State Dept. Chief REVEALS War Making Process | Lawrence Wilkerson

Neocons have been setting US foreign policy agenda for many decades, but how does the decision making process in Washington to use military power actually work? What's the role of the different agencies, who's the most powerful institution inside the apparatus and what role do individuals play? Well, let's ask someone who must know. Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson is a retired US army officer, former Chief of Staff of the Secretary of State, and a member of the activist group "Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity." After decades of experience with Washington I want to pick his brain about how US power structures function and the military-political process actually works.

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And the only thing in that document, really, that I'm talking about is this statement that is clearly saying we will achieve and maintain global hegemony at any cost. That's what it said. And I knew the people who wanted that, people like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith and others. I knew that they were behind that.

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Hello, everybody. This is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking for the second time to Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, a retired U.S. Army officer, former chief of staff to the Secretary of State, and a member of the activist group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. After decades of experience in Washington, I want to pick his brain about how U.S. power structures function and how the military-political process actually works. So, Colonel Wilkerson, welcome.

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Good to be with you.

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Let me start with my first question. You are a man who has a lot of experience with the political process in Washington, which also interlinks directly with its foreign policy due to your role as the chief of staff to the Secretary of State. Could you explain to us what your different roles were over the years? And just before the talk, you mentioned you served in one of the most dysfunctional administrations there was. Can you explain that as well?

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Sure. I was just a standard Army officer, a soldier for roughly 20 years, doing what everyone else did. I went to Vietnam, served in Korea, in Japan, and elsewhere. Then, as I departed as a lieutenant colonel from the 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks on Oahu in Hawaii, I went to the then Pacific Command, led by a Navy four-star admiral, encompassing 35 countries and 35 ambassadors with whom we had to work, and some fairly volatile characters in a sense. For example, we had responsibility for China, and we had responsibility for what we called Global O-Plan Operations Plan 5001, which complemented 5000. 5000 was war with the Soviets on the Western Front in Europe.

5001 was our plan to get their attention so they would have to divert forces from that front to their Pacific front. So we had a hell of a mission, really, and I had a hell of an admiral who would later be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I was the executive assistant to his two-star admiral, who was the real power at PACOM. He was the policy and strategy guy. So we did all the planning, all the war planning. We did all the strategizing, all the geopolitical conversations with the admiral. Then Admiral Crowe, the big guy, went to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Ronald Reagan picked him. I was there when Reagan went out on the boat with Admiral Crowe, and essentially Admiral Crowe gave him a tour d'horizon of this massive command. Reagan went back to Washington and said, "I want that man to be my chairman," and he was. Powell, of course, followed him, and I followed Powell because he picked me up from that job to be his special assistant. I was his special assistant for four years while he was the most powerful military individual in the world, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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What year was that?

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This was 1989 to 1993 under H.W. Bush as president, and then the last year was under Bill Clinton in the first year of his first term. We cut the military by 25% across the board. When we cut the defense industrial base, it was quite an experience to watch that happen. A lot of things came out of that that weren't necessarily good. For example, we cut the defense contractor base from about 100 or so to about six, and now they run monopolies. They build lousy products and sell them at a maximum price, and they have the Defense Department over a barrel because they are the only ones who can do it. Sad to say, we produced that.

And then I worked for Powell in a private capacity for about three years after I served four more years as director of the Marine Corps War College. He hired me, and we went back to work again as a team. We did such things as go to Lagos, Nigeria, to observe the elections of President Obasanjo at that time, who was elected. We did other things with the Carter Center in Atlanta. We did things with other people across the country. And Powell kept his hand in U.S. foreign policy. And I knew he

was looking at something. I thought he was probably looking at Secretary of Defense because he knew, and I knew, that's the most powerful position in the American government outside the president. Many would say it's more powerful than the president.

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The Secretary of Defense, not the Secretary of State.

#M3

No, the Secretary of State is probably one of the principal cabinet officers. And by the founders and the Constitution, in order of precedence, the Secretary of State is first. Of course, he's in the presidential chain, actually. But a very weak individual, very weak individual in a very weak department. And Powell used to say it like this, and the Secretary of Defense at the time, Donald Rumsfeld, agreed with him. Powell got $25 billion the first year of his State Department Secretariat. Rumsfeld got $375 billion. And Rumsfeld said one time, I lose more money than you get, Colin. And he was right. He was right. The most powerful department. But he didn't. He picked Secretary of State.

And I knew almost immediately, I think, that I'd been wrong in my calculations because one of his heroes was George Marshall, and George Marshall was both Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. But I think his time at State was more formidable for the country in terms of the legacy he left, including the only strategic think tank in the American government, really, the policy planning staff at State. And the imprimatur he gave them was the imprimatur that Richard Haass, who became Powell's director of policy planning, and Powell brought back to the State Department. So we began to think strategically again. Hadn't done that since World War II. And it was a difficult thing because the government doesn't think strategically.

