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The Six Most Disastrous Interventions of the 21st Century

By Gary Leupp
October 9, 2015



On October 2 President Barack Obama, alluding to Russia's decision to launch air strikes in Syria, told reporters at the White House that for Russia to view the forces targeted "from the perspective they're all terrorists [is] a recipe for disaster, and it's one that I reject."

In other words, he was saying that Moscow is not (as it claims) really focusing on ISIL and the al-Nusra Front but on the anti-regime opposition in general, which supposedly includes “moderates.”

Never mind that Obama himself as well as Joseph Biden have on occasion pooh-pooed the existence of a moderate armed opposition that controls territory in Syria. Didn't Biden say last year at Harvard that “there was no moderate middle [in Syria] because the moderate middle are made up of shop-keepers, not soldiers”?

And hasn't it been shown that maps showing territory in the hands of the “Free Syrian Army” are the figments of propagandists' imagination? The FSA has no coordinated command structure and its networks overlap those of groups that Washington would not normally define as “moderate” (unless it wanted to rehabilitate al-Qaeda, which having attacked the U.S. on 9/11 and supposedly the cause of all the—disastrous—post-9/11 U.S. military actions in the Middle East), has gradually become my-enemy-against-my-enemy and hence a new found friend.

Seriously. Gen. David Petraeus, architect of the “surge” in Iraq in 2007 and former head of the CIA (until brought down in a sex/email-misuse scandal), has actually suggested that the U.S. support al-Qaeda—the al-Nusra Front—in Syria to defeat the bigger foe that is ISIL. (It does seem one man's extremist is another man's “moderate,” especially under confusing crisis circumstances. And that every cable news anchorperson will call “moderate” whatever the State Department demands—without knowing jack-shit about the facts, this not being required by that profession.)

Since Moscow announced its intention to help the Syrian government repel the advance of the Islamist extremists, the mainstream U.S. media has been snarling that Russia is “obviously” not really targeting ISIL but the “opposition.” As though the “opposition” was some third wholly positive category deserving of sympathy and excluding any really unsavory forces! But haven't they themselves reported on the abject failure of the U.S. to train any viable “moderate” anti-regime military force?

Obama claims that Russian intervention into the conflict in Syria, at the invitation of the internationally recognized Syrian government, can (unlike the U.S. bombing in clear violation of international law) bring only “disaster.” But if we're to talk about disastrous military or political interventions in the 21st century, I'd say we have seen six main ones so far, wrecking six different countries. And they were all designed in Washington.

1 Afghanistan

The first was the disaster of the invasion of Afghanistan beginning in October 2001. I'm not sure we should call it a “crime,” since the international coalition that invaded was authorized by a UN resolution, or a “mistake” since it was clearly the result of calculation. But it has been a disaster, resulting from the initial proposition that the Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda terrorist organization were one, and that one need not (as George W. Bush put it) “make a distinction” between the two.

In fact, the Taliban was a xenophobic Pashtun nationalist organization preoccupied with restoring order to Afghanistan, after two decades of civil war and chaos, on the basis of a stern implementation of the Sharia as it understood it, and which it regards as the laws of God. (Much like some people see the Old Testament book of Leviticus—which specifies stoning to death for adultery, the burning of witches and death for men who have sex with other men—as the Word of God.) There was a time (October 1996) when Zalmay Khalilzad (Afghan-born neocon, soul-mate of Paul Wolfowitz, one-time U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, the ambassador to Iraq) could editorialize in the Washington Post that the U.S. should engage the Taliban because the “Taliban does not practice the anti-US style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran—it is closer to the Saudi model.”

Al-Qaeda on the other hand was an international jihadi network devoted to the cause of provoking, through spectacular acts of terror, a general confrontation between Islam and the west. These are two very different things, and there is little evidence that in 2001 they were coordinating activities with one another. Bin Laden was already living in Afghanistan at the time the Taliban rose to power; he had been expelled from Sudan at U.S. insistence and allowed to relocate to Afghanistan with tacit U.S. approval. He was allowed to remain in the country under the Taliban due to the Pashtunwali code of hospitality; his financial support to the new cash-strapped rulers; and his history of leading Arab mujahedeen against the Soviet-backed regime during the 1980s.

As the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan at the time has made clear, by the time that the U.S. bombing began in October 2001, the Taliban had agreed to the U.S. demand that it arrest and hand over Osama bin Laden to U.S. custody. But the neocons in Washington wanted nothing less than regime change. Ignoring the offer, the U.S. achieved this rapidly, almost bloodlessly, as Taliban forces responding to appeals from tribal leaders abandoned the cities (to spare civilian lives) and faded into the countryside to fight another day.

The U.S. soon cobbled together a regime, initially headed by Hamid Karzai and assorted Northern Alliance warlords, which fourteen years later has yet to stabilize the country or defeat the resurgent Taliban. U.S. military leaders have long since concluded and stated openly that the war is not winnable and that a political solution must be secured.

