migrant children born in the country couldn’t claim citizenship. Bush won the nomination, but Buchanan managed to insert a pledge in the Republican platform to build a “structure” on the border. It proved an embarrassment at a moment when there was an emerging post-Cold War consensus among Republican and Democratic Party leaders that a free trade agreement with Mexico had to be encouraged and the border left open, at least for corporations and capital. Bush’s campaign tried to fudge the issue by claiming that a “structure” didn’t necessarily mean a wall, but Buchanan’s people promptly shot back. “They don’t put lighthouses on the border,” his sister and spokesperson Bay Buchanan said.

**1993:** Having passed the North American Free Trade Agreement in Congress, President Bill Clinton immediately started to militarize the border, once again significantly increasing the budget and staff of the Border Patrol and supplying it with ever more technologically advanced equipment: infrared night scopes, thermal-imaging devices, motion detectors, in-ground sensors, and software that allowed biometric scanning of all apprehended migrants. Stadium lights went up, shining into Tijuana. Hundreds of miles of what the Clinton White House refused to call a “wall” went up as well. “We call it a fence,” said one government official. “‘Wall’ has kind of a negative connotation.”

The objective was to close off relatively safe urban border crossings and force migrants to use more treacherous places in their attempts to reach the United States, either the

creosote flatlands of south Texas or the gulches and plateaus of the Arizona desert. Trips that used to take days now took weeks on arid sands and under a scorching sun. Clinton's Immigration and Naturalization Service commissioner, Doris Meissner, claimed "geography" as an "ally" – meaning that desert torments would work wonders as a deterrent.

The Clinton White House was so eager to put up a set of barriers that it barely paid attention to the actual borderline, at one point mistakenly running a section of the structure into Mexico, prompting a protest from that country's government.

Another stretch, spanning 15 miles from the Pacific Ocean, would be built using Vietnam-era steel helicopter landing pads stood on end. Their edges were so sharp that migrants trying to climb over them often severed their fingers. As one observer noted, the use of the pads raised "the chilling possibility" that the U.S. might be able to "wall off the country" with leftover war matériel.

**2006:** The Secure Fence Act, passed by President George W. Bush's administration with considerable Democratic support, appropriated billions of dollars to pay for drones, a "virtual wall," aerostat blimps, radar, helicopters, watchtowers, surveillance balloons, razor ribbon, landfill to block canyons, border berms, adjustable barriers to compensate for shifting dunes, and a lab (located at Texas A&M and run in partnership with Boeing) to test fence prototypes. The number of border agents doubled yet again and the length of border fencing quadrupled. Operation Streamline detained, prosecuted, and tried migrants en

masse and then expedited their deportation (mostly using an immigration reform law Clinton had signed in 1996). Agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (created after 9/11) seized children off school buses and tracked undocumented residents deep into liberal states, including in the exclusive Hamptons on New York's Long Island and in New Bedford, Massachusetts. All told, in his eight years in office, Bush deported 2 million people, at a rate roughly matched by his successor, Barack Obama.

**2013:** The Democratic-controlled Senate passed a bill in June 2013 that – in exchange for the promise of a one-time amnesty and a long-shot chance at citizenship for some of the millions of undocumented residents in the country – offered more billions of dollars for policing, fencing, and deportations. According to the *New York Times*, with a winding down in Iraq and Afghanistan (however brief it would prove to be), defense contractors like Lockheed Martin were betting on a “military-style buildup at the border zone,” hoping to supply even more helicopters, heat-seeking cameras, radiation detectors, virtual fences, watchtowers, ships, Predator drones, and military-grade radar. The bill failed in the House, killed by nativists. But the Democratic Party would continue to fund “tough-as-nails” (in the phrase of New York Democratic Senator Charles Schumer) border security programs that amounted to years of up-arming the border in what was then referred to as a “border surge.”

No one really knows how many people have died trying to get into the United States since Washington began to make the border tough as nails. Most die of dehydration,

hyperthermia, or hypothermia. Others drown in the Rio Grande. Since about 1998, the Border Patrol has reported nearly 7,000 deaths, with groups like the Tucson-based Coalición de Derechos Humanos estimating that the remains of at least 6,000 immigrants have been recovered. These numbers are, however, undoubtedly just a fraction of the actual toll.

**June 16, 2015:** Donald J. Trump descends an escalator in Trump Tower to the tune of Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World" to announce his presidential campaign and denounce "Mexican rapists."

"I will build a great, great wall on our southern border," he tells Americans. "And I will have Mexico pay for that wall."

### **Show Me a 50-Foot Wall...**

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," poet Robert Frost once wrote.

Borders, not to mention walls, represent domination and exploitation. But they also symbolize the absurdity of political leaders taking the world as it is and trying to make it as they think it ought to be. However much people might curse border fortifications, they also enjoy subverting them -- even if the subversion only lasts a moment, as when citizens of Naco, Sonora, and Naco, Arizona, play an annual volleyball game over the border fence; or when an artist decides to paint "the world's longest mural" on border fencing; or when families come together to gossip, tell jokes, and pass tamales and sweets between the posts; or when couples get married through the

spaces separating the slats. As long as the United States keeps coming up with new ways to fortify the border, people will keep coming up with new ways to beat the border, including tunnels, ramps, catapults and homemade cannons (to launch bales of marijuana to the other side), and GoFundMe campaigns to pay for ladders.

As Janet Napolitano, former governor of Arizona and former director of Homeland Security, once said, “Show me a 50-foot wall, and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder.”

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## America’s Complicated Relationship with International Human Rights Norms

The U.S. has long had a love-hate relationship with international norms, having taken the lead in forging landmark human rights agreements while brushing off complaints over its own abuses, Nat Parry explains.

By Nat Parry

American exceptionalism – the notion that the United States is unique among nations due to its traditions of democracy and liberty – has always been the foundation of the nation’s claim to moral leadership. As a country founded on ideals that are today recognized the world over as fundamental principles of international norms, the U.S. utilizes its image as a human rights champion to

rally nations to its cause and assert its hegemony around the world.

Regardless of political persuasion, Americans proudly cite the influence that the founding principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights have had on the rest of the world, with 80 percent agreeing that “the United States’ history and its Constitution ... makes it the greatest country in the world” in a 2010 Gallup poll. Respecting these principles on the international level has long been considered a requisite for U.S. credibility and leadership on the global stage.



Much of this sentiment is an enduring testament to U.S.

leadership following World War II, a period in which international legal principles of human rights and non-aggression were established, as well as the four decades of the Cold War, in which the “free world,” led by the United States, faced off against “totalitarian communism,” led by the Soviet Union.

During those years of open hostility between East and West, the U.S. could point not only to its founding documents as proof of its commitment to universal principles of freedom and individual dignity, but also to the central role it played in shaping the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **Fourteen Points and Four Freedoms**

While the U.S. didn’t fully assume its position as moral arbiter until after the Allied victory in World War II, its role in these matters had already been well-established with Woodrow Wilson’s professed internationalism. As expressed in his famous “Fourteen Points,” which sought to establish a rationale for U.S. intervention in the First World War, the United States would press to establish an international system based on “open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.”

Wilson had seen the First World War as evidence that the old international system established by the Europeans had failed to provide necessary security and stability, and sought to replace the old diplomacy with one based on cooperation, communication, liberalism and democracy.

Speaking on this issue throughout his presidency, he consistently advocated

human rights and principles of self-determination.

“Do you never stop to reflect just what it is that America stands for?” Wilson asked in 1916. “If she stands for one thing more than another, it is for the sovereignty of self-governing peoples, and her example, her assistance, her encouragement, has thrilled two continents in this Western World with all the fine impulses which have built up human liberty on both sides of the water.”

These principles were expanded upon by subsequent American administrations, and especially by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In his January 1941 State of the Union address, Roosevelt spelled out what he called “the Four Freedoms,” which later became the foundation for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“In the future days,” he said, “which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.”

He continued: “The first is freedom of speech and expression – everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way – everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want – which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants – everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear – which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor – anywhere in the world.”

Following the Allied victory over the Axis powers, FDR’s widow Eleanor Roosevelt took her late husband’s vision and attempted to make it a reality for the world through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Chairing the Commission on Human Rights, a standing body of the United Nations constituted to undertake the work of preparing what was originally conceived as an International Bill of Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt pushed to ensure that FDR’s “four freedoms” were reflected in the document.