The American government does not have a strategic bone in its body. It claims to, but it doesn't. It works its inbox. From day to day, it works its inbox. It is purely tactical, purely focused on the issues of the day, mostly political issues rather than strategic. And so anybody who thinks strategically is put aside. And we learned that. We learned that big time because there was no strategy behind the global war on terror whatsoever. There was no strategy behind the invasion of Iraq in 2003. We just did it. There's not even a national security decision document published for the first time since World War II when we invented these documents that codified the decision to go to war in Iraq. We just did it.

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This is so ironic because I remember distinctly how Condoleezza Rice was extremely proud, proclaiming that for the first time the U.S. had a strategy, a grand strategy. That term only came up, I mean, to me, only back then. And she was so proud of that.

#M3

We and the policy planning staff authored and wrote several strategies for the government. And they were good strategies in my view. And Powell approved of them. Condi didn't want them, so she turned to her staff and said, produce a strategy. She didn't like those either, so she contracted it out. That tells you something. And there are plenty of think tanks in Washington that think strategically. And she got what she wanted, she thought, and others in the cabinet approved of it. But it's really not a very definitive document unless you're actually going to adhere to it. And all those publicly produced national security strategies, indeed the national military strategy in the past, published for public consumption. I'm not talking about secret versions, top-secret versions.

But those published for public consumption, which is what the press talks about and so forth, have been more or less anodyne. They're just, you know, keep America safe. Keep America's allies safe. Fight our enemies across the domain of warfare. Those kinds of statements. This one wasn't that way. This was a neoconservative national security attack produced by the think tank combination that she chose to produce the strategy. And she bought it. And I'm sad to say that my boss bought it, and we even had discussions about it, and I asked him if he was happy with it, and he said, yeah, why are you asking me? I said, well, this strategy essentially says, boss, that if anybody stirs at the bottom of the mountain upon which America is perched, we will kill them.

We will either use military power or sanctions or both and kill them. It doesn't matter what it is. It could be a rat stirring at the bottom of the mountain. It could be a behemoth stirring at the bottom of the mountain, like China. We're going to kill it. We're going to kill it before it gets a chance to grow up and kill us. That's what we're saying in this strategy. Oh, it's not that austere, Larry. Au contraire, look at it closely because I think it is. And he did have some reservations once he looked at it more closely, but he had the same attitude he'd had about those kinds of documents all along. And I have to confess, I did too. They're public. They go to the public, so they don't mean a damn thing.

Well, it did mean a damn thing. And let me back up for a moment and tell you that one of the reasons I kind of didn't like it was not just because Condi had turned us down flat about what we were saying should be our strategy. It was because what I saw there was essentially the same thing that Paul Wolfowitz, then the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, had sent across to H.W. Bush during his four years in office when I was Special Assistant to Chairman Powell. Bush was the most experienced president since World War II outside Eisenhower. I mean, I would compare Bush's experience with Eisenhower. Look at what he'd been: Vice President for eight years under Ronald Reagan.

Head of the RNC. Ambassador to China. Director of the CIA, so beloved they named the building after him. After saying for years they were never going to identify Langley with the CIA, they named it the Bush Center. So that tells you something about this guy's experience. He'd never been out of the intelligence world since he got his plane recovered in the Pacific Ocean during World War II. So

this is a very experienced guy. He wrote on this same document, which came over from Paul Wolfowitz at that time. He wrote on the document, "Send this back to the crazies in the bottom of the Pentagon." Bush Senior. Yes, Bush Senior. And that's exactly where it went, and it died there, we thought.

But here I am looking at it coming back, orchestrated, no doubt, by the think tank neoconservatives hooked up with Wolfowitz, now Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Feith, now Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. So it came back, and it came back in roughly the same format, but no one was there to write the sentence back to the crazies. We actually decided that that was going to be not only for public consumption and therefore anodyne and not really important, but it was going to be our strategy. And the only thing in that document, really, that I'm talking about is this statement that is clearly saying we will achieve and maintain global hegemony at any cost. That's what it said.

And I knew the people who wanted that, people like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith and others. I knew that they were behind that. However, Condi thought she had constructed it. I don't think she was complicit, but I do think that she was inclined to lean that way because the ultra-nationalist in the vice president's office, Richard Cheney, who really ran national security for the first four years, was of that same mind after 9/11. He was a changed man after 9/11. Remember, I saw him as Secretary of Defense, a very effective Secretary of Defense. He brooked no opposition to his desires, established his civilian supremacy right off the bat by firing the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

And Powell ran upstairs and sat down with him and said, I can handle this. I can take care of that. You don't need to fire him. And Cheney said, he's fired. Got any other questions? And what Cheney was doing was very early on establishing, reestablishing really, that the Secretary of Defense was the number two man in the chain of command, not the chairman. "And I am running this building," he said. And then after that, he's the only Secretary of Defense who canceled a multi-billion dollar naval aviation program that led to 15 years of lawsuits, but finally was decided in the favor of the government. He canceled the whole program. He got a 15-minute decision briefing. He said, cancel it.