The major battle of the war pitted about 50 U.S. troops plus Northern Alliance forces against perhaps as few as 300 al-Qaeda militants at Tora Bora. The U.S. military estimates some 200 militants were killed, although no detailed count is available, given the U.S. government’s desire at the time to both exaggerate al-Qaeda’s strength (to suggest a force of tens of thousands and frighten the U.S. public after 9/11) and its desire to inflate the death toll to emphasize U.S. success in the conflict.

It’s clear that hundreds of al-Qaeda militants successfully retreated across the border into Pakistan, whence some moved on to Iraq, Yemen, Libya and other countries, and as the Tribal Areas of western Pakistan became the headquarters of an al-Qaeda operation more vigorous and widely admired than ever.

Meanwhile Taliban forces that had similarly regrouped across the border inspired the formation of like-minded Pakistani Taliban groups. These became a massive headache for the Islamabad government—formerly the Taliban’s main patron—now reluctantly forced to ally with the U.S. in its so-called “War on Terror.” It had to tolerate the U.S. drone strikes that inevitably stimulated more local anti-U.S. sentiment, and launch attacks on homegrown pro-Taliban Islamists on the border resulting in heavy casualties and generally, failure.

While al-Qaeda has virtually disappeared in Afghanistan, its (even more brutal) offshoot ISIL is now gaining a foothold there. And the Taliban far from disappearing has been able to take over the city of Kunduz, once thought beyond their reach. The central government, which only controls the region around the capital of Kabul, is weak and divided among supporters of the president and his rival, the prime minister.

The agenda of reforms once promised by the invaders (including most notably, the education of girls and women and their liberation from the burqa) has fallen by the wayside. The Afghan experience can be considered Bush Disaster Number One since it is the fault of the Bush/Cheney co-presidency.

2 Iraq, 2003

The second disaster was of course the invasion and occupation of Iraq beginning in 2003. If Secretary of “Defense” Donald Rumsfeld had had his way, the U.S. would have begun bombing Iraq immediately after 9/11 “because,” as he put it, there were “no good sites to bomb” in Afghanistan.

In other words, he would have immediately manufactured a case blaming Iraq for 9/11 in order to justify war on the Arab country. George W. Bush, who had already told a biographer that if he “had a chance,” he “would invade Iraq” would have embraced that proposal. But the British prime minister told him that British support an invasion of Iraq would be more likely if Afghanistan were attacked first. Since al-Qaeda had training camps in Afghanistan, but none in Iraq, it would just be hard to sell an Iraq war as a response to 9/11.

But after a sustained propaganda campaign, launched with Bush’s state of the union speech just four months after 9/11, in which a tiny cabal of fear mongering disinformation specialists in the Pentagon and White House deliberately produced a case for war—a case entirely discredited soon after the beginning of the occupation—Bush did indeed lead the country to war in March 2003.

This was clearly a crime—a “crime against peace” as defined during the Nuremburg trials and by the UN Charter. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech to the UN Security Council requesting authorization for war fell on flat ears; the UN refused to approve the war; key U.S. NATO allies opposed it and refused to participate; Powell himself later acknowledged that the speech had been full of nonsense.

The war based on lies has dealt a sharp blow to U.S. credibility. But that is not why it was and is a disaster. Had the U.S. merely removed Saddam Hussein, leaving the professional army and

secular Baath Party intact if subject to reform, there might have been some hope for post-invasion stability. The neocons had predicted an enthusiastic welcome for the troops, and a smooth transition along the lines of the Occupation of Japan from 1945.

But no! Occupation procurator Paul Bremer stomping around Baghdad in cowboy boots ordered the ruling party and the Iraqi Army disbanded, depriving the Sunni minority of their sources of power and income. And necessarily bending to the peaceful protests of Shiite demonstrators clamoring for elections, the U.S. gradually empowered a fractious collection of Shiite-based parties bent on revenge and confrontation with the Sunnis. Civil war broke out in earnest within a year of Bush's declaration "Mission Accomplished" and U.S. troops started taking serious casualties.

More importantly, the number of Iraqi deaths likely rose to over half a million, while millions fled into internal or foreign exile.

Here is where the disaster in Afghanistan started to overlap the one in Iraq. The Jordanian terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, having fled Afghanistan after the U.S. attack, popped up in west Iraq with a band of militants. He told the local disaffected Sunnis, look at what the American infidels have done! They've empowered the Shiite apostates and strengthened the Shiites' ally, our enemy Iran. We have to wage a jihad on the foreign troops as well as the Shiites!

Having hitherto refused to join al-Qaeda, and in fact constituted a rival militant force, al-Zarqawi now pronounced his allegiance to al-Qaeda and established what was originally called "Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia." This of course morphed into today's ISIL or Islamic State. Its targets included Shiite religious sites and Shiite communities, attacked by suicide bombers. The general climate of terror initiated by the U.S. invasion became even more pervasive.

During the famous "surge" of 2007-8, an increase in U.S. troop strength is supposed to have suppressed the al-Qaeda-led "insurgency" in Iraq. In fact it was more a matter of bundles of U.S. dollars offered tribal leaders to encourage resistance to the anti-Occupation forces. And Zarqawi's movement was not in fact crushed but merely driven over the border into Syria. There it strengthened and from thence it returned into Iraq last year with a vengeance, in a wave of lightning conquests. Mosul, Ramadi, Tikrit, and Fallujah have all become part of the Islamic State.