Under Roosevelt’s leadership, the Commission decided that the declaration should be a brief and inspirational document accessible by common people, and envisioned it to serve as the foundation for the remainder of an international bill of human rights. It thus avoided the more difficult problems that had to be addressed when the binding treaty came up for consideration, namely what role the state should have in enforcing rights within its territory, and whether the mode of enforcing civil and political rights should be different from that for economic and social rights.

As stated in its preamble, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

Much of the language in the Declaration echoed language contained in the founding documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Whereas the U.S. Declaration of Independence articulates the “unalienable right” to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

While the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits Congress from “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble,” the UDHR provides that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” and that “everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.” Whereas the Eighth Amendment forbids “cruel and unusual punishments,” the UDHR bars “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Although the United States made it clear that it could not support a legally binding UDHR, it readily endorsed the final document as a political declaration, one of 48 nations to vote in favor of the Declaration at the UN General Assembly in December 1948. With no votes in opposition and just eight abstentions – mostly from Eastern Bloc countries including the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Poland – the Declaration served as a defining characteristic of the contrast between East and West in those early days of the Cold War.

### **A Small Problem**

There was of course one small problem. Despite the United States formally embracing “universal human rights” on the international stage, its respect for those rights domestically was considerably lacking. Throughout the country and especially in the South, African Americans endured racist segregation policies and were routinely denied the right to vote and other civil rights.

Lynching, while not as pervasive as its heyday earlier in the century, was still a major problem, with dozens of blacks murdered with impunity by white lynch mobs throughout the 1940s.

In 1947, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed an "Appeal to the World" petition in the United Nations that denounced racial discrimination in the United States as "not only indefensible but barbaric." The American failure to respect human rights at home had international implications, argued the NAACP. "The disenfranchisement of the American Negro makes the functioning of all democracy in the nation difficult; and as democracy fails to function in the leading democracy in the world, it fails the world," read the NAACP petition.

The NAACP's appeal provoked an international sensation, with the organization flooded with requests for copies of the document from the governments of the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the Union of South Africa, among others. According to NAACP chief Walter White, "It was manifest that they were pleased to have documentary proof that the United States did not practice what it preached about freedom and democracy."

The U.S. delegation to the UN refused to introduce the NAACP petition to the United Nations, fearing that it would cause further international embarrassment. The Soviet Union, however, recommended that the NAACP's claims be investigated. The Commission on Human Rights rejected that proposal on December 4, 1947, and no further official action was taken.

According to W.E.B. DuBois, the principle author of the petition, the United States "refused willingly to allow any other nation to bring this matter up." If it had been introduced to the General Assembly, Eleanor Roosevelt would have "probably resign[ed] from the United Nations delegation," said DuBois. This was despite the fact that she was a member of the NAACP board of directors. While Roosevelt's commitment to racial justice may have been strong, it was clear that her embarrassment over the U.S.'s failures to respect the "four freedoms" at home was even stronger.

It was in this context that the United States endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. That year also marked the beginning of tentative steps the U.S. began making towards respecting basic rights within its borders.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces. The next month, the Democratic Party included a civil rights plank in its platform. "The Democratic Party," read the platform adopted at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, "commits itself to continuing its efforts to eradicate all racial, religious and economic discrimination."

While there was clearly a domestic motivation for embracing the cause of civil rights (presidential adviser Clark Clifford had presented a lengthy memorandum

to President Truman in 1947 which argued that the African-American vote was paramount for winning the 1948 election), there was also a strong international component to the Democratic Party's support for civil rights.

### **UN Bragging Rights**

In addition to its civil rights plank, the 1948 Democratic platform included a wholehearted endorsement of the recently established United Nations, and expressed "the conviction that the destiny of the United States is to provide leadership in the world toward a realization of the Four Freedoms." But the Democrats recognized that the U.S. had a long way to go to realizing those four freedoms at home.

"We call upon the Congress to support our President in guaranteeing these basic and fundamental American Principles: (1) the right of full and equal political participation; (2) the right to equal opportunity of employment; (3) the right of security of person; (4) and the right of equal treatment in the service and defense of our nation," the platform stated.

The Democratic platform also proudly pointed to the accomplishment of organizing the United Nations: "Under the leadership of a Democratic President and his Secretary of State, the United Nations was organized at San Francisco. The charter was ratified by an overwhelming vote of the Senate. We support the United Nations fully and we pledge our whole-hearted aid toward its growth and development."

For its part, the Republican Party also embraced the fledgling UN, stating in its 1948 platform that "Our foreign policy is dedicated to preserving a free America in a free world of free men. This calls for strengthening the United Nations and primary recognition of America's self-interest in the liberty of other peoples." While the Democrats pointed to the president's leadership for helping establish the UN, the Republicans also wanted to make sure that they received due credit. Their party platform listed "a fostered United Nations" as one of the main accomplishments of the Republican Congress, despite "frequent obstruction from the Executive Branch."

As "the world's best hope" for "collective security against aggression and in behalf of justice and freedom," the Republicans pledged to "support the United Nations in this direction, striving to strengthen it and promote its effective evolution and use." The UN "should progressively establish international law," said the Republicans, "be freed of any veto in the peaceful settlement of international disputes, and be provided with the armed forces contemplated by the Charter."

As a major component of the progressive establishment of international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was to be codified into legally binding treaties.

Although the Declaration was endorsed by the U.S. and 47 other countries in December 1948, the two corresponding legally binding covenants to define the obligations of each state required another two decades of work. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were ready for ratification in 1966, some 18 years later.

The United States became a signatory to both covenants on Oct. 5, 1977. It ratified the ICCPR on June 8, 1992, but to this date has not fully subscribed to the ICESCR, one of just seven countries in the world not to ratify the agreement.

### **Cold War Context**

Throughout those years, the U.S. was engaged in an intense ideological battle with the Soviet Union, in which human rights were used as a rhetorical weapon by each side against the other. While American leaders chastised the Soviets for their failures to respect fundamental liberties, including freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of association, the USSR could readily point to the blatant institutionalized racism that plagued American society.

Racial discrimination belied America's rhetoric about democracy and equality, making the U.S. cause of freedom look like a sham especially to people of color in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Soviets enthusiastically exploited the issue, imbuing their anti-capitalist propaganda with tales of horrors suffered by African Americans.

So, in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* that segregated schools were unconstitutional and ordered that school integration proceed "with all deliberate speed," the case was trumpeted by the American establishment as evidence of the great strides being made toward full equality for all citizens.

At times, racial discrimination in the United States caused such international embarrassment that the State Department would pressure the White House to intervene. In 1957, for example, when a Federal District Court ordered the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, to allow African-American students to attend, Governor Orval Faubus declared that he would refuse to comply with the decree. Several hundred angry and belligerent whites confronted nine African-American students who attempted to enter the school on September 4,

1957.

The National Guard, called up by Faubus, blocked the students from entering the school. Pictures of the angry mob, the frightened African-American students, and armed National Guardsmen were seen all over the world, and the Soviets eagerly seized on the propaganda.

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles informed President Dwight Eisenhower that the Little Rock incident was damaging the United States' credibility abroad, and could cost the U.S. the support of other nations in the UN.

Eisenhower attempted to negotiate a settlement with Faubus, but when that failed, he sent in federal troops. The nine African-American students were finally allowed to attend Central High under the armed protection of the United States military.

The developing international human rights project led to deep ideological divisions in the United States, with some conservatives, especially in the South, concerned that the national government would use international human rights law to promote national civil rights reforms. Arguing that the civil rights question was beyond the scope of Congress's authority and concerned about the constitutional power of treaties, conservatives launched several attempts in the 1950s to amend the U.S. Constitution to limit the government's ability to subscribe to treaties.

Those failed efforts to amend the Constitution were based on the premise that the federal government had no say in the matters of states and localities in regulating race relations, and that since Article VI of the Constitution provides treaties the status of "supreme law of the land," the U.S. would find itself subjected to the whims of the international community on these matters.

Those fears would prove unfounded, since the U.S. didn't formally subscribe to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights until 1977, long after most of the relevant domestic civil rights legislation had been adopted, but the right-wing opposition to U.S. submission to international norms had become thoroughly established as American conservative orthodoxy.

**Nat Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.***

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# 'Hostiles' and Hollywood's Untold Story

Hollywood's recent attempt to depict Frontier life captures the reality of "hostiles" shooting various weapons at one another, but the real history is more interesting, Jada Thacker explains in this essay.