And it was done. Now, this is a very effective Secretary of Defense. He's also the Secretary of Defense who, when George H.W. Bush said during the first Gulf War, when the highway of death was developing, "We were killing Iraqis just to be killing them. Stop the war," he turned to the Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, and said, "Do you agree?" He said, "Absolutely. It's not worth a single soldier to go to Baghdad, and that's not our writ. It's not our orders. The U.N. said, kick Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait. We've done that. Let's quit." And 12 years later, this is the man who wants to go to war in Iraq in 2003. So, very different man, very different.

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So something changed him personally. But at the same time, something happened in this period between '93 and 2001. And let's not hang it too much on 9/11, I suppose, but the intermediate period when this Wolfowitzian neoconservatism managed to kind of hang on and then get back into power. And Brzezinski, I think he wrote that book in '97. And somehow this swept straight into the administration. Can you explain this to yourself, how that happened after being sent back to the crazy all the way to national policy?

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Well, I think it was really quite simple. I didn't think it was a complex metamorphosis, if you will. I think it was quite simple. These people had always been there. You see them in NSC 68 all the way back to the 1950s and before. You see them there. You see them in Paul Nitze. Eisenhower would not even let Paul Nitze participate in the Solarium exercise, which was his prima facie way of letting everybody get their bite of the apple. And then he decided in a 45-minute disquisition at the end of all their briefings what U.S. strategy was going to be. But he wouldn't let Nitze even come because he didn't want Nitze anywhere near U.S. strategy. Well, they've been around all this time, but they've been in the shadows mostly.

They came out during Reagan's administration in the form of Richard Perle and others. Arguably, Richard Perle may have wrecked an early attempt to deal with nuclear weapons in a more forceful, decisive way at Reykjavik because Perle got a hold of what Reagan was saying to Gorbachev and Gorbachev to Reagan and managed to talk the president out of going any further with what he was discussing. It happened anyway, but it would have happened a little bit earlier probably if Perle hadn't been there. So they're there. They've been there all along. I would argue they've been there since Alexander Hamilton and the founding of the republic.

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It did. There are good scholars who say the same and say this is basically the Jeffersonian string of U.S. foreign policy thinking versus the Washingtonians, who were always more about national security by being secure at home without searching for monsters abroad.

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Jefferson, in 1803, said undoubtedly Cuba will be a state, and there were two motivations for that. Of course, he knew that the slavers in the United States, the South basically, would get Cuba because they were trying to expand their power and needed more slave states. So if Cuba became a state of the United States, it would add to Texas, and there'd be another slave state. Jefferson thought that Cuba would, just by proximity and that power struggle, eventually become a state. But anyway, to get back to my point, they come in, they go, they come in, they go, they come in, they go. Well, they came in with a vengeance after 9/11. It was almost like Pearl Harbor for them. They

were searching for something like this. They wanted something like this to happen because they knew, I'm pretty sure that the leadership knew, that they were not going to be able to implement the strategies they wanted without something prompting it as being sellable, marketable.

And 9/11 came along and did that. It was like October 7th for Bibi Netanyahu. Bibi Netanyahu wanted to do this and was doing this on a much lower key all along. He was killing Palestinians on the West Bank, starting in East Jerusalem, and, of course, he was bombing Lebanon every eight to nine years just to make sure their economic infrastructure didn't compete with his. And we blessed all that. We blessed all that. So you had the same thing here where all of a sudden these—not many, they're giant Netanyahus—suddenly came out of the woodwork and had their excuse, just like Bibi did for October 7th, to start mass killing instead of just periodic killing.

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I will come back to this, and I will come back to Israel and the United States. But I still wonder whether, because following your explanation, it seems that your assessment is that these individual heads do actually control the government and U.S. foreign policy-making. My question is always: which one is more important, the structure of the whole thing—who answers to whom and creates what kind of dependencies—or is it the individual people? Because you also mentioned reestablishing control over certain agencies, which would imply that other agencies might be a bit out of control. What is it? Is it the people, or is it the structure that moves U.S. policy-making forward more?

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Well, I taught this for 16 years on two civilian campuses and two military campuses, the Naval War College and Springfield. My course was National Security Decision Making. At the core of that course was fateful decision-making, which we defined in our seminars as presidential decisions to send young men and young women to die for state purposes and to kill others for state purposes. War. War. You know, we'd like to use euphemisms, but we called it war. Whether we were killing one person or 10,000, we called it war. And we looked at everything. We looked at all the decisions Harry Truman made, the leading one being Korea, of course. We looked at the decisions that Richard Nixon made, like the expansion of the war into Cambodia in 1970. We looked at all the major fateful decisions in the post-World War II era, all the way up to Obama and Libya.

