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The U.S. Versus ISIS Grounds for Deepening Dread

by GARY LEUPP

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It's hard not to feel a sense of deepening dread about what this country's doing in the world, and the inevitable blowback.

I did not feel this way a year ago. Then it seemed that U.S. imperialism was in retreat. Not that the leopard can change its spots; the system is, after all, what it is.

(All U.S. schoolchildren should be taught, as part of their basic civics education, by conscientious elementary, middle school and high school teachers, that they live in an *imperialist* country. The term itself ought to be popularized. This is what politicians like Obama actually refer to, elliptically, when they call the U.S. "exceptional." Most of the world's 196 nations are, after all, *not* imperialist countries. Most aren't oligarchies controlled by a top 1%, who control 42% of the nation's wealth, investing much of it in cheap foreign labor while the domestic standard of living declines. Most do not have incarceration and criminal supervision rates of 1 in 32 citizens. Most do not have police forces equipped with heavy military equipment sometimes savagely used against their citizens. Most nations don't channel citizens' tax dollars to state "security" forces that systematically collect their people's and others' electronic and telephone communications. Most don't spend billions of dollars in order to overthrow other countries' governments. Most don't maintain 860 military bases outside their borders; most don't every few years attack other countries in declared or undeclared wars. Most don't back the Israelis in

everything they do, and *nobody* else blocks every UN vote that evenly mildly criticizes Israel. And so on.)

Still—mindful of the horrible general situation—a year ago I was feeling guardedly optimistic that U.S. imperialism was entering a less toxic stage. Obama’s horrifying plan to assault Syria had been stymied, by popular opposition, Congressional unease, and Vladimir Putin’s timely chess move (arranging for Damascus to give up its chemical weapons arsenal). Obama was suddenly speaking with Iran’s new president Hassan Rouhani, and talks on Iran’s civilian nuclear program had begun. Obama was ignoring Binyamin Netanyahu’s familiar, barked demands for the U.S. to bomb Iran.

2014 has been much gloomier. We have for one thing been forcibly reminded that there has been no real change in foreign policy between the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. The grotesque figure of Victoria Nuland, a Dick Cheney aide who stayed on to assist Hillary Clinton, heads the East Europe desk. She is one of those neocons (married to another distinguished, academic neocon) who strongly supported the Iraq War based on what she knew was a campaign of lies and has never felt any pangs of guilt about it. Her political ideology requires contempt for truth and morality. It’s all about manipulating public opinion to achieve the objectives of the tiny circle she loves and represents. The fact that she was retained in the State Department into the Obama administration speaks volumes about the president’s own outlook on the world.

Obama postures as a centrist. In practice this means he places himself midway between the neoconservatives serving the interests of the 1% and the “liberal interventionists” serving the 1% in their efforts to impose what Paul Wolfowitz terms “full-spectrum dominance” in the world. He is the textbook example of how all in his position must (and naturally do) kiss the ass of the ruling class. This is his job. His (increasingly weak) historical distinction is to be the first African-American to do so. (Not that anyone paying attention needed persuasion that being a person of color doesn’t make you good, or progressive, or even a harbinger of “change.” It might just make you useful, like Colin Powell was for Cheney and his neocon bunch. Or Condoleezza Rice was to the U.S. power structure throughout George W. Bush’s criminal, racist war on Iraq.)

Nuland made it her mission to topple the elected government of Ukraine, promoting the concept that the Ukrainian people (who are in fact sharply divided) possess “European aspirations” (code word for a supposed longing for entry into the European Union—under a painful IMF-imposed austerity program—and for admission into the anti-Russian NATO military alliance which will oblige them to cough up 2% of their GNP in military expenditures).

On February 22 Nuland got her way, after what she has herself boasted was a five billion dollar U.S. investment in supporting (or generating and encouraging) those “European aspirations.” On that day neo-fascist sniper fire and building seizures—a violent, lightning *putsch*—toppled the elected Ukrainian president, brought Nuland’s hand-picked candidate to power as unelected prime minister, brought neo-fascists into a European government for the first time since 1945, and caused the ethnic Russian population in the east to rise up in (what ought to be) understandable rebellion.