By Jada Thacker

A theatrical poster for the recent American Western movie "Hostiles" depicts its principal characters – a Frontier widow, a hardboiled Indian fighter, and an Indian chief – with a helpful blurb stating the story's theme with the subtlety of a striking rattlesnake: "We are all hostiles."

Some critics think the movie somehow ought to have been a different one – that it should have included a bit more of this, or a bit less of that...whatever. Maybe they have a point. Though it hardly seems fair to ding "Hostiles" for being an imperfect example of the ideal Frontier fantasy.

But it is fair to criticize a movie for being a perfect example of a movie genre that consistently ignores the most essential themes of the American Frontier. "Hostiles" succeeds brilliantly as the latest addition to a very long list of movies that focus laser-like attention on hostile Frontier characters, rather than on the consequences of Frontier hostility.

The American Frontier was not, as Hollywood formerly portrayed it, merely a canvas background prop for a violent soap box drama starring Cowboys & Indians – or, as more recently re-imagined, an ethnic melodrama featuring white Bad Guys versus Noble Indian resistance.

Nor can the American Frontier be considered a particularly hostile place without expunging from history the slaughter-grounds of Cannae, Verdun, Stalingrad, or even America's own Gettysburg – each of which produced more bloated corpses than any number of Wild Wests. In an encyclopedia of human violence, the massacres at the Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee would be relegated to a footnote.

Yet, the significance of the American Frontier endures. William Faulkner was not referring to the Frontier experience when he said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," but he was right.

Unacknowledged by the silver screen, contemporary America remains as hostile as it ever was to the Frontier dwellers of tee-pees, log cabins, wigwams, or army outposts. Every American today who rages at corrupt and incompetent government, who counts out their pennies for rent or mortgage, or who despairs of the growth-driven, mechanized rape of the American landscape can thank the American

Frontier experience for their trouble.

## **Frontier Anarchy**

No government existed in North America at the time of European contact. The societies that pre-existed there lived in a condition of anarchy.

Although the term “anarchy” is used casually to denote a condition of chaos, it literally refers only to a society without government (from the Greek: *a* [without] + *archy* [rulers]). Anarchy is the *voluntary* self-organization of people without the use of authoritative force. Thus, anarchy does not denote an absence of social order, but only the absence of a *forcible* social order.

Anarchy is not an exception to human organization, but the rule – if we can forgive the pun. All non-governmental organizations are anarchic, voluntary associations: sports teams, business entities, civic groups, church congregations, trade unions, symphony orchestras, and marriages included. American Indian societies had thrived just so without authoritative force for some 20,000 years before Europeans appeared to set things straight.

Immediately upon European arrival, the Frontier materialized as a lethal No Man’s Land where the alien hierarchical order of government clashed catastrophically with indigenous anarchy. At issue was not just the survival of hostile individuals, but the survival of fundamentally hostile political cultures.

Unlike anarchy, government has nothing to do with the voluntary self-organization of society. Nobody ever volunteers to be arrested, pay fines, go to jail, or be executed – or pay the taxes necessary for doing so to others. And no such elements of coercion existed in North America prior to the importation of European authoritarianism. (When so-called “democratic government” later purported to banish British tyranny, it made certain to keep prisons and capital punishment intact.)

Moviegoers, no less than movie-makers and history textbooks, blithely assume that Indian leaders wielded the same authority as did government officials in white society. Not so. Indians had no officials because they had no offices. Indian chiefs led by example and inspiration only; they possessed no more coercive ability than a scoutmaster or a captain of a football team.

In any event, Indians had no written laws that begged enforcement. Anarchic political culture does not depend on the enforcement of rules and regulations, but upon free consent to them. A Wikipedia article summarizes the Abenaki people’s consensual customs:

“Group decision-making was done by a consensus method. The idea is that every group (family, band, tribe, etc.) must have equal say, so each group would elect a spokesperson. Each smaller group would send the decision of the group to an impartial facilitator.

“If there was a disagreement, the facilitator would tell the groups to discuss again. In addition to the debates, there was a goal of total understanding for all members. If there was not total understanding, the debate would stop until there was understanding.

“When the tribal members debate issues, they consider the Three Truths: Peace: Is this preserved? Righteousness: Is it moral? Power: Does it preserve the integrity of the group?

“These truths guide all group deliberations, and the goal is to reach a consensus. If there is no consensus for change, they agree to keep the status quo.”

Not all Indian self-organization was this formal, but it all was intensely democratic. The hierarchical European political culture which ruled by indelible law, dictated by police and military forces and financed by forcible taxation, decidedly was not.

The collision of anarchy and government in America was not a melodramatic struggle between “good” and “evil.” But it did involve a spiritual choice – between a circle and a pyramid.

The Indian way was represented by a circle or hoop, symbolized physically by the Puebloan people’s *kiva*, a circular, ceremonial meeting place. The Lakota and other tribes conceived of universal order as a hoop. The symbolic meaning is one of balance and equality, with each member of society located equidistant from a common core. Indian leaders did not occupy the position of “top dog” or “king of the hill” but as central mediators among equals.

In contrast, all civilizations – including the white civilization that hovered in the wings of the Frontier stage – are pyramidal structures. In pyramidal culture, authority resides at the apex and flows only downward, forcibly if necessary. While pyramidal culture was not unique to the colonizing European culture of the day – Ancient Egyptians and Aztecs expressed their pyramidal culture in stone, just as current organization charts express our pyramids on paper – it was utterly foreign to the Indian consciousness.

So-called “Indian Nations” were conceptual fallacies that did not in fact exist. Even the famous Iroquois League, or Haudenosaunee, was not an example of “Indian government” and certainly not of pyramidal structure. It was a decentralized,

voluntary confederacy – a hooplike “League of Peace” (ca.1140 – 1784) of its six constituent tribes – not a hierarchical command-and-control structure that dominated Indian society.

## **Frontier Economics**

Lest the Right-Libertarians among us applaud too loudly the absence of Big Government (or any government) in Indian society, the central conflict between white and red men (a term Indians used to describe themselves) was a contest between individualistic vs. collective property rights.

To be clear, Indians had a keen sense of territorial sovereignty. But this did not include personal property ownership, which was both unknown and an anathema to the Indian way. T.R Fehrenbach, a notable commentator on Frontier culture and author of the encyclopedic *Comanches: The History of a People*, put it simply:

“Hypocrisy was perhaps inevitable in a people [whites] who convinced themselves that they were creating something new in the New World, while actually carrying out the most primordial form of conquest.”

But then he adds:

“Amerindians resisted all sincere imitation of their conquerors. Broken warriors refused to become economic men, to accept the concept of private property or the discipline of incessant labor.”

Quite frankly, the Comanche people (the *Nermernuh*) of whom Fehrenbach spoke were without doubt the most rapacious Indians that whites ever encountered. (Other Indians were intimidated by them, too, and for good reason, a point “Hostiles” duly observes.) Alongside hunting buffalo, raiding and stealing constituted the *raison d’etre* of their predatory society.

In fact, hostility and theft generally characterized Indian between-group behavior both before and after European arrival; they did not need the presence of whites to justify their elevation of lethal larceny to an art form. By the same token, European pioneers needed no particular excuse to exterminate Indians, or each another, while committing Grand Theft Continent.

Ironically, armed robbery was the primary economic activity whites and Indians shared in common. “Making a killing” by “hostile takeovers” of others’ property is not a new pony trick invented by corporate raiders.

But the ruthless exploitation of one’s own kinsmen and their resources is something else. This was as unthinkable to tribal peoples as it was premeditated by the bringers of civilization. The privatization of shared resources proved to

be the profound and irreconcilable issue that separated the two peoples' concepts of economic justice.

Even in abject defeat, Indians never shared the whites' notion that the land's resources could, or should, be monopolized as private property. Since Indians perceived themselves essentially as children of the Earth, private ownership of land made no more sense to them than a child claiming to own its parents.

Unlike whites, the Indian concept of territory was communal. What they possessed in common they defended in common. Their view of communal property rights flowed naturally from their egalitarian culture, which did not tolerate landlords or economic class distinctions.

Within any Indian band, no privileged economic class could exist simply because there was no hierarchical power structure to sustain one. Since no Indian had the power to control the food supply of another, they were liberated at birth from the private monopolization of the "means of production." Possession of property was not justified by individual privilege but was their common birthright.

