

Rationalizing Lunacy: The Intellectual as Servant of the State and Perpetual War

By [Andrew J. Bacevich](#)

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Walt Whitman Rostow, McGeorge Bundy's successor as national security adviser, shows President Lyndon B. Johnson a model of the Khe Sanh area on Feb. 15, 1968. (Photo: public domain)

Policy intellectuals — eggheads presuming to instruct the mere mortals who actually run for office — are a blight on the republic. Like some invasive species, they infest present-day Washington, where their presence strangles common sense and has brought to the verge of extinction the simple ability to perceive reality. A benign appearance — well-dressed types testifying before Congress, pontificating in print and on TV, or even filling key positions in the executive branch — belies a malign impact. They are like Asian carp let loose in the Great Lakes.

It all began innocently enough. Back in 1933, with the country in the throes of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt first imported a handful of eager academics to join the ranks of his New Deal. An unprecedented economic crisis required some fresh thinking, FDR believed. Whether the contributions of this "[Brains Trust](#)" made a positive impact or served to retard economic recovery (or ended up being a wash) remains a subject for debate even today. At the very least, however, the arrival of Adolph Berle, Raymond Moley, Rexford Tugwell, and others elevated Washington's bourbon-and-cigars social scene. As bona fide members of the intelligentsia, they possessed a sort of cachet.

Then came World War II, followed in short order by the onset of the Cold War. These events brought to Washington a second wave of deep thinkers, their agenda now focused on "national security." This eminently elastic concept — more properly, "national insecurity" — encompassed just about anything related to preparing for, fighting, or surviving wars, including economics, technology, weapons design, decision-making, the structure of the armed forces, and other matters said to be of vital importance to the nation's survival. National insecurity became, and remains today, the policy world's equivalent of the gift that just keeps on giving.

People who specialized in thinking about national insecurity came to be known as "defense intellectuals." Pioneers in this endeavor back in the 1950s were as likely to collect their paychecks from think tanks like the prototypical RAND Corporation as from more traditional academic institutions. Their ranks included creepy figures like Herman Kahn, who took pride in "thinking about the unthinkable," and Albert Wohlstetter, who tutored Washington in the complexities of maintaining "the delicate balance of terror."

In this wonky world, the coin of the realm has been and remains "policy relevance." This means devising products that convey a sense of novelty, while serving chiefly to perpetuate

the ongoing enterprise. The ultimate example of a policy-relevant insight is [Dr. Strangelove's](#) discovery of a “mineshaft gap” — successor to the “bomber gap” and the “missile gap” that, in the 1950s, had found America allegedly lagging behind the Soviets in weaponry and desperately needing to catch up. Now, with a thermonuclear exchange about to destroy the planet, the United States is once more falling behind, Strangelove claims, this time in digging underground shelters enabling some small proportion of the population to survive.

In a single, brilliant stroke, Strangelove posits a new *raison d'être* for the entire national insecurity apparatus, thereby ensuring that the game will continue more or less forever. A sequel to Stanley Kubrick's movie would have shown General “Buck” Turgidson and the other brass huddled in the War Room, developing plans to close the mineshaft gap as if nothing untoward had occurred.

The Rise of the National Insecurity State

Yet only in the 1960s, right around the time that *Dr. Strangelove* first appeared in movie theaters, did policy intellectuals really come into their own. The press now referred to them as “action intellectuals,” suggesting energy and impatience. Action intellectuals were thinkers, but also doers, members of a “large and growing body of men who choose to leave their quiet and secure niches on the university campus and involve themselves instead in the perplexing problems that face the nation,” as *LIFE Magazine* put it in 1967. Among the most perplexing of those problems was what to do about Vietnam, just the sort of challenge an action intellectual could sink his teeth into.

Over the previous century-and-a-half, the United States had gone to war for many reasons, including greed, fear, panic, righteous anger, and legitimate self-defense. On various occasions, each of these, alone or in combination, had prompted Americans to fight. Vietnam marked the first time that the United States went to war, at least in considerable part, in response to a bunch of really dumb ideas floated by ostensibly smart people occupying positions of influence. More surprising still, action intellectuals persisted in waging that war well past the point where it had become self-evident, even to members of Congress, that the cause was a misbegotten one doomed to end in failure.