Iraq has in all probability been permanently dismembered. It now constitutes a nearly independent Kurdistan in the north, under intermittent fire from U.S. ally and NATO member Turkey (which fears the independence movement among Turkey's own 11 to 20 million Kurds); the Shiite-led, Iran-friendly rump Iraqi state around Baghdad and Basra; and the ISIL-dominated Anbar Province. The border between Syria and Iraq imposed by French and British imperialists after World War I has been erased.

This can be considered Bush Disaster Number Two since it is again the fault of the Bush/Cheney co-presidency.

3 Syria

The third disaster is the destabilization of Syria. We know that the neocons in the Bush/Cheney administration were plotting the downfall of the Bashar al-Assad government from at least 2001; that Israel bombs Syria routinely, with U.S. approval; and that diplomatic documents published by Wikileaks show multiple efforts by the U.S. embassy before its closure in 2012 to undermine Assad.

But the key year was 2011, during the “Arab Spring” that President Obama apparently thought was going to bring down most governments in the Middle East. He also apparently thought that, by rhetorically siding with the youth-led, social media-fueled protest movements he could subsequently pose as a champion of “freedom” in the region. So in July after the forceful suppression of some protests he declared that Assad had “lost his legitimacy” (as though Washington had respected his legitimacy earlier) and began to funnel limited assistance to the armed opposition.

We know that Hillary Clinton as secretary of state found the aid inadequate and would have preferred to involve the U.S. more heavily in another attempt at (illegal) “regime change.” (She makes a point in her memoir *Hard Choices* of noting how she differed with Obama on this issue.) From 2011 the U.S. sought to train armed forces in the “moderate opposition” but has in the years since been frustrated by their inclination to align with the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda branch, and to pass on U.S. weaponry to the more experienced and effective group.

Support for the armed opposition by the U.S. and its Gulf allies with Saudi Arabia in the lead has all but destroyed the modern Syrian state, just as the U.S. and its partners destroyed Iraq. It has contributed to the emergence of ISIL, as the result of a split within al-Qaeda that occurred in Syria, and to ISIL’s acquisition of de facto state power and a capital in Raqqa. Often battling against al-Nusra, it has succeeded better than any other al-Qaeda chapter or offshoot in holding and expending territory. Hence its self-designation, the Islamic State.

This is the group once dismissed by Obama as of “Junior Varsity” quality compared to al-Qaeda (the real threat). But no, it has become the most ferociously evil armed force of the century (next to U.S. imperialism itself)—demanding compliance with a certain version of Sunni Islam; forcing conversions; beheading Christians, Shiites, Yezidis and others solely on the grounds of their religious beliefs; burning and burying people alive; crucifying prisoners of war; enslaving women and forcing them into marriage; terrifying hundreds of thousands to flee their homelands for Europe where they meet with more cruelty and death.

Its wanton destruction of the precious monuments of Palmyra that shocks and grieves the world might never have happened if Obama had recognized that Assad is NOT the main problem in Syria.

Assad has tried to avoid conflict with the U.S. When in 2005 Washington demanded that it withdraw its troops from neighboring Lebanon—where they had been upon the request of a Christian-led government in 1976 in the course of a civil war sparked by an Israeli invasion, to

separate warring forces and restore order—Syria did indeed withdraw. (As it did, huge numbers of Lebanese rallied to express their gratitude to the Syrian Army.)

When Obama accused Damascus in 2013 of using chemical weapons against the opposition (a charge substantially refuted since by Seymour Hersh and other investigative reporters), and prepared to launch strikes against Syria initiating yet another war, Assad quickly agreed to a Russian proposal that Syria turn over its chemical weapons stocks to the United Nations. This was done efficiently and expeditiously. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had in fact spared a trigger-happy Obama a likely nightmare.

But Obama persists in the delusion that there's a viable, "legitimate" opposition in Syria standing between the state forces and the Islamist crazies. And so he denounces Russia for supporting the Syrian government and army while trying to lead a coalition backing this opposition while fighting both Assad and the Islamists. And now that Russia has made the decision to support Damascus with airstrikes, the U.S. State Department echoed by the U.S. press claim that those strikes are hitting "the opposition rather than ISIL."

As though ISIL and similar forces are not the bulk of the opposition! U.S. public opinion is once again being shaped to view Putin as a relentless aggressor rather than a leader responding cautiously to U.S. efforts that are sowing chaos. Meanwhile Putin himself asked the U.S. bluntly, in his speech September 28 to the United Nations General Assembly: "Do you realize what you've done?" (Would that these pointed and necessary words would resonate and linger in Obama's cold brain.)

Syria too has been an unmitigated disaster. And although its roots lie in the Bush/Cheney co-presidency, it is basically Obama Disaster Number One.