Thus, Indian society was devoid of both private property and the State. This is inconvenient news for today's Marxists and Right-Libertarians, alike.

Indian society repudiated the Right-Libertarian (anarcho-capitalist) notion that individual liberty requires the sanctity of private property ownership. No humans have exercised more individual liberty, nor owned less private property, than American Indians. Ownership of private property – which cannot and does not exist in the absence of government-sanctioned privilege – would not have conferred any liberty to Indians they did not already possess.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, Indian society also belied the Marxian notion that economics is determined to evolve from capitalism, through socialism, to the ideal of communism. In reality, American Indians had beat Marx to the punchline 20,000 years before he set pen to paper.

In modern parlance, Indians were communists long before communism was cool. Contemporary Indians may disavow Marx as an industrial materialist with no respect for their spiritual way; that doesn't mean their people were not original communists, but only that they are not Marxists.

Marx was the latecomer – and then he got it all backwards. The American Frontier experience graphically demonstrated that humanity was not advancing toward a stateless, economic Utopia but was rooting out and laying waste to prehistoric communism wherever it still persisted.

All “isms” aside, reality reveals that whoever exercises effective ownership of a place rules it for their benefit. First and foremost, the Frontier was a place of a hostile and involuntary transfer of economic property from communal Indian ownership into the itchy palms of the private white owners who usually stood at the apex of an authoritarian pyramid.

### **Frontier Ecology**

Pre-contact Indians lived in Stone Age societies. They possessed no metal implements, and the highest level of tool technology available to them employed only stone, bone, and clay.

In *Stone Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins famously referred to Stone Age people as the “original affluent society” – not because they possessed much material wealth, but rather because they required so little and because their modest needs were so readily fulfilled when compared to the far greater requirements of us Moderns.

On the other hand, we would be mistaken to believe Indians were conscious “environmentalists.” Like any society, theirs took from nature what was needed for survival. Stone Age people had no reason to conserve that which was beyond their power to despoil.

As Sahlins “original affluence” implies, the trick to achieving environmental sustainability does not lie in *not taking* what is needed, but in *not needing to take* more than the environment can afford. “What the environment can afford” is known in ecology-speak as *carrying capacity*.

More formally stated, carrying capacity is the ability of the environment to sustain a given population of organisms indefinitely. “Sustain” usually means “to feed” and “indefinitely” simply means “with no end in sight.” Thus, a given number of organisms that continues to live (and reproduce) within the means of its food-energy supply is “ecologically sustainable.”

In any event, “living sustainably” should not be conceptualized as “living in harmony with nature.” Nature is not a Barbershop Quartet. Nature is nothing if not a relentless, biological gang fight encompassing every organism on the planet. Each organism will lose the fight eventually, only to decompose into the itinerant molecules from which it was temporarily pasted together.

In fact, the natural *danse macabre* preserves ecological balance at the expense of harmony. Any cosmic harmony on the American Frontier, existed only under the influence of mezcal and peyote.

Moreover, just because an organism manages to survive individually does not

imply that it lives in a sustainable society. Sustainability requires that a given *number* of organisms must be able to survive *indefinitely*. No environmental carrying capacity can sustain too many needy organisms, or even a few organisms that consume more food-energy than the environment can replace.

By any measure, however, American Indians had been living sustainably for millennia before Europeans waded ashore with their metallurgy, animal husbandry, intensive agriculture, literacy – and their marked tendency toward epidemic plagues, famine, industrialized warfare, and commercial-grade slavery. Upon arrival, the benighted invaders found practically nothing to remind them of their ecologically stressed homelands, which they had abandoned.

Nowhere in America did the colonizers find the privation, starvation, social depravity, and ecological wastage that characterized their soil-ravaged and forest-denuded homeland. Having accidentally stumbled upon a Stone Age population that lived sustainably, civilized Europeans set about at once to destroy it, as they had done at home. Indeed, had Europeans possessed a sustainable culture, they would not have needed to ditch their depleted continent in search of lootable resources elsewhere.

The supreme irony of the Old-World invasion was that Europeans never realized the “savages” inhabiting the Americas were practically identical to their own ancestors, though a couple of hundred generations removed. Ecologically, the European invasion did not represent the wave of the future, but a retrogression to their own Edenic past.

The environmental devastation that had taken several thousand years to accomplish in Europe was replicated in three centuries in the Americas. Such was the price and the speed of the “progress” achieved on the American Frontier.

### **Frontier Armageddon**

The Frontier did not disappear just because the westward movement had run out of geographical space, its few Indian survivors having been herded into open-air prisons. Rather, the Frontier itself was destroyed by the westward migration of the Industrial Revolution – a truly monstrous creation of unrelenting factory toil, rolling on steel rails, powered by steam, and financed by perpetual human servitude to debt.

The terminal theme of the Frontier was not to be man’s conquest of nature, or even of man’s conquest of other men, but instead the industrial conquest of humanity. Metastasizing far beyond the “primordial form of conquest” of Indians by hypocritical whites, this final act of destruction was so complete that not even whites survived it.

A Stone Age world bound by blood kinship, loyalty, courage, intuition and revenge was within a single lifetime displaced by the depersonalized tyranny of contract law, freight schedules, time zones, taxes, universal debt and 'no trespassing' signs. Proud Indian warriors, brave Texas Rangers, indomitable pioneer sod-busters – all alike swept away only to be reincarnated by industrialized karma as sweatshop wage-slaves, coal mining troglodytes, and corporate lackeys.

After this cataclysm, we can rely on Hollywood to remind us now and again that the Frontier was where some hostile hombres ran amok shooting various weapons at one another – as if that is not the daily fare of modern-day America. The theatrical poster blurb “We are all hostiles” could be a permanent contemporary subtitle to American civilization.

But the American Frontier was not a blurb or a subtitle. It was a war that raged westward for 300 years before its place was lost to history. Yet, the ultimate loss of the Frontier was not *by* those fortunate few who once lived within the warzone; the greater loss was *to* those unfortunate multitudes who were fated to live thereafter without it. And that would be us.

Possibly lost to us forever has been our egalitarian self-determination, our common possession of the means of survival, our ecological sustainability, and our sense of the primacy of personal human worth. These hallmarks of human society have been eradicated so thoroughly that even celluloid fables of our own history betray hardly a trace of their multi-millennial existence. Unwilling to recall such a way of life, we retell only tales of hostility that surrounded its death.

But lest old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind, Americans everywhere now commemorate the first day of each calendar month with a nagging sense of loss – as befits the date on which the rent is due in this erstwhile Land of the Free.

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## The Right's Second Amendment Lies

From the Archive: In the wake of the latest gun massacre in the United States, we republish an article by Robert Parry debunking some of the right-wing myths

about the Second Amendment that have prevented common sense gun laws.

By Robert Parry (first published December 21, 2012)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

government can be considered as evidence of insanity.”

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

“If three years ago [at the end of the American Revolution] any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws & constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him a bedlamite – a fit subject for a mad house,” Washington wrote to Knox on Feb. 3, 1787, adding that if the government “shrinks, or is unable to enforce its laws anarchy & confusion must prevail.”

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

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

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

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

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

### **Behind the Second Amendment**

The Second Amendment dealt with concerns about "security" and the need for trained militias to ensure what the Constitution called "domestic Tranquility." There was also hesitancy among many Framers about the costs and risks from a large standing army, thus making militias composed of citizens an attractive alternative.

So, the Second Amendment read: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Contrary to some current right-wing fantasies about the Framers wanting to encourage popular uprisings over grievances, the language of the amendment is clearly aimed at maintaining order within the country.

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

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

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

So, it would be counterintuitive as well as anti-historical to believe that Madison and Washington wanted to arm the population so the discontented could resist the constitutionally elected government. In reality, the Framers wanted to arm the people at least the white males so uprisings, whether economic

clashes like Shays' Rebellion, anti-tax protests like the Whiskey Rebellion, attacks by Native Americans or slave revolts, could be repulsed.

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

This "history" has then been amplified through the Right's powerful propaganda apparatus Fox News, talk radio, the Internet and ideological publications to persuade millions of Americans that their possession of semi-automatic assault rifles and other powerful firearms is what the Framers intended, that today's gun-owners are fulfilling some centuries-old American duty.