In his fine new book [American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity](#), Christian Appy, a historian who teaches at the University of Massachusetts, reminds us of just how dumb those ideas were.

As Exhibit A, Professor Appy presents McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser first for President John F. Kennedy and then for Lyndon Johnson. Bundy was a product of Groton and Yale, who famously became the youngest-ever dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, having gained tenure there without even bothering to get a graduate degree.

For Exhibit B, there is Walt Whitman Rostow, Bundy's successor as national security adviser. Rostow was another Yale, earning his undergraduate degree there along with a PhD. While taking a break of sorts, he spent two years at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. As a professor of economic history at MIT, Rostow captured JFK's attention with his modestly subtitled 1960 book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, which offered a grand theory of development with ostensibly universal applicability. Kennedy brought Rostow to Washington to test his theories of “modernization” in places like Southeast Asia.

Finally, as Exhibit C, Appy briefly discusses Professor Samuel P. Huntington's contributions to the Vietnam War. Huntington also attended Yale, before earning his PhD at Harvard and then returning to teach there, becoming one of the most renowned political scientists of the post-World War II era.

What the three shared in common, apart from a suspect education acquired in New Haven, was an unwavering commitment to the reigning verities of the Cold War. Foremost among those verities was this: that a monolith called Communism, controlled by a small group of fanatic ideologues hidden behind the walls of the Kremlin, posed an existential threat not simply to America and its allies, but to the very idea of freedom itself. The claim came with this essential corollary: the only hope of avoiding such a cataclysmic outcome was for the United States to vigorously resist the Communist threat wherever it reared its ugly head.

Buy those twin propositions and you accept the imperative of the U.S. preventing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a.k.a. North Vietnam, from absorbing the Republic of Vietnam, a.k.a. South Vietnam, into a single unified country; in other words, that South Vietnam was a cause worth fighting and dying for. Bundy, Rostow, and Huntington not only bought that argument hook, line, and sinker, but then exerted themselves mightily to persuade others in Washington to buy it as well.

Yet even as he was urging the "Americanization" of the Vietnam War in 1965, Bundy already entertained doubts about whether it was winnable. But not to worry: even if the effort ended in failure, he counseled President Johnson, "the policy will be worth it."

How so? "At a minimum," Bundy wrote, "it will damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own." If the United States ultimately lost South Vietnam, at least Americans would have died trying to prevent that result — and through some perverted logic this, in the estimation of Harvard's youngest-ever dean, was a redeeming prospect. The essential point, Bundy believed, was to prevent others from seeing the United States as a "paper tiger." To avoid a fight, even a losing one, was to forfeit credibility. "Not to have it thought that when we commit ourselves we really mean no major risk" — that was the problem to be avoided at all cost.

Rostow outdid even Bundy in hawkishness. Apart from his relentless advocacy of coercive bombing to influence North Vietnamese policymakers, Rostow was a chief architect of something called the Strategic Hamlet Program. The idea was to jumpstart the Rostovian process of modernization by forcibly relocating Vietnamese peasants from their ancestral villages into armed camps where the Saigon government would provide security, education, medical care, and agricultural assistance. By winning hearts-and-minds in this manner, the defeat of the communist insurgency was sure to follow, with the people of South Vietnam vaulted into the "age of high mass consumption," where Rostow believed all humankind was destined to end up.

That was the theory. Reality differed somewhat. Actual Strategic Hamlets were indistinguishable from concentration camps. The government in Saigon proved too weak, too incompetent, and too corrupt to hold up its end of the bargain. Rather than winning hearts-and-minds, the program induced alienation, even as it essentially destabilized peasant society. One result: an increasingly rootless rural population flooded into South Vietnam's cities where there was little work apart from servicing the needs of the ever-growing U.S. military population — hardly the sort of activity conducive to self-sustaining

development.