4 Libya

The fourth disaster is the ruination of Libya. The country's leader, Muammar Gaddafi, had from 1969 to 2011 presided over a stable society that had during this time become a relatively affluent society with the most equitable distribution of income in North Africa. Its health care and education systems were of comparatively high standard.

Long shunned by western governments for his alleged support for international terrorism, Gaddafi sought rapprochement with the west from the beginning of this century. In 2003 he accepted Libyan (although not personal) responsibility for the 1988 bombing of Pam Am Flight 103 over Lockerbee, Scotland and paid compensation to victims' families. (Between 2003 and 2004 the U.S. sent at least eight captured terror suspects to Libya for "questioning.")

In 2006 he negotiated with western countries led by Britain and agreed to dismantle his WMD programs. (U.S. "diplomat" John Bolton made himself positively unwelcome in these negotiations by his bullying behavior.) At that time Gaddafi was (according to Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice) providing "excellent cooperation" in fighting international terrorism, and had developed a close relationship with MI6 and CIA officers.

Richard Perle visited Gaddafi in his tent, reporting back to Cheney. British Prime Minister Blair visited him, and in 2006 wrote him a letter beginning “Dear Muammar” and concluding with, “Best wishes, Yours ever, Tony.” In 2010 Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi visited him and publicly kissed his hand. Moussa Koussa, the head of Libya’s external intelligence department, was on a first-name basis with MI6 and CIA officials and exchanged gifts and Christmas greetings with them.

But all that changed during the Arab Spring when anti-Gaddafi protests and riots broke out in Libya. Those in Benghazi were violent; BBC and France24 reported protesters’ use of petrol bombs on February 16. Police responded with rubber bullets and water cannon; 38 protestors were hospitalized with light injuries and all released the next day.

But more violence ensued, and within days armed anti-regime forces took control of the city. Human Rights Watch put the number of dead protesters at 173. As Gaddafi vowed to send military forces to retake the city, the western press embarked on a campaign to accuse him of planning “genocide.” His western friends turned on him, vowing to help the Libyan people to drive him from power.

French president Nicolas Sarkozy, apparently thinking that Gaddafi’s days were numbered anyway and that it would be wise for France to pose as the ally of the Libyan people, pushed for international action: a no-fly zone to prevent the Libyan air force from bombing Benghazi. British Prime Minister David Cameron joined in the call. Obama was somewhat reluctant; U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had recently cautioned against U.S. involvement in more wars in the Middle East. But Hillary Clinton was the picture of enthusiasm.

On March 17, the UN Security Council voted on a resolution to authorize a no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians from state attack. French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe argued that the world was experiencing “a wave of great revolutions that will change the course of world history,” suggesting that the states represented should get behind the masses seeking “a breath of fresh air.”

The resolution passed with five in favor and five abstentions (including Russia, China, Germany, India and Brazil). Of course we now know that this ostensible “humanitarian” effort to protect civilians became an all-out attack on the Gaddafi government and family. Russia expressed outrage over the expansion of the UN-approved mission (and has subsequently stated that it will veto any similar motion proposed by the western countries in the future).

At least 76 civilians were killed by air strikes in the “Operation Unified Protector” between February and October 2011, which empowered numerous tribal militias; unleashed tribal and ethnic animosities; destroyed the modern Libyan state; provided power vacuums quickly filled by al-Qaeda affiliates; and resulted in Gaddafi’s flight, capture, and brutal murder while sodomized with a knife.

Hillary Clinton getting word of the Libyan leader’s demise got cute, quoting the Latin phrase attributed to Julius Caesar relating to a battle in Pontus in 46 BCE: *Veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I

saw, I conquered). In Clinton's rendition, conveyed with twinkling eyes and pixie smile: "We came, we saw, he died!"

Now Libya has become completely ungovernable, with civil war raging between the New General National Congress in Tripoli and the (more internationally recognized) Council of Deputies in Tobruk in the east, and Ansar al-Sharia (implicated in the killing of U.S. diplomats in Benghazi in 2012) and ISIL also holding territory.

Is it not rather sickening, by the way, that for her political foes and the mainstream media the main controversy over Clinton's record as Secretary of State involves the State Department's explanation for the attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi on September 11, 2012—rather than on her role in destruction of the country of Libya itself? This savage person is the front-runner for the U.S. presidency, for godssake!

Tuaregs long resident in Libya have been obliged to flee into Mali, where Tuareg secessionists in the north have sometimes joined with al-Qaeda forces. The central government has invited in French troops to help quell the simmering insurgency which intensified after Gaddafi's overthrow. Meanwhile tens of thousands of refugees have fled to Italy and beyond, contributing to the massive problem these wars are continuing to inflict on Europe. AP reported on October 5 that 95 more migrants fleeing Libya were found dead along the shore near Benghazi.

Another country wrecked. So let us call this Obama Disaster Number Two.

5 Yemen

The fifth disaster is the ravaging of Yemen. This, the poorest country in the Arab world, located on the Arabian Peninsula and bordering Saudi Arabia, has had friendly relations with the U.S. since the early 1990s. It hosted 100 U.S. troops during the disastrous Somalia operation in 1992.