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

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

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

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

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

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# Assault on the Embassy: The Tet Offensive Fifty Years Later

On January 31, 1968, Viet Cong forces attacked the U.S. Embassy in Saigon as part of the Tet Offensive, a turning point in the Vietnam War. On the eve of the 50th anniversary, veteran war correspondent Don North takes us back to that momentous event.

By Don North

It was the eve of battle. Ngo Van Giang, known as Captain Ba Den to the Viet Cong troops he led, had spent weeks smuggling arms and ammunition into Saigon under boxes of tomatoes. Ba Den was about to lead 15 sappers, a section of the J-9 Special Action Unit, against an unknown target. Only eight of the unit were actually trained experts in explosives. The other seven were clerks and cooks who signed up for the dangerous mission mainly to escape the rigors of life in their jungle camp near Dau Tieng, 30 miles northwest of Saigon.

On the morning of January 30, 1968, Ba Den secretly met with U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker's chauffeur, Nguyen Van De, an embassy driver who was in fact an agent for the Viet Cong. De drove Ba Den in circles around the Embassy compound in an American station wagon. De revealed that Ba Den's mission was to attack the heavily fortified Embassy. Learning the identity of his target, Ba Den was overwhelmed by the realization that he would probably not survive the attack. Pondering his likely death, and since it was the eve of Tet, Ba Den wandered into the Saigon market, had a few Ba Muoi Ba beers and bought a string of firecrackers to light as he had done for every Tet celebration since he was a child.

Ba Den and his team were about to play a small but critical role in what we now call the Tet Offensive, the coordinated attack by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops against dozens of cities, towns and military bases across South Vietnam. When the bloody fighting ended after 24 days, the Communist troops had been driven from every target and the U.S. declared a military victory. However, the attackers scored a significant political and psychological victory by demonstrating an ability to launch devastating and coordinated attacks seemingly everywhere at once, and by showing that a U.S.-South Vietnamese victory was nowhere in sight. The attack on the U.S. Embassy was a potent symbol of that success.

I've thought a good deal about that attack on the Embassy over the last 50 years. I was there as a television journalist – lying in the gutter outside the

Embassy as automatic fire buzzed above my head. Here is what I knew then and what I know now.

Later that night of January 30, Ba Den joined the other members of the assault team at 59 Phan Than Gian Street, the home of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Phe, a veteran Communist agent who ran an auto repair shop next to her home, just four blocks from the Embassy. The 15 sappers unpacked their weapons and dressed in black pajamas with a red sash around one arm. They had trained to breach the Embassy's outer perimeter with explosives and attack with rifle fire, satchel charges and rocket propelled grenades. They were ordered to kill anyone who resisted but to take prisoner anyone who surrendered.

The Embassy attack was to be the centerpiece of a larger Saigon offensive, backed up by 11 battalions totalling 4,000 Viet Cong troops. The operation's other five objectives were the Presidential Palace, the national broadcasting studios, South Vietnamese Naval Headquarters, Vietnamese General Staff Headquarters at Ton Son Nut Airbase, and the Philippine Embassy. The goal was to hold these objectives for 48 hours until other Viet Cong battalions could enter the city and relieve them. North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front leaders expected (or hoped) that a nationwide uprising to overthrow the government of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu would take place.

Of all the targets, the U.S. Embassy was perhaps the most important. The \$2.6 million compound had been completed just three months earlier. The six-story Chancery building loomed over Saigon like an impregnable fortress. It was a constant reminder of the American presence, prestige and power. Other key military and political targets were slated for attack in South Vietnam, like Nha Trang, Buon Ma Thout and Bien Hoa, but most Americans couldn't even pronounce their names, let alone understand their importance. A successful attack on the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, however, would instantly convey shock and horror on an American public already weary of the war, and could turn many of them against the war.

### **Public Relations Blitz**

President Lyndon B. Johnson conducted a massive public relations blitz at the end of 1967 to convince Americans that the Vietnam War was nearing a conclusion. General William Westmoreland, the U.S. military commander in Vietnam, was ordered to support the President's progress campaign. In November 1967, Westmoreland told NBC's Meet the Press that the U.S. could win the war within two years. He then told the National Press Club, "We are making progress, the end begins to come into view." In his most memorable phrase, Westmoreland (derisively known as "Westy" to many members of the press corps) claimed to see "some light at the end of the tunnel."

The massive public relations campaign overwhelmed voices of other experienced American observers who foresaw disaster. General Edward Lansdale had been a senior American advisor to the South Vietnamese government starting in the mid-1950s; he was an expert on unconventional warfare and still senior advisor to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. In October 1967, Lansdale wrote to U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, "Hanoi policy makers saw the defeat of French forces in Vietnam as having reached its decisive point through anti-war sentiment in France than on the field of battle in Vietnam. [The battle of] Dien Bien Phu was fought to shape opinion in Paris, a bit of drama rather than sound military strategy."

Lansdale warned that Hanoi was about to follow a similar plan to "bleed Americans" because it believed the American public was vulnerable to psychological manipulation in 1968. It was an accurate prediction; despite Lansdale's inability to exert influence on policy at that time, he had a better grasp on what was happening in Vietnam than Westmoreland or Bunker – or President Johnson.

### **Detoured to Khe Sanh**

As an ABC News TV correspondent I was sent to the U.S. base at Khe Sanh, located in the northwest corner of South Vietnam, in the weeks before Tet. The base had been under siege by Communist forces and General Westmoreland was predicting a major offensive there, where the Communists would seek to repeat the French military loss at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Since 1968, a majority of U.S. military analysts have suggested the enemy attacks at Khe Sanh were part of a ruse to draw American military forces away from South Vietnam's population centers, leaving them open to successful attacks at Tet. Khe Sanh became a metaphor for Westmoreland's mismanagement of the war.

My cameraman and I were covering the ongoing battle at Khe Sanh. A massive attack on January 30 sent us diving into a trench for protection from incoming mortars and rockets; the effort saved our lives but broke the lens of our camera. We were forced to return to Saigon for a replacement. I thought we would miss the expected military push on Khe Sanh but flying back to Saigon on the C-130 milk run, it seemed like all of South Vietnam was under attack. As we took off from Da Nang, enemy rockets fell on the runway. Flying south along the coast, we could see almost all the seaside enclaves under attack – Hoi An, Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay. It was a clear night, and as we passed over the besieged cities, we could see fires burning and hear on the military radio frequencies the calls of besieged U.S. troops.

The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army battle plan for the Tet Offensive called for coordinated surprise attacks throughout the country, but their plans were

seriously compromised by a misunderstanding concerning the attack date. The Communist forces in the Northern provinces mistakenly planned the attack for January 30, whereas zero hour in the Southern provinces was understood to be January 31. As a result, I was in the unique position of watching the Tet Offensive unfold from the North to the South.

### **Convoy to the Embassy**

At 2:30 AM, the Ba Den's sapper unit loaded into a taxi cab, a Peugeot truck and an Embassy car. Guiding them to the target was Nguyen Van De, the Embassy driver, a long-time employee who Embassy staff had nicknamed "Satchmo." Several of the sappers hid in his trunk. Driving with their lights out, the convoy approached the Embassy night gate on Mac Dinh Chi Street and fired their AK-47 assault rifles at two American sentries guarding the gate. Specialist 4 (SP4) Charles Daniel and Private First Class (PFC) William Sebast returned fire with their M-16 assault rifles, then ran through the steel gate and locked it. At 2:47 AM they transmitted "Signal 300" over the MP radio net to alert everyone that the Embassy was under attack. The sappers placed a 15 pound satchel charge against the eight foot high embassy wall, and the explosion created a hole three feet wide. The first two sappers crawled through the breach but were immediately killed by Daniel and Sebast's rifle fire.

Daniel shouted into his radio, "They're coming in! They're coming in! Help me! Help me!" as more sappers came through the hole. In an exchange of gunfire, both Daniel and Sebast were killed, the first two Americans killed in the battle for the Embassy.

The sappers made a concerted effort to break into the Chancery firing rocket propelled grenades through the heavy wooden doors and following up with hand grenades. Several U.S. Marines were wounded by shrapnel and fell behind the Chancery door. Few of the Marine or MP guards were armed with M-16's or other automatic weapons. One Marine fired a shotgun from the roof at the next wave of sappers entering through the hole in the wall. When the shotgun jammed, he continued to fire his .38 caliber revolver. Other American troops began to take up positions on nearby rooftops, giving them some control of the streets and the sappers inside the compound. Now trapped in the compound and being shot at from multiple directions, the attackers hunkered down behind large concrete flower pots on the Embassy lawn.