Realizing the U.S. objective was to first draw Ukraine into the EU, then to incorporate it into NATO, then to expel the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the Crimean Peninsula, Moscow (I will not say *Putin*, because virtually *any* Russian leader watching the alarming power-play would have acted similarly) promptly and bloodlessly reasserted its historical ownership of the peninsula, to the very apparent relief of its inhabitants. But the U.S. corporate media—with stunning uniformity, omitting if not forbidding any reference to NATO expansion as a cause for U.S. meddling in Ukraine, or Svoboda Party and Right Sector actions in the Maidan triggering a bloody coup, or legitimate grievances and valid agency of the “Russian secessionists” in the east—constructed an imaginary narrative that most people in this country have swallowed.

Just like they once swallowed the mythology about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and al-Qaeda ties. (And let us note again that the systematic dissemination of lies through the Pentagon, State Department and White House showing utmost contempt for the people of this country—designed to convince them that they were facing imminent Iraqi attack—has, while well documented, never been *punished!* The scum responsible live comfortably as TV commentators, university academics, and think-tank “fellows.”)

Most people in this country, to the extent that they watch or read the mainstream news, believe that the Ukrainian people rose in a peaceful mass movement, ousted a corrupt leader, and established a popular government that just wants to escape Russia’s oppressive control and join democratic, prosperous Europe. They believe that evil power-hungry Putin, nostalgic for the past, wants to re-create the USSR or maybe Tsarist Russia. This is sheer nonsense, but the success of the State Department-corporate press partnership in foisting this perception on the people is amazing. It shows that, even though the masses have largely come to understand that they were lied to, big-time, in the build up to the Iraq War—not just by politicians but a corporate media that was entirely obedient taking its talking-point cues from the regime—they are still willing dupes. Lambs led to the slaughter.

(I find this depressing. But what can you do, but continue to rage against the lies of the corporate media, and try to expose them to any who will hear?)

Then came the lightning successes of ISIL/ISIS/the Islamic State, as the forces of the Caliphate (30,000, we’re suddenly told) stormed out of the northern Syria stronghold into Iraq over the summer, beheading and crucifying women and children all the way to the gates of Baghdad. Suddenly the U.S. propaganda machine kicked into gear, producing the immediate consensus: Despite America’s war-weariness, despite the mass opposition to more “boots on the ground” in Iraq, this threat (to all the *good* “we” achieved during the long occupation) is so dire that—at *least*—air strikes against the *ihadis* are needed.

Polls have shown sudden widespread support. They even show, ominously, substantial backing for ground troops. A recent Fox News poll shows a majority of respondents favoring the dispatch of U.S. troops against ISIL. A definite cause for dread. If you have a brain to think and a heart to feel, your stomach should be churning—both in response to the savagery of ISIL, which would not exist had the U.S. not created the preconditions for it, and to the ramifications of U.S. actions now.

The CIA has concluded that Obama's announcement of his intention to bomb ISIL sites in Syria, even before they began, caused a spike in *jihadi* enlistments.

Isn't it obvious that when the "elected representatives of the American people" *always, unanimously*, support Israel whenever it attacks Arabs; when U.S. military officials order the torture and sexual humiliation of Muslims, gleefully capturing it all on tape; when the U.S. wantonly destroys Muslim states with no thought of the aftermath, there will be repercussions?

Is it not *obvious*—such is the ocean of hatred of the U.S. government in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and such is the absolute lack of U.S. moral authority or credibility in the minds of Muslims globally—that any time the U.S. attacks Muslim targets, whomever is attacked will attract support?

Isn't this as obvious as the physical law that spraying gasoline on fire will make the fire grow? And maybe burn you up?