Yet even when the Vietnam War ended in complete and utter defeat, Rostow still claimed vindication for his theory. “We and the Southeast Asians,” he wrote, had used the war years “so well that there wasn’t the panic [when Saigon fell] that there would have been if we had failed to intervene.” Indeed, regionally Rostow spied plenty of good news, all of it attributable to the American war.

“Since 1975 there has been a general expansion of trade by the other countries of that region with Japan and the West. In Thailand we have seen the rise of a new class of entrepreneurs. Malaysia and Singapore have become countries of diverse manufactured exports. We can see the emergence of a much thicker layer of technocrats in Indonesia.”

So there you have it. If you want to know what 58,000 Americans (not to mention vastly larger numbers of Vietnamese) died for, it was to encourage entrepreneurship, exports, and the emergence of technocrats elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Appy describes Professor Huntington as another action intellectual with an unflinching facility for seeing the upside of catastrophe. In Huntington’s view, the internal displacement of South Vietnamese caused by the excessive use of American firepower, along with the failure of Rostow’s Strategic Hamlets, was actually good news. It promised, he insisted, to give the Americans an edge over the insurgents.

The key to final victory, Huntington [wrote](#), was “forced-draft urbanization and modernization which rapidly brings the country in question out of the phase in which a rural revolutionary movement can hope to generate sufficient strength to come to power.” By emptying out the countryside, the U.S. could win the war in the cities. “The urban slum, which seems so horrible to middle-class Americans, often becomes for the poor peasant a gateway to a new and better way of life.” The language may be a tad antiseptic, but the point is clear enough: the challenges of city life in a state of utter immiseration would miraculously transform those same peasants into go-getters more interested in making a buck than in signing up for social revolution.

Revisited decades later, claims once made with a straight face by the likes of Bundy, Rostow, and Huntington — action intellectuals of the very first rank — seem beyond preposterous. They insult our intelligence, leaving us to wonder how such judgments or the people who promoted them were ever taken seriously.

How was it that during Vietnam bad ideas exerted such a perverse influence? Why were those ideas so impervious to challenge? Why, in short, was it so difficult for Americans to recognize bullshit for what it was?

Creating a Twenty-First-Century Slow-Motion Vietnam

These questions are by no means of mere historical interest. They are no less relevant when applied to the handiwork of the twenty-first-century version of policy intellectuals, specializing in national insecurity, whose bullshit underpins policies hardly more coherent than those used to justify and prosecute the Vietnam War.

The present-day successors to Bundy, Rostow, and Huntington subscribe to their own reigning verities. Chief among them is this: that a phenomenon called terrorism or Islamic radicalism, inspired by a small group of fanatic ideologues hidden away in various quarters

of the Greater Middle East, poses an existential threat not simply to America and its allies, but — yes, it's still with us — to the very idea of freedom itself. That assertion comes with an essential corollary dusted off and imported from the Cold War: the only hope of avoiding this cataclysmic outcome is for the United States to vigorously resist the terrorist/Islamist threat wherever it rears its ugly head.

At least since September 11, 2001, and arguably for at least two decades prior to that date, U.S. policymakers have taken these propositions for granted. They have done so at least in part because few of the policy intellectuals specializing in national insecurity have bothered to question them.

Indeed, those specialists insulate the state from having to address such questions. Think of them as intellectuals devoted to averting genuine intellectual activity. More or less like Herman Kahn and Albert Wohlstetter (or Dr. Strangelove), their function is to perpetuate the ongoing enterprise.

The fact that the enterprise itself has become utterly amorphous may actually facilitate such efforts. Once widely known as the Global War on Terror, or GWOT, it has been transformed into the War with No Name. A little bit like the famous Supreme Court opinion on pornography: we can't define it, we just know it when we see it, with ISIS the latest manifestation to capture Washington's attention.

All that we can say for sure about this nameless undertaking is that it continues with no end in sight. It has become a sort of slow-motion Vietnam, stimulating remarkably little honest reflection regarding its course thus far or prospects for the future. If there is an actual Brains Trust at work in Washington, it operates on autopilot. Today, the second- and third-generation bastard offspring of RAND that clutter northwest Washington — the Center for this, the Institute for that — spin their wheels debating latter day equivalents of Strategic Hamlets, with nary a thought given to more fundamental concerns.