At about 3 AM, chief U.S. Embassy spokesman Barry Zorthian, at home a few blocks from the attack, started calling news bureaus; he had few details but told them the Embassy was under attack and there was heavy fire. ABC News bureau chief Dick Rosenbaum then called me around 3:30 and told me – just back from Khe Sanh – to find out what was happening. The ABC bureau, located at the Caravel Hotel,

was only four blocks from the Embassy. We headed there in the ABC News jeep but did not get far. Just off Tu Do (now renamed Dong Khoi) Street, three blocks from the embassy somebody opened up on us with automatic weapons. It was impossible to tell who it was – Viet Cong, South Vietnamese Army, Saigon police, or U.S. MP's. A couple of rounds pinged off the hood of the jeep. I killed the jeep's lights and reversed out of range. We returned to the ABC News bureau to await dawn.

At 4:20 AM, Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) issued an order instructing the 716th Military Police Battalion to retake the compound. When the MP officer in charge arrived at the scene, he concluded that U.S. forces had the Embassy surrounded and the sappers trapped inside its walls. He was unwilling to risk lives of his men in a dangerous night assault against an enemy he knew could not escape, so he ordered his men to settle in and wait for morning.

At about 5:00 AM, a U.S. Army helicopter carrying reinforcements from the 101st Airborne Division attempted to land on the Chancery roof. As the chopper hovered before touching down, the surviving sappers opened fire. Afraid of being shot down, the helicopter chief aborted the mission and flew quickly away from the building. Lieutenant General Frederick Weyand, the Commander of III Corps (one of the four major military sectors designated by MACV), was monitoring the Embassy fight and agreed there was nothing to be gained by risking another night helicopter landing into a hot landing zone. He ordered a halt to air operations until daylight.

At first light, my cameraman and I walked to the Embassy. As we approached, I heard heavy firing and saw green and red tracer bullets cut into the pink sky. Near the Embassy, we joined a group of U.S. MPs moving toward the Embassy front gate. I started my tape recorder for ABC Radio as the MPs loudly cursed the South Vietnamese troops for running away after the first shots. Lying flat in the gutter that morning with the MPs, we didn't know where the Viet Cong attackers were holed up or where the fire was coming from, but we knew it was the "big story."

Several MPs rushed past, one of them carrying a Viet Cong sapper piggy-back style. The sapper was wounded and bleeding. He wore black pajamas and, strangely, had an enormous red ruby ring on his finger. I interviewed the MPs and recorded their radio conversation with colleagues inside the Embassy gates. There was no doubt they believed the Viet Cong were in the Chancery building itself. Associated Press reporter Peter Arnett crawled off to find a phone and report the MPs' conversation to his office.

**Just One Mag**

Sporadic gunfire continued around the Embassy and one by one the sappers were either wounded or killed. I lay flat on the sidewalk in front of the Embassy as bullets ricocheted around. I found I was lying next to a seriously wounded sapper wearing black pajamas and a red arm band and bleeding from multiple wounds. Years later after reading declassified interrogation reports of the three prisoners, I discovered the wounded sapper lying next to me was Captain Nguyen Van Giang, alias Ba Den, who had lit firecrackers in the Saigon market the night before his mission and was one of the first through the hole blasted in the wall. Giang spent the remainder of the war as one of three prisoners of the Embassy attack in the infamous French-built prison on Con Dao Island just off the Southeast coast of South Vietnam.

Around 7:00 AM, Army assault helicopters land thirty-six heavily armed paratroopers from the 101st Airborne on the Embassy roof. The troopers quickly started to clear the building from top floor down searching each office for possible Viet Cong infiltrators. On the ground, MPs from the 716th stormed the front gate. My cameraman and I followed them onto the lawn which was littered with the bodies of dead and dying Viet Cong. I stepped over the Great Seal of the United States which had been blasted off the Embassy wall. We rushed into the once elegant Embassy garden where the battle had raged. It was, as UPI's Kate Webb later described, "like a butcher shop in Eden."

We paused to assess our film supply. "Okay, Peter how much film have we got left," I shouted to my cameraman. "I've got one mag," he replied. "How many do you have?" I had no mags left. "We're on the biggest story of the war with only one can of film," I groaned. "So it's one take of everything including my stand-upper" – a TV reporter's closing remarks.

VC green tracer bullets still stitched the night sky as red tracers from the U.S. weapons arced down from the Embassy roof and from across the street. The MPs took three wounded sappers prisoner and marched them off for interrogation. Nguyen Van De, the Embassy driver who had aided the sappers, lay dead on the lawn along with another armed Embassy driver. Two other Embassy drivers died as well. Orders crackled over a field radio from an officer inside the Chancery. "This is Waco, roger. Can you get in the gate now? Take a force in there and clean out the Embassy, like now. There will be choppers on the roof and troops working down. Be careful not to hit our own people. Over."

Colonel "Jake" Jacobson, the CIA chief-of-station assigned to the Embassy occupied a small villa adjacent to the Embassy. He suddenly appeared at a window on the second floor. An MP threw him a gas mask and a .45 caliber Army pistol. Surviving sappers were believed to be on the first floor and would likely be driven upstairs by tear gas. The last VC still in action rushed up the stairs,

firing blindly at Jacobson but missed. The colonel later told me, "We both saw each other at the same time. He missed me and I fired one shot at him point blank with the .45, taking him down." The battle was over.

At 9:15 AM, the U.S. officially declared the Embassy grounds secure. Scattered about the grounds were the bodies of 12 of the original 15 sappers, two armed Embassy drivers who were considered double agents and two drivers killed by accident. Five Americans were dead, including four Army soldiers: Charles Daniel, Owen Mebust, William Sebast, Jonnie Thomas; and one U.S. Marine, James Marshall.

### **Westmoreland Briefs**

At 9:20 AM, General Westmoreland strode through the gate in his carefully starched fatigues, flanked by MPs and Marines who had been fighting since 3 AM. Standing in the rubble, Westmoreland held a briefing for the press. "No enemy got in the Embassy building. It's a relatively small incident. A group of sappers blew a hole in the wall and crawled in. They were all killed." He cautioned us, "Don't be deceived by this incident." Westmoreland's relentless optimism struck most of us reporters as surreal, even delusional. Most of us there had seen much of the fighting. The General was still spinning that everything was just fine. In the meantime, thousands of U.S. and South Vietnamese troops were fighting hard to take back the four other Saigon targets the VC had occupied – as well as the City of Hue and other targets of the offensive around the country.

Also, contrary to Westmoreland's briefing, it was not correct that all of the 15 sappers were killed. Three were wounded but survived. Army photographers Don Hirst and Edgar Price, and Life Magazine's Dick Swanson took dramatic photos of the wounded sappers being led away by 716th Battalion MPs, before being turned over to the South Vietnamese – and never heard from again during the war. No one admitted that some sappers survived, and it was a closely guarded secret that at least two of the dead Embassy drivers were Viet Cong agents.

The Embassy siege showed the effectiveness of U.S. Marines and Military Police, non-tactical troops fighting as infantry without benefit of heavy weapons or communication to overcome an enemy.

### **A TV Report Stand-Upper**

Using our last 30 feet of film, I recorded my "stand-upper."

"Since the Lunar New Year, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese have proved they are capable of bold and impressive military moves that Americans here never dreamed could be achieved," I said. "But whatever turn the war now takes, the

capture of the U.S. Embassy here for almost seven hours is a psychological victory that will rally and inspire the Viet Cong.”

A rush to judgement? Perhaps, but I was on an hourly deadline and ABC expected the story as well as some perspective, even in the early hours of the offensive – a first rough draft of history. Still my instant analysis never made it onto ABC News. Worried about editorializing on a sensitive story, a senior producer in New York killed the on-camera close. Ironically, my closer ended up in the Simon Grinberg library of ABC out-takes and was later discovered by director Peter Davis and used in his film “Hearts and Minds.”

The rest of our story package fared better. The film from all three networks arrived on the same plane in Tokyo for processing and editing, causing a mad scramble to be the first film on the satellite for the evening newscasts in the U.S. Because we only had 400 feet to process and cut, ABC News made the satellite in time and the story led the evening news. NBC and CBS missed the satellite deadline and had to run catch-up specials later in the evening.