We even had an interview with Obama. What we discovered, I think, was what I used as one of my principal textbooks, David Rothkopf's book, "Running the World: The National Security Council." And he has on page 12, as I recall, a five-part analytical framework, and the number one item was Powell's number one item: Who the hell is making the decisions? Character, you know, whatever you want to call it, a very Greek interpretation of decision-making. The second is international circumstances. The third is domestic circumstances. The fourth is their process. Is it statutory, or is it outside the statutory process? Because we had a statutory process as of the 1947 National Security Act. We didn't have that before. Presidents just made decisions. They just decided to go to

war in consultation with their favorite cabinet officers or whatever. This formalized the decision-making.

And the Congress did that for a reason. They didn't like the way FDR had managed the war. They didn't like the power he had accrued doing it. And not only did they amend the Constitution so we couldn't have a president again for that long a period of time, but they passed the 1947 National Security Act. And the last thing, of course, is ideology and governing philosophy. And then you go into my addition to David's framework, which was budget. And I would always point out that the only president in the post-World War II era who demanded of his then-budget officer—it's called the Office of Management and Budget now—but demanded of him a codicil to his national security decision to go to war or to conduct a covert operation was Eisenhower, if he allowed it to happen.

The cost. We haven't had one since. Instead, what we have is Dick Cheney saying, Ronald Reagan proved deficits don't matter, so don't worry about the money. And we haven't concerned ourselves with the cost of fateful decisions since that time. And we went through probably, I don't know, maybe all told 400 students over 16 years, another 100 on another campus over six years, George Washington University. We probably went through almost everything you could cite that would qualify as a fateful decision in 1945 to the present. The consensus was in agreement with Powell that the major factor was the people participating in the decision-making, not the statutory or non-statutory nature of it, because many of these decisions were non-statutory.

Nixon's decision was not made in the Security Council. It was made at his home drinking Jack Daniel's. And there are other decisions like that, which are outside the system. And you can see, I think, a trail of what happens when that occurs, because the first thing that happens is your cabinet is not behind you. They don't know what you're doing, and so their immediate reaction is a protest: Why did you do this without calling me in? Why did we not have a National Security Council meeting per the law? So you perturb things immediately if you do that. But I think our answer, all these students and mine and others that we brought in from time to time, would be that that's the most important thing. It's the people actually making the decisions.

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A question, though. If you look at all of these decisions that are presented or that have to be made by certain people, the question is, how are they framed and who presents them? Is that clear? Is that in good faith? Right now, a lot of people are very worried that Donald Trump, although he might have the right instincts when it comes to pulling the United States out of warfare or not getting into it, might be given false dichotomies by the people around him. It's like, go to war here, go to war there, instead of nothing. So, is that clear during the decision-making process? And are the people who make the decisions aware of the fact that they need to question the menu they are being presented?

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That's an excellent question, one we debated quite often. And I think the consensus, if there was one among most of my students—by the way, I had some brilliant students on both campuses. Honors program at GW, they had to have a 3.75 GPA before they even came to me, and they were all seniors. And at William & Mary, they were excellent students too. I think the consensus would have been, if you are going to decide, that Powell used to say 95%—none of my students would say that—that fully half of the influence on any fateful decision is the characters in the decision process, then you have to consider several factors. One, they might not even be statutory members of the government.

They might be a buddy outside who's whispering in the president's ear, a buddy with far more influence on the president than anyone he's selected to be his cabinet members. The second thing you've got to consider is that there are no geniuses that are forging this decision. It's just standard Americans, and they're not necessarily the brightest Americans who could be in that position. Oh, and by the way, the person who's going to make the ultimate decision is not necessarily the brightest light on the street either, because we don't produce those kinds of people in elections. Those kinds of people increasingly, too, since World War II, don't win elections.

The kind of people who win elections are not the kind of people you would want deliberating these very serious matters and coming up with the best possible decision. I think my students would probably say that they were shocked at the caliber of people since World War II in particular, who populated the American government and were making these decisions. We used to say sometimes at the end of a three-hour seminar, "My God, I'd have made a better decision than that." And these are 19, 20, 21-year-old youngsters. And they were right. And I often would say, "You probably would have." Our capstone exercise in my course was a four-hour National Security Council meeting staged as best I could, exactly the way it would be in the Roosevelt Room or wherever in the White House.

I would serve all kinds of food and jelly beans and candy and coffee and Cokes and everything else and set it up. I'd use the most prestigious room at GWU and the most prestigious room at William & Mary to do it. And I said, this is the National Security Council. You're the president. You're the vice president. You're the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. And they come out of that exercise and, you know, they would say, I knew this as a simulation war gamer in the military, that you can really put pressure on people, even in simulations. They would come out of it sweating. And, you know, they would come out of it actually feeling as if they had been in the cauldron making these decisions.