After the al-Qaeda attack on the USS Cole in Yemeni waters in October 2000, Yemen cooperated with the investigation. Its president Ali Saleh visited Washington to meet with President Bill Clinton the following month and received a promise of patrol boats and other military aid.

After the 9/11 attacks the following year, Washington demanded that Saleh's government take military action against a target in the country where U.S. intelligence indicated about 20 al-Qaeda militants were located. Saleh obeyed, and 18 of his soldiers were killed by local villagers, four of whom were killed. No al-Qaeda militants were found. This set the tone for later operations demanded by the U.S.

In January 2002 Washington announced a plan to dispatch 200 U.S. soldier to Yemen to train local forces to confront militants in the country. Vice President Cheney told the press that Saleh had requested these, but the Yemeni president, who had in fact declared to his people that there would be no foreign troops on Yemeni soil, told al-Jazeera, "It was not we who requested them. It is the U.S. government that said, 'prove your genuineness and let the experts in' so we let them

in.” Meanwhile parliament members complained that the U.S. ambassador, Edmund Hull, was behaving like a colonial administrator.

U.S. cultural insensitivity, drone strikes that have killed many civilians (57 in 2012-13 alone, according to Human Rights Watch), and demands placed on the Sana’a government have produced a very low opinion of the U.S. in Yemen. A poll by Glevum Associates in 2011 found that 98% of Yemenis have an unfavorable perception of Americans.

The al-Qaeda group responsible for the USS Cole attack had all but disappeared by 2009, when an influx of Saudi jihadis created Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Based in Yemen, it was joined by the U.S.-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who had been in the country since 2004, and who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2011. (His 16 year-old son and another boy were killed in another strike.) The so-called Underwear Bomber apprehended in 2009 was a Nigerian who had trained in Yemen with this group.

Still, this group’s numbers were small and the Yemeni government was more concerned with putting down multiple armed uprisings by Houthis in the north and containing a secular secessionist movement in the south than waging war on AQAP in Abyan Governorate. While the local al-Qaeda branch carried out an occasional terror attack, it was not a large-scale military threat.

During the Arab Spring there were demonstrations in Yemen calling on Saleh to end his 33-year rule. Tens of thousands participated, and security forces killed dozens. In August the U.S. evacuated its embassy and Hillary Clinton called upon Saleh to step down. He did the following February, turning power over to the vice president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. (Hadi was “elected” to power without opposition, and soon met with his own protests.)

Saleh, a secular Zaidi (member of the same Shiite sect to which the Houthis belong) had and has his own support base, particularly in the national army. Having left office he has cultivated ties with the Houthis, whom he once repeatedly sent his soldiers to fight. The issues were not religious but political: the Houthi movement espouses democracy and socialism, and greater power for the people in the Sa’da and Hajja governates on the Saudi border.

The ineffectual Hadi was unwilling or unable to challenge advances of AQAP. The Houthis, however, were engaging them in combat in regions around the capital. In September 2014 Houthis advanced into Sana’a with minimal resistance and seized the presidential palace in January 2015. Hadi, forced to resign, fled the country two months later taking refuge in Saudi Arabia.

As AQAP continued to gain ground, U.S. forces evacuated the country in March of this year. The al-Qaeda militants then captured the seaport of Mukalla, the capital of Hadramawt, Yemen’s largest governate. Having announced their support for the Yemeni chapter of ISIL, they are in the most powerful position they have ever enjoyed. This despite years of U.S. drone strikes and U.S. efforts to train the Yemeni army in counterinsurgency!

Just another example of Washington spraying kerosene on the flames.

The regime in Saudi Arabia, the colossus to the north, is less concerned with the Islamist forces than the Houthis. This is because they are Zaidis, and seen as apostates by the Sunni Wahhabi sect embraced by the Saudi royal family. Riyadh fears the country's own Shiite minority, who may be around 20% of the total and are concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province and in the region bordering Yemen.

Religion plays a huge role here. The Saudis seem themselves as not only the keepers of the holy sites at Mecca and Medina but also the guardians of Islamic orthodoxy. Their arch-foe is Shiite-dominated Iran, and what they perceive as its chain of Shiite allies: Syria, led by members of the Alawite branch of Shiism; Shiite Hizbollah in Lebanon; the pro-democracy moved based among the majority Shiites in Bahrain, a Sunni monarchy; and the Shiite Houthis in Yemen.

(Do not expect Foggy Bottom policy wonks much less presidential candidates of either party to know the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite, or the complex geopolitics here.)

The ruling House of Saud is not motivated completely by religious intolerance; in fact, there are some Shiite officials in Saudi Arabia (although never in the Education Ministry charged with shaping young minds). The Saudis have good relations with some secular-leftist regimes; and they despise some Sunnis like those in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. And the Saudis sometimes had good relations with Yemen when it was ruled, between 1918 and 1962, by a series of Zaidi imams. But imagining those aligned with Iran as proponents of elections and critics of monarchy, and critics of the U.S. which is the Saudi's closest ally, they see them as enemies and threats.