What prompts these observations is Ashton Carter's return to the Pentagon as President Obama's fourth secretary of defense. Carter himself is an action intellectual in the Bundy, Rostow, Huntington mold, having made a career of rotating between positions at Harvard and in "the Building." He, too, is a Yale and a Rhodes scholar, with a PhD. from Oxford. "Ash" — in Washington, a first-name-only identifier ("Henry," "Zbig," "Hillary") signifies that you have *truly* arrived — is the author of books and articles galore, including [one op-ed](#) co-written with former Secretary of Defense William Perry back in 2006 calling for preventive war against North Korea. Military action "undoubtedly carries risk," he bravely acknowledged at the time. "But the risk of continuing inaction in the face of North Korea's race to threaten this country would be greater" — just the sort of logic periodically trotted out by the likes of Herman Kahn and Albert Wohlstetter.

As Carter has taken the Pentagon's reins, he also has taken pains to convey the impression of being a big thinker. As one *Wall Street Journal* [headline](#) enthused, "Ash Carter Seeks Fresh Eyes on Global Threats." That multiple global threats exist and that America's defense secretary has a mandate to address each of them are, of course, givens. His predecessor Chuck Hagel (no Yale degree) was a bit of a plodder. By way of contrast, Carter has made clear his intention to shake things up.

So on his second day in office, for example, he dined with Kenneth Pollack, Michael O'Hanlon, and Robert Kagan, ranking national insecurity intellectuals and old Washington

hands one and all. Besides all being employees of the Brookings Institution, the three share the distinction of [having supported](#) the Iraq War back in 2003 and calling for redoubling efforts against ISIS today. For assurances that the fundamental orientation of U.S. policy is sound — we just need to try harder — who better to consult than [Pollack](#), [O’Hanlon](#), and [Kagan \(any Kagan\)](#)?

Was Carter hoping to gain some fresh insight from his dinner companions? Or was he letting Washington’s clubby network of fellows, senior fellows, and distinguished fellows know that, on his watch, the prevailing verities of national insecurity would remain sacrosanct? You decide.

Soon thereafter, Carter’s first trip overseas provided another opportunity to signal his intentions. In Kuwait, he convened a war council of senior military and civilian officials to take stock of the campaign against ISIS. In a daring departure from standard practice, the new defense secretary [prohibited PowerPoint briefings](#). One participant described the ensuing event as “a five-hour-long college seminar” — candid and freewheeling. “This is reversing the paradigm,” one awed senior Pentagon official [remarked](#). Carter was said to be challenging his subordinates to “look at this problem differently.”

Of course, Carter might have said, “Let’s look at a different problem.” That, however, was far too radical to contemplate — the equivalent of suggesting back in the 1960s that assumptions landing the United States in Vietnam should be reexamined.

In any event — and to no one’s surprise — the different look did not produce a different conclusion. Instead of reversing the paradigm, Carter affirmed it: the existing U.S. approach to dealing with ISIS is sound, he announced. It only needs a bit of [tweaking](#) — just the result to give the Pollacks, O’Hanlons, and Kagans something to write about as they keep up the chatter that substitutes for serious debate.

Do we really need that chatter? Does it enhance the quality of U.S. policy? If policy/defense/action intellectuals fell silent would America be less secure?

Let me propose an experiment. Put them on furlough. Not permanently — just until the last of the winter snow finally melts in New England. Send them back to Yale for reeducation. Let’s see if we are able to make do without them even for a month or two.

In the meantime, invite Iraq and Afghanistan War vets to consider how best to deal with ISIS. Turn the op-ed pages of major newspapers over to high school social studies teachers. Book English majors from the Big Ten on the Sunday talk shows. Who knows what tidbits of wisdom might turn up?

Andrew J. Bacevich is a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. His latest book is [Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country \(American Empire Project\)](#). He is also editor of the book, [The Short American Century](#) (Harvard Univ. Press), and author of several others, including: [Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War](#), [The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War](#), [The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism \(American Empire Project\)](#), and [The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy Since World War II](#).

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