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May I just ask, in the actual National Security Council, when these fateful decisions are being made, do people keep snacking and drinking?

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Oh, yeah. Really? Yeah, it depends on the president, of course, and what the president is usually doing. It's not always the case, but either the deputy national security advisor or the national security advisor, both of whom are unelected and not subject to the advice and consent of the Senate, which is, you know, Henry Kissinger was present, and he wasn't in any way, fashion, or form elected. You've got to wonder about that.

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Jake Sullivan.

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Yeah, my students often did. They would say, wait a minute, Brzezinski's the most powerful man. Kissinger's the most powerful. Now he's Secretary of State, too. And I would tell them the joke, and it's not a joke. It actually happened where one staffer came in to Henry when he was both Secretary of State and National Security Advisor and said, Mr. Secretary, which stationery do you want this decision codified on? I mean, that we let that happen is unconscionable, that we let a man be the National Security Advisor and the Secretary of State simultaneously. Now, of course, it got changed quickly, and Kissinger went into the dark after that, really, except for his talking. But nonetheless, it was a concentration of power that the founders, James Madison, would have shuddered in his boots that something like that happened.

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But then the decision-making itself, like, it's highly abstract, right? It's a couple of people in a room, snacking away, of course, being probably aware of the gravity of the decisions.

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It really depends. And I think the variety of scenarios that we studied, we had a wonderful resource. We had primary sources at the National Security Archive at George Washington University. I mean, we looked at the memoranda. We looked at the intelligence documents. You know, we could look for the early decisions in particular and almost every primary document pertaining to that decision. And my students did. They beavered away and dug and found these documents. So when you're looking, for example, at Vietnam, and you're looking at Kennedy, and then you're looking at Johnson, you're looking at primary documents, and you're looking at summaries of documents where, for example, George Ball is talking to LBJ, and he's telling him about the bombing campaign that's coming up, and LBJ interjects and says, oh, ho, ain't going to be moved by no bombs. You know, the president knew. He knew. And yet he goes on and makes a decision to send more troops and kill another 25,000, 30,000 Americans.

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Why did he do that? What was the reason for that decision?

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Well, my students would tell you that they argued and debated it. And I think they probably would come down on there being a number of reasons for it. But the principal one was that LBJ knew that his Great Society was in jeopardy if he were seen as a president who cut and ran from Vietnam. No matter how right a decision it might be, the American people, in their majority, would not see it that way. And so that would jeopardize everything about what he wanted to do domestically. So he bit the bullet and made the decision.

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In a sense, legacy over...

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I know the Johnson family fairly well. I know the granddaughters. I know the daughter. I knew Lady Bird a little bit. She gave me $40,000, handed me a check to help me with my work, put me in the D. C. public school system to help the school system, and I needed some money. She wrote me a check for $40,000. So I know the Johnson family pretty well. I think LBJ was really committed to the Great Society. He thought it not only was going to be his legacy, but he also thought the country needed it. It needed it. It needed everything from the Civil Rights Act to the programs that were created by it. And that was his legacy, but it was also, I think, his deep belief that the country needed it. I think he agonized over it. I really do. I think he had trouble sleeping at night. But ultimately, it's a decision that says... You know, those 58,000 names or the 35,000 or so that he added on the wall over there, the Vietnam Memorial Wall, were the price we paid for a domestic tranquility that he thought was essential.

#M2

Okay. But, I mean, that at least makes sense from the perspective of national cohesion or the good of the country, even if that means it's bad for foreign policy.

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And you have to remember also—and this runs throughout America's history, all the way back to George Washington—the legislature, whether it's the Confederation or it's the actual Congress, always, always considers the poor people in the infantry expendable.

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Yeah, poor people's kids, yes.

#M3

Yep. And that's who we put in the infantry in every one of our wars.

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The incentive structure is also very clear. If you serve in the US Army, you get a chance at getting an education and so on, and even go to university. It's very clear. But I do need to ask you something because most people belong to the propagandized public. What we get of decision-making and so on is what we get through the media and through reported leaks, most of which I do think are just part of the way that you try to manage the expectations and the knowledge of the general public. But the people who sit in this room, I mean, they also read these newspapers. How big is the impact of the portrayed reality versus the hopefully coming from the intelligence, the actual happening reality? Because to me, it constantly seems that people make decisions based upon a very poor understanding, especially when we look at things like the currently ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. How does that work?