Unwilling to accept a Houthi-led Yemen, and unmoved by Houthi insistence that their movement is open to power-sharing with others, the Saudis and some allies including the UAE and Bahrain have viciously attacked their neighbor since March. Launching airstrikes, shelling from naval vessels, and imposing a blockade, they have killed around 4,000.

90% of Yemen's food is imported, so the blockade has been devastating. Petrol is scarce and food distribution has been interrupted. According to one report, 180 petrol stations have been bombed in the Sa'da area. Dr. Natalie Roberts of Doctors Without Frontiers reports seeing food trucks bombed. The only region where food is still being imported is Hadramawt, through the AQAP-controlled port of Mukalla.

Human Rights Watch estimated that as of last month 21 million Yemenis or 80% of the population needed assistance and half faced food insecurity. Over 20 million lack access to safe water.

Parts of Sana'a's historic old city, a World Heritage site, have been bombed and destroyed. War crimes are clearly occurring. But the U.S. press ignores this story while the State Department hardly comments. When it does it blames the Houthis (supposedly aided by Iran, although there is little evidence of that) and offers both diplomatic cover and military support for the Saudi-led war. U.S. intelligence is providing logistics support and targeting information.

Saudi Arabia is well-known for being one of the world's most egregious violators of human rights. But last month the U.S. supported a bid by Saudi Arabia to take a leading position on the

UN's Human Rights Council. Its ambassador to the Geneva-based HRC had been appointed to a key panel over the summer and then promoted to serve as chairman. U.S. State Department spokesperson Mark Toner answering a reporter's question said "We would welcome it. We're close allies." Do not expect any UN probe into Saudi war crimes in Yemen anytime soon.

The situation in Yemen is a direct result of U.S. interference in that country. Let us call it Obama Disaster Number Three, giving due credit to Bush/Cheney as well.

6 Ukraine

The sixth disaster is the civil conflict in Ukraine, the rise of neo-fascism there, the imposition of sanctions on Russia and its counter-sanctions with devastating effects on European economies.

In brief, the U.S. State Department, working with U.S. intelligence and government-linked "NGOs," spent about \$ 5 billion in 2013-2014 to exploit political divisions in Ukraine in order to effect regime change by toppling a democratically elected president. The ultimate aim was to draw the country away from Russia and into the U.S.-led camp, accord it NATO membership and expel the Russian Navy from the Crimean Peninsula where it has been based since the 1780s.

The plan was to bring to power politicians committed to Ukrainian NATO membership, and to complete the NATO encirclement of Russia. Victoria Nuland, who serves as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, came up with a creative strategy to achieve these goals. Nuland, a Dick Cheney protégé and neocon holdover from the Bush/Cheney administration chosen by "liberal interventionist" war hawk Hillary Clinton for her position, was probably aware of some pertinent facts about Ukraine rooted in its history.

Ukraine did not exist as a state until the Bolsheviks proclaimed it a republic (specifically, a Soviet Socialist Republic) in the 1920s and drew its current borders, which include the Donbass region of predominantly Russian people. ("Ukraine" had not been the name of a country but a Russian world for "borderland.") The region had been part of Russia for two and a half centuries, and part of Poland for centuries before that. The Ukrainian neofascists concept of an historical Ukrainian state is a myth.

Part of what is now Ukraine had been independent, in the form of two confederated principalities, between 1199 and around 1400 (six decades of that period under the Mongol Yoke). These had been successor-states to Kievan Rus, the very name of which indicates the shared DNA of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. But these principalities of Galicia and Volhynia did not include the Donbass region.

When Ukraine declared its independence from Moscow in 1990, as the other SSRs were doing as the Soviet Union collapsed, it did so as a republic that owed its creation (and mixed ethnic-Ukrainian and ethnic-Russian character) to the Bolsheviks. Russian speakers preponderate in the east, Ukrainian speakers in the west. The languages while related are not mutually intelligible and both were used officially throughout the Soviet period. Not physical appearance but language determine ethnic identity in today's Ukraine.

It was natural that in post-Soviet Ukraine, ethnic Russians would desire to maintain their close historical, political, cultural and trade ties with Mother Russia. And that Ukrainian speakers in the west would identify more with the west (or some conception of it). Surely Victoria Nuland saw opportunity in this fact.

She was also surely aware that, while there was a great deal of nostalgia for the Soviet Union in Ukraine, there was also a lot of Ukrainian nationalism including the extreme forms expressed by the Svoboda Party and the Right Sector that openly admire Hitler's Germany and revere Stepan Bandera, the anti-Soviet pro-Nazi leader who rounded up Jews for the occupying Germans in 1941. These realities could be used.

Nuland set out to topple the incumbent government under President Viktor Yanukovich (in one of the State Department's "color revolutions" like the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia that brought the pathetic stooge Mikheil Saakashvili to power in 2003). Yanukovich had been elected in what was internationally accepted as a free election in 2010, in a vote largely following ethnic lines. Yanukovich had the solid backing of the Donbass region.