### **An Information Curtain Falls**

Our group of 50 journalists in the Embassy compound were then escorted out and the gates were locked. An information curtain descended around the Embassy for the following weeks. No interviews were allowed with Marines or MP's who had fought the Embassy battle and won. Journalists were told the only comment on the Embassy battle would come from the State Department or White House, and that an investigation was under way and would be released in due course. That report – if there was ever such a report – has yet to be declassified. Without access to the stories of the American defenders of the Embassy, their heroism went largely unreported, thus increasing the public perception that the Tet Offensive had been a U.S. defeat instead of the military victory it actually was.

In March 1968, just two months after Tet, a Harris poll showed that the majority of Americans, 60 percent, regarded the Tet Offensive as a defeat for U.S. objectives in Vietnam. The news media was widely blamed for creating the antiwar sentiment. Research by a senior U.S. officer in Vietnam, General Douglas Kinnard, found 91 percent of U.S. Army generals expressed negative feelings about TV news coverage. However, General Kinnard concluded that the importance of the media in swaying public opinion was largely a myth. That myth was important to the U.S. Government to perpetuate, so officials could insist it was not the real war situation to which Americans reacted, but rather the media portrayal of that situation.

### **Embassy Demolished, Memorials Remain**

The imposing U.S. Embassy that withstood the attack fifty years ago was demolished in 1998 and replaced with a modest one story Consulate. In a garden closed to the public is a small plaque in honor of the five American soldiers who died defending the Embassy that day: Charles Daniel, James Marshall, Owen Mebust, William Sebast, and Jonnie Thomas. A few steps away, on the sidewalk outside the Consulate, is a gray and red marble monument engraved with the names of Viet Cong soldiers and agents who died there on January 31, 1968.

### **Three Surviving Sappers Imprisoned on Con Dao Island**

The fate of the three surviving Viet Cong sappers was a closely held secret by the U.S. Embassy. Following a hot dispute between U.S. Army MPs and the South Vietnamese military as to who should have custody, the POWs were turned over to the South Vietnamese and imprisoned in the infamous old French prison on Con Dao island. U.S. Army interrogators questioned them and in 2002, the reports were declassified. If the three POWs were a fair indication of the 15 sappers who conducted the siege, it would seem they were not a highly trained elite force, but rather older soldiers of low rank, some holding down clerical and cooking duties for their units.

Ba Den, 43, was the senior survivor of the attack and among the first through the hole blown in the Embassy wall. He had been born in North Vietnam and migrated south to join a Viet Cong cadre in Tay Ninh.

A second sapper prisoner was Nguyen Van Sau, alias "Chuck," the third man through the wall hole. Shot in the face and buttocks, the 31 year-old Buddhist was captured by MPs at first light. Sau was born on a small farm near Cu Chi and was forced to join the VC when a recruiting raid entered his village in 1964 and seized 20 men. Sau's main complaint was that he didn't get enough to eat but remained with the VC as most of the young men from his village were also members and had endured the same hardships. With information divulged by Sau, Saigon police raided the garage where the sappers mounted their attack and arrested the owner and ten others linked to the group.

The third sapper, 44 year-old Sergeant Dang Van Son, alias "Tot," joined the Viet Minh in North Vietnam in 1947 and was sent down the Ho Chi Minh trail. He became cook for an infantry company in Tay Ninh. During the attack, Son was wounded in the head and leg, captured by the South Vietnamese and woke up in a Saigon hospital several days later.

Ba Den was released from prison in 1975 and returned to his village North of Saigon. There was no word of Dang Van Son or Nguyen Van Sau, who are believed to have died in Con Dao prison and are buried in the vast cemetery there.

## **Biet Dong Committee of Ho Chi Minh City**

Now that the 50th anniversary of the Tet Offensive and the Embassy attack is here, Vietnamese who honor the dead according to traditional custom will remember the estimated one hundred thousand Communist soldiers who died and renew their efforts to identify the burial grounds of their comrades. So it's surprising that even top North Vietnamese field commanders had little praise for the 15 sapper martyrs of the Embassy attack.

North Vietnamese General Tran Do, in communication with the Saigon command a few days after Tet, asked, "Why did those who planned the attack on the Embassy fail to consider the ease with which helicopters and troops could be landed on the roof?" However, their boldness and bravery against such overwhelming odds has made them heroes to be remembered in Vietnam. Although in recent years there has been U.S. cooperation in identifying burial grounds of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops, there has been no recognition of a possible mass grave for the sappers killed at the Embassy.

## **Something Truly Stupid**

Washington military analyst Anthony Cordesman has often observed, "One way to achieve decisive surprise in warfare is to do something truly stupid." As revealed in the interrogation reports of the sapper POWs, the planning and execution of the Embassy attack was "truly stupid" and carried out by poorly trained Viet Cong, but its effects marked a turning point of the war and earned a curious entry in the annals of military history.

Another Washington military analyst, Steven Metz, explains "counterinsurgency" and why Tet became a dramatic turning point in the war. "The essence of insurgency is the psychological. It is armed theatre. You have protagonists on the stage, but they are sending messages to a wider audience. Insurgency is not won killing insurgents, not won by seizing territory; it is won by altering the psychological factors that are most relevant."

In Vietnam, this "truly stupid" attack on the U.S. Embassy changed the course of the war. It may have been "a small incident" as General William Westmoreland claimed, but seen through the political and psychological prism of insurgency warfare, it may have indeed been the biggest incident of the war.

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# **Trump's Fragile Grasp of History**

President Trump may have been a reality-TV star but his grasp of reality has

always been tenuous, underscored by his weak understanding of U.S. and world history, as Michael Winship explains.

By Michael Winship

Gene Tunney, the champion prizefighter of the 1920s, wanted to promote an image of himself as a great intellectual. Trying to prove it, he always carried in his pocket a copy of Shakespeare's sonnets. Many members of the press weren't buying it. When Tunney published a volume titled *A Man Must Fight*, one sportswriter began his story about it with this immortal line: "Gene Tunney, who has written one book and read several others..."

It's a line that would work for Donald Trump, too, but only if flipped: "Donald Trump, who has *written* several books and *read* one other..."

Of course, his various books have been written with the considerable help of long suffering ghosts. And yes, I know that on several occasions Trump has bragged to reporters about the many books he claims to have read. In 2011, for example, he told the official Chinese news agency Xinhua, "I've read hundreds of books about China over the decades." If you believe that, I've got a Great Wall to sell you. A real one. In China, not Mexico.

As I wrote a couple of weeks ago, one of Trump's least appealing of many unappealing traits is his incuriosity, his total lack of interest in history or pretty much anything that somehow doesn't pump up his ego or profits. It's deeply dangerous for all of us.

On Monday, here he was again, the man who just claimed an unprecedented first 100 days (must have been a helluva shock to FDR), who may have thought Frederick Douglass was still alive ("somebody who's done an amazing job") and who seemed eager to spread the news that Abraham Lincoln was a Republican ("Does anyone know? A lot of people don't know that!").

Now he was sharing his thoughts on the Civil War: "People don't realize, you know, the Civil War – if you think about it, why? People don't ask that question, but why was there the Civil War? Why could that one not have been worked out?"

When my eyes uncross and my head stops coming to a point, I'd like to read aloud to him from the Emancipation Proclamation. Trump's remarks came as he discussed in a radio interview his oft-stated admiration for Andrew Jackson. But as Aaron Blake at *The Washington Post* notes, Trump pulled yet another groaner when, "Just last week, in an interview with Reuters, Trump suggested there was really no reason for the Israelis and the Palestinians to have been fighting for all these

decades.

“‘I want to see peace with Israel and the Palestinians,’ Trump said. ‘There is no reason there’s not peace between Israel and the Palestinians – none whatsoever. So we’re looking at that, and we’re also looking at the potential of going to Saudi Arabia.’”

“No reason whatsoever! You know, besides the whole claim-to-the-very-same-holy-land thing. Minor details.”

### **Don’t Know Much...**

It boggles the mind. My former colleague, historian David McCullough, is no stranger to American presidents, having written Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of Harry Truman and John Adams. He has been making the rounds promoting his new book, a collection of his speeches called *The American Spirit: Who We Are and What We Stand For.*

When he appeared on Leonard Lopate’s talk show on New York public radio a couple of weeks ago, McCullough noted that in Donald Trump we had “put someone in the pilot seat who has never ever flown a plane before; who doesn’t understand how our government works, who has no interest in the history of the country and has said so on more than one occasion, who has never read a book about the presidency or a biography of a president and claims... that he doesn’t need to read books because he knows so much intuitively.”