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I think you have to really delve deeply to find the actual purpose, reason, or whatever word you want to use—motivation sometimes—for the decision that you look at. Normally, it's not a single decision. My students were amazed at this, too. It's a decision set because it's a series of decisions, and you get deeper and deeper sometimes into the mess because you keep making decisions. For example, you do what is time immemorial for militaries. Instead of backing up from a defeat, whether it's tactical or strategic, you reinforce it, and you reinforce that defeat.

And ultimately, almost all the time, you deepen your profound defeat rather than suddenly reverse the situation and win. So it's more a series of decisions. It's more about who's influencing it at that moment when that second or third or fourth decision was made. Why was that decision made? Was intelligence actually infused—what I will call actionable intelligence? Not necessarily correct, but at least it's sufficient for an analytical mind to make a decision. And then you have to, you know, if it is bad intelligence, throw that into the mix as you analyze the decisions. And you don't always get perfect intelligence. The system is not set up to give you perfect intelligence.

The system is set up now, in particular, my students were really alarmed over this. We have created a culture with then 16 intelligence entities, now 17, counting the DNI, that more or less conforms to the decision maker's wishes. So it spends an inordinate amount of time ferreting out through its leadership and other ways, too, like putting people all over the National Security Council staff,

putting people at the Pentagon, putting people on other key staffs. And they're spies. They really are spies. And the most guilty of this is the CIA. Sometimes they do it without your knowledge, too. You don't know that the guy you just hired is a CIA operative.

So they get, like J. Edgar Hoover did when he was director of the FBI, information on everybody in the government. So they know how to twist this and twist that to make sure that this entity, like INR at State, the only really independent or almost independent intelligence entity in the 16 that the government had at that time, gets people in there whom you can twist and turn and make them come to consensus with your overwhelming view as Director of Central Intelligence, which is in sync with what you know your president wants. So, as the British said at one point about Iraq, you actually shape the intelligence to the policy, not the policy to the intelligence.

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But that's something that would happen in a reciprocal process. And I suppose these agencies don't agree with each other. My guess would be that the Defense Department must be highly suspicious of the CIA, right?

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Absolutely. And we think that competition is healthy. That's an American principle, you know, competition. It is healthy sometimes, but sometimes it is very, very unhealthy. You actually get something like George Tenet, for example, as the then Director of Central Intelligence, which is the same thing that DNI is now, except that he's got another hat that says he's Director of the CIA, using that power to cajole and/or compel others to see things the same way or to use his assets, which are formidable, to ensure that your view doesn't take place. Let me give you an example.

The one man in the intelligence apparatus in the United States who dissented majorly and whose analysis was just superb on the aluminum tubes that Saddam Hussein supposedly had smuggled in to use for centrifuges, George Tenet made sure when they had the ultimate meeting of all 16 entities to adjudicate the national intelligence estimate in that regard, was gone, out of town. And he was the only one who had the skill set to really be formidable in such a meeting in convincing others that they were wrong. George Tenet made sure he was out of town when he held the meeting. So we called him Joe Turner because no one wanted to give his name out, and I don't blame them. But we would say, Joe Turner was out of town. Why was Joe Turner out of town?

And afterwards, Powell more or less asked that question of Tenet, and he just smiled. There were other moments like that, too. You've got incredible power. And now, if you think about it for a moment, if Trump actually gives Tulsi Gabbard the DNI position, if she's approved, the power he said he's going to give her, which should have been given in the legislation, but wasn't. Congress didn't want to go that far. And that's money and people power. In other words, the DNI can shift money among the 16 entities, and she can shift people. Couldn't do that. Congress wouldn't go that

far. They didn't want to make that powerful a potentate with regard to intelligence. But Trump has said he's going to do that. He's going to give the DNI, only the DNI, access to him. And he's going to give the DNI money and people power.

#M2

So basically, he's saying he wants to know what's actually happening from the director, and he wants the power to actually dismantle the system if he doesn't like what he learns about how it works.

#M3

That's the implication. But I dare say he's going to fail in that because it's just too powerful. We've made it too powerful. The only way you could succeed in that, and you couldn't do it, is to do what several people, what John Kennedy said. I don't know if it's apocryphal or not. I doubt it because Bobby said he said it. After the Bay of Pigs, he said the CIA should be broken up into a thousand pieces and scattered across the globe. That's about the only way you're changing it, and you're not going to do that.

#M2

And maybe let me ask you now about foreign influence on this decision-making. In our last conversation, you said you came to the insight that—let's talk about Israel. There's a lot of people who talk about the influence of Israel, right? We have the Mearsheimer interpretation of the lobby and so on, and how a lot of these policymakers or politicians are actually relying not only on money coming from there but also on not being undermined. And your interpretation is, no, actually, we are using Israel after all. It's not the other way around. I talked to Colonel McGregor the other day, and he told me he likes you very much and thinks of you highly, but he doesn't understand how you get to that assessment. Could you explain it?