In 2013 Yanukovich negotiated with the European Union to obtain his country's associate member status. Russia did not object to this, so long as it did not hurt the Russian economy deeply intertwined with Ukraine's. (Putin has stated repeatedly that there was nothing wrong with a country being both a member of the EU and the proposed Eurasian Economic Union—that is, countries should not have to "choose between East and West.")

Yanukovich initialed a document with the EU. But after considering the implications of the austerity plan the EU would impose on his impoverished country as a condition for membership, he reconsidered. Meanwhile Russia, which provided Kiev its gas and oil at below-market prices, offered a \$ 15 billion aid plan. Yanukovich opted for the latter.

Thereupon with U.S. encouragement, some forces in the Ukrainian opposition—who had legitimate gripes about Yanukovich's corruption, connections to oligarchs, and life of egregious luxury—represented this as a betrayal of the nation and capitulation to Russia. No one touted this line more vigorously than the pathologically Russophobic neofascists.

Nuland, announcing U.S. support for the "Ukrainian people's European aspirations" hurled herself personally into the swelling movement to topple the elected government. As tens of thousands came to rally in the Maidan in Kiev, she appeared personally to hand out cookies. Sen. John McCain, who had advocated war with Russia in 2008 during the brief Russo-Georgia War, was also on hand to be photographed with neofascist figures.

Nuland openly admitted to an "international business conference on Ukraine" in December 2013 that Washington had "invested more than 5 billion dollars to help Ukraine achieve [the development of democratic institutions] and other goals." But her references to Ukraine's "European aspirations" were a code word for the aspirations of select members of the Kiev power structure who aspired to join NATO.

Nuland and McCain had no reason to pass out cookies to Maidan protesters to nourish them as they pressed for membership in the European Union, which is, after all, a trading block that rivals the US's NAFTA bloc. Turkey (a NATO member), has long pushed for inclusion in the EU and the U.S. has supported its bid. But not with any particular passion.

The composition of the EU is, after all, none of Washington's business. It's not like it's encouraging Norway or Switzerland to join. Why should it be so intent on fanning the flames of anti-Yanukovich sentiment based on his decision to back off from a deal with the EU?

Because, my friends, Nuland saw EU membership as a steppingstone towards Ukraine's inclusion in the NATO anti-Russian military alliance. Her talk about "supporting Ukraine's European aspirations" didn't mean supporting the people's desire for easier travel and broader trade, job opportunities and all the other advantages that the people of Greece and Portugal have come to understand are cruel jokes.

No, Washington's concept of "European aspirations" was the acquisition of Ukraine as the ultimate "prize" culminating a quarter century of unyielding NATO expansion, in violation of George H. W. Bush's pledge to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989 that NATO would not expand "one inch" eastwards with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

So Washington welcomed the huge demonstrations in the Maidan peaking in the coordinated violent attacks on government buildings on February 22, 2014. No matter that Yanukovich had just signed an EU-brokered agreement with the opposition to call off the security forces who had clashed with demonstrators in the square, and had agreed to call new elections. Unknown people fired into the crowd; this was blamed on the security forces although the bulk of evidence indicates it came from neo-fascists seeking to pull off a putsch.

They did so, with lightning success. Their violence paved the way for Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a former Minister of the Economy and austerity proponent, an advocate of EU and NATO membership, to ascend to power. He had been Nuland's clear favorite, chosen in advance.

Nuland was famously recorded discussing with the U.S. ambassador plans for regime change in Kiev in early 2014. In the days leading up to the coup, she dismissed the EU's advocacy of a role for Arseniy Yatsenyuk's rival Viktor Klitschko (whose party has in fact been excluded from the present cabinet). "Fuck the EU!" snapped Nuland.

Think about that a minute. On the one hand she's presenting the U.S. effort in Ukraine as one to bolster Ukraine's supposed "European aspirations." On the other hand she's saying "Fuck the EU!" if the EU's strategy for regime change in Kiev conflicts with that of the U.S. State Department.

In the same conversation she stated that once in power Yatsenyuk should be talking to Klitschko and (more interestingly) the neofascist leader Oleg Tyahybok (whose party actually established in 2010 a "Joseph Goebbels Political Research Center") "four times a week." The neo-fascists may not have been the State Department's preferred tool to effect regime change, but they were eagerly and cynically deployed.

(As I've mentioned elsewhere, this may be the first time that a Jewish U.S. assistant secretary of state has directed a puppet leader to consult weekly with someone who publicly castigates "Jewry and other filth." What does a little anti-Semitism matter when the issue at hand is the humiliation and ultimate destruction of the neocons' post-Cold War bogeyman, the Russian Federation?)

After the putsch, Yanukovich's flight, an illegal parliamentary maneuver appointing a new government headed by Yatsenyuk and the almost immediate retraction of the law guaranteeing language equality to Ukrainian and Russian speakers, the people of the Donbass rose up in rebellion. This should not have been surprising to anyone with some cursory knowledge of history. They refused to accept the legitimacy of a regime they viewed quite reasonably as hostile and discriminatory.

Moscow naturally refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the U.S.-backed coup. And the overwhelmingly Russian population of the Crimean peninsula (which had been part of the Russian Federated Socialist Republic to 1956, then allotted to the administration of the Ukrainian SSR) voted for reunion with Russia.