Since the U.S. bombing of Syria began ISIL has occupied over 300 Syrian Kurdish villages near the Turkish border. They've hoisted their black flag over the border town of Kobani and U.S. military analysts concede that the town will be taken. These analysts are quietly noting that bombing is never going to truly reverse or prevent ISIL's territorial expansion. The top U.S. military officials are saying, yes, boots are needed on the ground—implying that they could be, in addition to those of the (remarkably unreliable, especially giving their expensive U.S.-supplied training) Iraqi Army, Kurdish *peshmerga*, and Shiite militias, forces from other Arab countries. The Turkish parliament has voted to approve military action against ISIL in Syria, and the Turkish prime minister has indicated Turkey will put boots on the ground if other nations do. John Kerry has even told the UN that Iran might have a role to play.

One problem is, Baghdad strongly rejects boots from Sunni-led countries like Saudi Arabia on its ground, just as it rejects a return of U.S. forces. The U.S.—never, ever capable of grasping the depth of the Sunni-Shia divide or even able to apply the necessary respect to study it—wants to cobble together a grandiose "coalition" and, in pronouncing each new enumeration of its members, boast of how it has global backing and remains the leader of the world. (Have you noticed that the imperialists have revived that quaintly anachronistic Cold World term, "the Free World"?) But in so doing, it boasts of deploying Sunni Muslim forces (at least in aerial bombing campaigns) against Sunni ISIL while sidelining Shiite Iran and endlessly repeating its hostility to Alawite-led Syria.

Another problem is that Turkey, a NATO member, which if attacked (or if it declares it's been attacked) can demand that all other NATO nations come to its aid. Ankara openly seeks the downfall of the government of Bashar Assad in Syria, and also hates the Syrian Kurds who are aligned with Turkey's PKK and the (increasingly independent and assertive) Iraqi Kurds as well. If Turkey were to invade Syria, it would not be to merely confront ISIL but to destroy multiple foes at odds with the jihadis. Imagine Obama invoking the NATO charter to assist Turkey and occupy Syria following some Tonkin Gulf-type moment.

In a nutshell: the United States—having *caused* a Sunni-Shiite civil war in Iraq by destroying the secular Baathist regime and its institutions in 2003; having produced the conditions that allowed al-Qaeda (in the form of al-Zarqawi’s initial group that has morphed into ISIL) to root itself in Iraq, then Syria; having backed (as its best bet) the government headed by al-Maliki that gradually alienated the Sunnis of Iraq; and having, through its savagery, racism, disrespect, ignorance, arrogance, and incompetence, made itself entirely unwelcome among the peoples of the region—cannot accomplish anything good in the Middle East.

Citizens and residents in this declining imperialist country—those paying attention, not just innocently imbibing the Big Lies imagining we live in a free country with a free press—should feel dread about what’s to come. Having announced that the U.S. will “degrade and destroy ISIL” (without any clue about how to actually *do* that, having ruled out coordination with Syria and Iran, and having earned the hatred of the Iraqi Shiite militias) the U.S. seems doomed to either putting its own boots on the ground, enraging everyone in the region, or relying on proxies whom the Iraqi Shiites will reject.

In the weeks after 9/11, witnessing the coordinated campaign of the media oligarchy (Time-Warner, Viacom, Disney, GE, News Corp., CBS) that controls what most of us see and read, I felt truly frightened. Not about nukes over New York City (although I did have some vivid dreams about such stuff). But about the onset of fascism in this country. The constant syrupy patriotic music playing on the heart-strings on cable TV, the omnipresence of the U.S. flag, the sudden ambiance of those insane terror-warning colored level warnings deliberately promoting the sort of paranoia prescribed by Nazi specialists on mass mind-control. The emergence of new fascist-sounding institutions and bizarre popularization of unfamiliar terms (like “Homeland”), the stupidity of George W. Bush’s pronouncements (“axis of evil” etc.), Dick Cheney’s calm prediction of a “War on Terror” to last forever. The *warnings* to TV commentators that they could be fired for challenging the government line—and the actual firings. The Patriot Act and Congress’s bovine, universal endorsement of it, passed into law unread.