#M3

Most people would be that way, John. John Mearsheimer's that way, I'm sure. I haven't talked to Steve Walt about it, but I'm sure Steve's that way too. I come in this way, and let me start with a description of what the Israelis have done that I think reflects this from their perspective. We have AIPAC and we have J Street.

#M2

I don't know the second one.

#M3

J Street is the soft Israeli lobby group in America that constantly comes out in opposition to some of the things AIPAC promulgates, some of the inputs they charge. Jeremy Ben-Ami is in charge of J Street. They're both the same thing. One is a hardcore group, and the other is a group that, if the hardcore group gets defeated or even disestablished perhaps sometime in the not too distant future, J Street will be here, and everybody will turn to them. Wonderful, beautiful technique by Israel. It wasn't Israel. It was us. It was us that encouraged this development of the soft side and the hard side. And I don't think that John and Steve are wrong about the Congress and about the influence of the lobby.

I think they're absolutely right because most of Congress, in terms of mental acuity, are pipsqueaks. And in terms of their knowledge and wherewithal in dealing with national security and even foreign policy issues, they are way behind the times and not really interested in it, unless it's some issue like going after the Ortegas in Nicaragua or going after Georgia, for example, or Wilson in South Carolina. They're not interested in it. They're just interested in two things: staying in office and making money. That's basically what our legislature has turned into. There are exceptions, but that's basically it. So, yes, it's very important with regard to them.

But with regard to national security strategy done by those who really understand it, whether they're neoconservative or of another ilk, Israel is our tool. They are the people. They are the state that the British formed to do this, and we took it away from them. And what this is, is to keep the Levant for us, period. That's what they're there for. And if it involves killing lots of people who are Palestinian Arabs, that's okay with us. And that's why we go along with this and don't seem to be too perturbed by it because they are doing what we want them to do. They're now doing what we want them to do in Syria. They're incrementally inching out. Do you know they have now probably 30% of the water in Syria under their control? They're doing what we want them to do.

#M2

But there are all of these stories, like a whole string of them, where the Israelis did something that seems very, very against American interests, from the sinking of that boat or the attack on that boat. I forgot the name.

#M3

Take that boat, the Liberty. Why did Johnson come on the horn, as it were, after the skipper of the carrier Saratoga, I believe it was, had tried to launch planes to go to Liberty's relief, been called back by an inferior, you know, to the president, got a real set of cold feet, and went to launch the planes again and had the President of the United States come on the line and tell him to stand down? LBJ.

#M2

Why? This...

#M3

Because everything that was happening, in particular what was happening with respect to the Russians in the Cold War, was what we wanted to happen. And we didn't want to perturb that with a sudden crisis over just a few sailors killed and in the water. Now, the original commission designed to look at that, I'm told—I have no proof of this, I wish I did—the original commission found some of this, and the admiral that we had put in charge of the commission squelched it, just the way our inspector and a whole bunch of other people squelched the Warren Report or tainted the Warren Report. So the Warren Report is fiction. It's fiction. JFK was not shot by Lee Harvey Oswald. JFK was shot by a number of people who were assassins for, some would say, outcasts from.

I wouldn't. I would say they were people recruited by the establishment from the CIA, the military, and the mafia. Very good gunmen, very good assassins who placed bullets where Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't have possibly done. I mean, just the FBI test on the rifle—the best marksman the FBI had—could not make Lee Harvey Oswald's rifle function the way it would have had to function to do what happened. And Arlen Specter and others on the Warren Commission, Arlen Specter. He was the guy who manipulated the Warren Commission, manipulated the questions and answers and so forth that came out with the decision that the Warren Commission made, which was bull crap. It was just a lie.

#M2

I do understand how these agencies would, under certain circumstances, even be willing to go that far. But when we talk about the influence of, let's say, Israel on U.S. presidents, like one after another, who reportedly got very angry with the Israelis, but still... Well, that's not my experience.

#M3

My experience... Yeah, my experience in government and at the end of the pole, if you will, the force provider in PACOM, for example, my experience was that when Reagan spoke or when H.W. Bush spoke or when a president who really thought that the Israelis were doing something that wasn't in the national security interest of America, they spoke harshly, fast, and effectively.

#M2

So this is how Donald Trump basically shut down Netanyahu the other day and forced the ceasefire. And the whole Joe Biden trying to get a ceasefire and Netanyahu defying him, that's all just a charade in order to... It's not a charade.

#M3

I think it's, like most things, a formidable division in the U.S. government. Not everybody signs up to this idea that Israel is our poodle doing our job. We have had presidents like Jimmy Carter who didn't sign up to that. That's one reason Jimmy Carter didn't get reelected. Donald Trump likes to say it was because he gave away the Panama Canal. He likes to say maybe it was the hostages and everything. Well, those things contributed, of course, but the real reason was because Israel didn't want him to get reelected.