And yet when Trump declares that health care reform or pretty much anything else – in fact the entire job of being president – is much more complicated than he imagined it would be, it’s precisely because he has no knowledge of history, the kind of knowledge that might at least from time to time buffer for him the shock of reality by offering the golden gift of precedence.

History, McCullough writes, is “an aid to navigation in such troubled uncertain times. ... All problems have histories and the wisest route to a successful solution to nearly any problem begins with understanding its history. Indeed, almost any attempt to solve a problem without an understanding of its history is to court failure – an example our tragic plunge into Vietnam with hardly a notion of its past.”

Or our plunge into Iraq. Or Afghanistan. Or Iran. Or North Korea – especially when the sum total of Trump’s knowledge of that country’s fraught history seems to have been a 10-minute tutorial from the president of China.

History is that proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in Mexico and causing a tsunami in Malaysia. Which makes it all the more perilous when you have a

president who uses “America First” as a campaign slogan, revealing little knowledge of the isolationist movement before World War II; whose press secretary makes ill-considered statements comparing Nazi Germany, Syria and the use of poison gas to massacre civilians; and who calls Sen. Elizabeth Warren “Pocahontas,” demonstrating a willful, repugnant ignorance of Native American history that goes all the way back to a time some 24 years ago when he claimed owners of tribal casinos “are not Indians” because they didn’t conform to his stereotype of what Native Americans should look like.

### **‘A Bad Thing’**

But even worse than any of these is a lack of knowledge of history and government that puts our very existence as a free and democratic government in peril. Embracing other countries’ dictators is one slippery slope. And then on Sunday there was Trump’s chief of staff Reince Priebus suggesting to Jonathan Karl of ABC News that his boss is contemplating amending or even eliminating the First Amendment to curb negative coverage of the president. And finally, there was Trump himself, complaining to Fox News about the difficulty of getting his program through Congress: “It’s a very rough system. It’s an archaic system... It’s really a bad thing for the country.”

In other words, history, the system of checks and balances and the Constitution itself are just getting in Trump’s way, despite his prior claims to regard as inviolate the original language of the founders.

David McCullough has said that our past is an invaluable asset, but “if you’ve inherited some great work of art that is worth a fortune and you don’t know that it’s worth a fortune, you don’t even know that it’s a great work of art and you’re not interested in it – you’re going to lose it.”

Trump and his minions seem determined to send the admittedly flawed masterwork that is our legacy to the trash. One of David’s favorite quotes comes from Thomas Jefferson: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

Sadly, those words are probably unfamiliar to Trump precisely because of what Jefferson suggested. Past presidents have embraced our past as prologue, read books, invited eminent historians to the White House for advice and consultation. But Trump takes his history, as little as it is, from the dark spoutings of pseudointellectuals like Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, or in tweets and soundbites from *Fox & Friends*. When he tries to parrot the words back as public statements, they come out even more mangled and malevolent.

While he is so ignorant we cannot be free.

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[<http://billmoyers.com/story/dont-know-much-about-history/>]

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## Standing Up for Lessons of Dissent

There is a general belief that Americans don't care much about history, preferring to bask in self-reverential "exceptionalism" with U.S. behavior beyond criticism. But students outside Denver are taking to the streets to protest right-wing efforts to strip dissent from the history curriculum, writes Peter Dreier.

By Peter Dreier

In Colorado, just west of Denver, Jefferson County high school students are protesting their school board's attempt to rewrite the American history curriculum. In their resistance, they are doing all Americans a favor by reminding us of the importance of dissent and protest in our nation's history.

The students are reacting to a proposal by the Jefferson County school board – Colorado's second largest school district with about 85,000 students – to change the way history is taught in the schools.

Last November, three new board members were elected to the school board, forming a conservative majority. One of them, Julie Williams, has led the charge to revise the Advanced Placement U.S. history curriculum to promote patriotism, respect for authority, and free enterprise and to guard against educational materials that "encourage or condone civil disorder."

Williams said she believes that the current Advanced Placement curriculum in American history places an excessive emphasis on "race, gender, class, ethnicity, grievance and American-bashing."

With the support of many teachers and parents, the Colorado students have engaged in a protest of their own to teach the school board a lesson. It began on Monday, Sept. 22, when about 100 students walked out at Evergreen High School, one of 17 high schools in the suburban district outside Denver.

Since then the protests have gained momentum, fueled by social media and student-to-student contact. As the *New York Times* [reported](#), they "streamed out of school and along busy thoroughfares, waving signs and championing the value of learning about the fractious and tumultuous chapters of American history."

By last week, the number of students involved in the protest had mushroomed. On Thursday, according to the [Denver Post](#), more than 1,000 students walked out of class behind a new unified slogan – “It’s our history; don’t make it mystery.”

## **History of Protest**

Back in 1900, people were considered impractical idealists, utopian dreamers or dangerous socialists for advocating women’s suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the right of workers to form unions, a progressive income tax, a federal minimum wage, old-age insurance, dismantling of Jim Crow laws, the eight-hour workday, and government-subsidized health care. Now we take these ideas for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

As Americans, we stand on the shoulders of earlier generations of reformers, radicals and idealists who challenged the status quo of their day. They helped change America by organizing movements, pushing for radical reforms, popularizing progressive ideas, and spurring others to action.

To understand American society, we need to know about the accomplishments of people like Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, Eugene Debs, Robert La Follette, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. DuBois, Frances Perkins, Lewis Hine, A.J. Muste, Alice Paul, A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Day, Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Fiorello LaGuardia, Myles Horton, Rachel Carson, Walter Reuther, Thurgood Marshall, Bayard Rustin, Woody Guthrie, Cesar Chavez, Barry Commoner, Ella Baker, Jackie Robinson, Bella Abzug, Pete Seeger, Martin Luther King, Harvey Milk, Ralph Nader, Gloria Steinem, John Lewis and Billie Jean King.

If some of these names aren’t quite household names, that reflects our failure as a society to recognize and teach our students about some of the major dissenters, rebels and reformers who have shaped our nation’s history.

Even today, grassroots movements have continued to push and pull America in a positive direction, often against difficult odds. Today’s battles over the minimum wage, Wall Street reform, immigrant rights, climate change, voting rights, gun control, and same-sex marriage build on the foundation of previous generations of dissenters.

Each generation of Americans faces a different set of economic, political, and social conditions. There are no easy formulas for challenging injustice and promoting democracy. But unless we know this history, we will have little understanding of how far we have come, how we got here, and what still needs to change to make America (and the rest of the world) more livable, humane and

democratic.

The Jefferson County School Board's attempt to ignore or downplay the long tradition of dissent, protest and conflict that has always shaped American society is hardly unique. In the early 1990s, Lynne Cheney, who headed the National Endowment for the Humanities during the first Bush Administration (and is the wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney), attacked the teaching of American history for presenting a "grim and gloomy" account of America's past.

After that, conservatives on local school boards around the country escalated their efforts and continue them today. It is part of the backlash against the increasing examination by historians of the roles of women, African-Americans, Latinos, native Americans, dissenters, and movements in American history.

But such battles go back even further than Cheney's campaign. In the 1979 book, *America Revised*, Frances Fitzgerald examined how the teaching of American history has been the subject of an ongoing debate going back to the 1800s, fueled by political differences over the nature of American identity. Conservatives have traditionally sought to emphasize consensus over conflict in the development of U.S. history textbooks and curriculum.

As the College Board observed in a statement issued on Friday, the Jefferson County students "recognize that the social order can – and sometimes must – be disrupted in the pursuit of liberty and justice. Civil disorder and social strife are at the patriotic heart of American history – from the Boston Tea Party to the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement. And these events and ideas are essential within the study of a college-level, AP U.S. History course."

It would be fitting and appropriate for the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association to give these students an award at their next meetings for their commitment to the teaching of American history. Perhaps one or both of these organizations could invite some of the students to give a presentation about their protest campaign as part of a plenary session on the teaching of AP American history. It would surely be the most well-attended session at either conference.

Such a gesture by one or both of the leading organizations of historians would inspire high school students elsewhere to challenge arbitrary authority and put the two organizations on record in opposition to the efforts by school boards to distort the teaching of history for overtly political purposes.

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most recent book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012)

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