The U.S. State Department echoed as always by the mainstream press hailed a popular uprising overthrowing a dictator, depicting Moscow's reaction as something resembling Hitler's annexation of Austria. While they have steadily vilified Putin, as somehow at fault for what's happened in Ukraine (as a result of his supposed desire to re-establish the old Soviet Union), they have ignored referencing the role of neo-fascists in the current crisis, depicted the ethnic Russians of the Donbass as Putin's troublemakers (as if they had no history and agency of their own), and systematically avoided mentioning the death toll resulting from the U.S.-backed coup and consequent civil war (now over 8,000).

This is another conflict surrounded by lies propounded by the Washington establishment including its captive press. This disaster must be placed firmly at the feet of Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Nuland. It is the Fourth Obama Disaster.

* * * *

One has the strong sense that those responsible for the disasters do indeed not realize what they've done. This is either because they are idiots (the example of George W. Bush comes most immediately to mind) or sophisticated but amoral world-changers indifferent to the massive human suffering, death and chaos their decisions have visited on, and are continuing to inflict upon, innocents from the Hindu Kush to the Maghreb.

The Obama administration has tried to distance itself from the Iraq War and from the neocon scheme of broad regional regime change. Just the other day he told the press that if he'd heeded the calls of Republicans in Congress, the U.S. would be ensnared in seven wars right now. He postures as a levelheaded policy-maker who loathes war, and especially points to the Iran deal (and by implication, his defiance of Netanyahu, the neocons and the Israel Lobby) as evidence of his measured statesmanship.

But look at what he's done! In Afghanistan, where U.S. forces killed 12 Doctors without Borders personnel and 10 others, including three children, in an "accident" last week. In Iraq, where ISIL terror has caused the very government that the U.S. boosted into power is welcoming Russian military help while holding the distrusted and discredited U.S. at arm's length. In Syria, where support for an imagined "moderate armed opposition" has funneled U.S. arms into the hands of lunatic child-rapists on a Holy War against civilization. In Libya, which Obama, when he accepted Hillary's case for war, effectively dismantled as a peaceable state. In Yemen, where he stands arm-in-arm with the Saudis as they try to secure regional hegemony by denying the Yemenis food and water.

And what is the government of the U.S. planning to do in the future, building on this impressive recent foreign policy record?

One is tempted to suggest that the best-case short-term scenario (barring the much-needed revolutionary mass upheaval that could empower the masses of people in this country) is one in which the U.S. would acknowledge its most recent crimes against peace; prosecute those responsible; work with any other parties possible to help the peoples of the Middle East most victimized by the savage religiously based forces unleashed by U.S. imperialist aggression since 2001; respect the legitimacy of whatever regimes might emerge thereafter; and forswear its intention to expand NATO while vilifying and provoking the Russian leadership.

Putin indeed in his UNGA speech alluded to the alliance of the U.S., U.K. and USSR during the Second World War to jointly defeat the menace of fascism—the most obvious analog to today's ISIL-type radical Islamism—suggesting the U.S. and its allies join forces with Russia and Iran in defense of the Syrian state.

But it would be unrealistic to expect the U.S. State Department at this point in history to act as an honest team-player ignoring Israel's demand for Assad's overthrow and pressure from U.S. oil companies to gain control over Syrian oil fields. Or to expect it to back off from the Putin-as-new-Hitler thesis it has promoted so assiduously through the U.S. corporate media.

The worst-case scenario is the continuation of the current disastrous nightmare. That means the continued expansion of ISIL and al-Qaeda—sometimes in concert, sometimes in conflict—from Pakistan to Nigeria, met with uncoordinated responses from the U.S. and others that only fan the flames.

If we suppose a Hillary Clinton presidency fifteen months from now, we might have Nuland as Secretary of State—someone who has learned nothing, and apologizes for nothing, because she is just as hell-bent on imposing U.S. empire on Eurasia as ISIL is intent upon reviving the Caliphate and imposing Sharia law on the world.

The status quo means continued official cultivation of American ignorance of the world, and exploitation of knee-jerk patriotic stupidity. It means more revival of Cold War propaganda techniques, and increasingly, PR efforts to link U.S. efforts at regime changes anywhere to some need to curb a (mythical) Russian drive for imperial expansion.

Putin, who claims to have become a pious son of the Russian Orthodox Church (which he has patronized and used politically), is surely familiar with Jesus' plea on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they've done" (Luke 23:34). He and the Russian foreign minister continue to speak softly and reasonably—even one might say "forgivingly"—often referring to their western counterparts as "partners." On the matter of Syria, they have been for the most part gently chiding, seeking to avoid confrontation while asking those responsible for making the Middle East a hellhole to open their eyes and see the consequences of their actions.

But as the English proverb dating to 1546 (probably rooted in Jeremiah 5:21) puts it: "There are none so blind as those who will not see." While Obama stumbles about in the dark, the treasures of Palmyra, one after one, are blasted into the black hole of history these disastrous interventions have created.