And the real reason behind that was the people who were using Israel didn't want him to get reelected. You don't want a president in there who doesn't understand the formula. And when you get one, he's a one-termer. H.W. Bush brought the hammer down so hard on Israel that I would contend it wasn't Ross Perot. It wasn't the "read my lips, no new taxes" that got H.W. Bush defeated for a second term. It was the fact that Israel threw its weight behind Clinton, bought Clinton, actually, because they didn't like what Bush had made them do. He forced them. He forced them into the Oslo process.

#M2

But doesn't this undermine the argument that Israel does things at the behest of the United States? So there is a reciprocity between these two, then?

#M3

I don't think so. I think you've got to keep your lackey in line. You can't let your lackey get out of line, and you can't let your—lackey is not the right term—you can't let your surrogate state, operating basically in accordance with your national security needs, or as you perceive them, go off on tangents and do things that might repercuss against you. And I think that's one of the reasons Trump, not knowing any of this—I would guess Trump doesn't know anything that I've said. He hasn't a clue. He hasn't a clue what the shadows are doing.

#M2

But the domestic shadows, not the Israeli shadows—the domestic shadows.

#M3

Oh, domestic and Israeli. And I say that only because since George W. Bush brought Ariel Sharon into the Oval Office in 2004 and told him, "Over to you," and unleashed them more or less to do whatever they thought they needed to do within, you know, really wide guidelines. Ever since then, it's been a more difficult proposition to manage them. And when Biden came along, Biden did not have the tools whatsoever. And he had Blinken, and Blinken was operating as Bibi Netanyahu's surrogate Secretary of State. And Jake Sullivan was much better. So Biden had the deck stacked

against him in terms of even doing things that were in line with U.S. security policy. I think towards the end, I don't know if the dementia was getting to Biden badly.

I watched Reagan this way, and I've talked to Secret Service agents who said Reagan didn't even know what the schedule was one morning in the last year of his second term. I never could get Powell to talk about it. Powell was his National Security Advisor. And there were hints that Reagan was not quite as acute in his mind as he was previously, but I think the combination of old age—I mean, I'm there myself—and the combination of other things that Biden had signed up to during his time on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with regard to Israel and other incidents, Biden was really caught, trapped, and he couldn't figure out a way to escape the trap. He finally, I think, at the end, saw some light, and he didn't have—I don't know what would happen in the second term. I really don't. I can't even guess what would happen in the second term.

Had Biden had to deal with Ukraine and Gaza at the same time, and Jake and Tony would have been right there trying to force him into the same ironclad suit he was caught in, I don't know. I don't know if he would have broken out and been able to do things a little bit better and maybe brought an end to both crises. I'm just speculating. But I knew Biden through Powell mostly, but individually too on occasion. And Powell said something one time that really stayed with me. He said, Joe knows the issues. Joe knows the foreign policy better than Dick. Dick Lugar was the Republican equivalent at the time, and Powell just didn't trust him. Condi even chided Powell one time for talking too much to Joe Biden when Joe Biden went into the minority and was a ranking minority member of the SFRC. She said, you're supposed to be talking to Dick.

Dick is our guy, you know, Republican. But he would talk to Joe. But he said to me one time, he said, he should never be president. And it's basically because, and Powell probably would have said this about almost anyone, they just don't have any responsibility for what they say. They can say anything they want. Look at Lindsey Graham. Look at the Kennedys of Louisiana. Look at Cruz. Look at Cotton. They can say anything they want to. A president, Powell would say, a president has to think tomorrow morning, above the fold, right side, Washington Post, front page. A president has to be very circumspect and careful with his language. Congressmen just say anything they want to, senators or representatives. So they should never be president.

#M2

Well, he did become president, and Colonel Wilkerson, I promised you we wouldn't go over the hour mark, which we're getting close to. You gave me a lot of food for thought and new questions. I will reach out to you again if I may, and just thank you very much for all these insights.

#M3

Surely. I'm willing to do anything as long as I don't go into dementia for educational purposes, because I put a lot of people into the bureaucracy, the NSA, the Foreign Service, the civil service in

general. I have a young lady, a brilliant student, who is the Iraq desk officer at the NSA, married to the Russian desk officer, who was also one of my students. So anything I can do to create young people or help young people be better civil servants or better foreign professionals or whatever, I do. Because we've got to change this. We've got to change this.

#M2

That gives me a lot of hope because this is a... I've talked to other people, Jack Matlock and Jess Freeman and so on, and they all say, like, we don't have a lot of good people. But I know the United States has produced some of the best diplomats in the world, Joseph Grew and so on, and the people, a lot. So where are they? But this is a question for another time, I suppose.

#M3

We used to ask that question in seminars: what's happened to us?

#M2

I will ask you next time. We will talk about this next time. Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, thank you very much for your time today.

#M3

Thanks for having me.