The clear indications that “my” government was manipulating powerful emotions of fear and hatred, and inventing, Nazi-like, pretexts for ongoing war. Yes. I felt frightened by the manifest, staggering power of the beast. And that was *before* Bush and his team began their sadistic destruction of Iraq and that enterprise was still in its planning stage.

My anxiety level has risen and fallen in the years since, and was, as I said, lowered by some events last fall. But it’s back up there now as I switch between cable channels noting the total merger of state power and the corporate media and total absence of moral clarity.

The egregious misrepresentation of events in Ukraine. The total lack of context of events in Iraq and Syria, and the gracious reception (as astute commentators) of those most responsible for the Iraq War based on lies. These are sickening things.

Those not feeling dread *should* feel it. My gut feeling is, if George W. Bush and his dad opened the gates of hell, Obama has blown the gates off entirely. By attacking the Islamic State—solely in alliance with the Muslim states whose governments are most regarded as U.S. lackeys—Obama has merely enhanced the crazies’ legitimacy. Isn’t that obvious?

To save Baghdad from ISIL conquest—a feat that would outweigh the “fall” of Saigon in 1975 as a geopolitical humiliation for the U.S.—Obama is trying to cobble together a collection of Turks, Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs all of whom have complex contradictions with one another and with the U.S. He claims to have assembled a “coalition” of over 60 nations (mostly western) in the heroic anti-ISIL cause.

The majority in all categories (those providing air support and military equipment; those providing “humanitarian assistance”; and those providing other, basically political legitimacy and support) are NATO countries. 15 of the 21 in the first category are NATO members, plus Australia, while 6 are members of the Arab League. Aside from Iraq (whose fractious elite opposes any foreign troops on the ground) and Lebanon (in which Hizbollah is a leading political-military force and which is only “participating” by receiving arms to defend itself from ISIL) all these Arab countries are repressive monarchies that promote Sunni Islam and have very bad relations with the Shiites of Iraq and Iran.

The ISIL thugs can argue—not so inaccurately—that the force the U.S. has organized against them is a force of Christian Crusaders and their corrupt not-really-Muslim allies (including the hated NATO member Turkey), in a war to thwart the progress of the Caliphate versus the Alawite heretics in Syria and the Shiite idolaters of Iraq and Iran. And they can also note that by excluding Syria’s Assad and the Iranian regime—who have actually fought ISIL on the battlefield, winning some victories—the stupid infidels are miscalculating again, big time.

The “coalition” is not going to defeat ISIS any more than the earlier (now dissipated) “coalitions” defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Sunni “insurgents” in Iraq. Its intervention is going to exacerbate the misery of Syria, Iraq and the whole region and maybe trigger a real world war.

I have a modest proposal, to those dreading the likely results of more war against the generated by recent U.S. imperialist wars—the crucifiers of children, beheaders of Shiites, destroyers of priceless monuments. To those dreading the prospect that the failure of air strikes will inevitably entail the dispatch of U.S. and allied ground troops in what former CIA chief Leon Panetta recently predicted would be another Thirty Years War.

How about an anti-imperialist revolution in this country instead?

Seriously. How about, by toppling those responsible for the total destabilization of the Middle East, we send a message to the peoples of the region that we don’t want to dominate you anymore (not that the ordinary person here ever did)?

How about—*after* the necessary revolution here—we say to those confronting the religious crazies, craving secularism and democracy:

You have our political and moral support, and we now can (now having toppled the 1% who have insanely determined U.S. policy forever), finally talk about aiding you (as internationalist brothers and sisters—not the corporate scum, war profiteers, uniformed torturers, trigger-happy

bombers, Israel lackeys, and deceitful warmongering liars whom have earned your rightful hatred in the past) to make your own revolutions.

Just a dream, maybe. But how else to end the dread?