

The Worst Mistake in US History

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Featured image: U.S. Army (USA) M1A1 Abrams MBT (Main Battle Tank), and personnel from A Company (CO), Task Force 1st Battalion, 35th Armor Regiment (1-35 Armor), 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 1st Armored Division (AD), pose for a photo under the “Hands of Victory” in Ceremony Square, Baghdad, Iraq during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The worst mistake in U.S. history was the conversion after World War II of the U.S. government from a constitutional, limited-government republic to a national-security state. Nothing has done more to warp and distort the conscience, principles, and values of the American people, including those who serve in the U.S. military.

A good example of how the national-security state has adversely affected the thinking of U.S. soldiers was reflected in an op-ed entitled “What We’re Fighting For” that appeared in the February 10, 2017, issue of the *New York Times*. Authored by an Iraq War veteran named Phil Klay, the article demonstrates perfectly what the national-security state has done to soldiers and others and why it is so imperative for the American people to restore a constitutional republic to our land.

Klay begins his op-ed by extolling the exploits of another U.S. Marine, First Lt. Brian Chontosh, who, displaying great bravery, succeeded in killing approximately two dozen Iraqis in a fierce firefight during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Klay writes,

When I was a new Marine, just entering the Corps, this story from the Iraq invasion defined heroism for me. It’s a perfect image of war for inspiring new officer candidates, right in line with youthful notions of what war is and what kind of courage it takes — physical courage, full stop.

Klay then proceeds to tell a story about an event he witnessed when he was deployed to Iraq in 2007. After doctors failed to save the life of a Marine who had been shot by an Iraqi sniper, those same doctors proceeded to treat and save the life of the sniper, who himself had been shot by U.S. troops. Klay used the story to point out the virtuous manner in which U.S. forces carried out their military mission in Iraq.

Well, except perhaps, Klay observes, for Abu Ghraib, the Iraqi prison in which Saddam Hussein’s government had tortured and abused countless Iraqis and which the U.S. military turned into its own torture and abuse center for Iraqis captured during the 2003 U.S. invasion of the country. Klay tells the story of a defense contractor named Eric Fair, who tortured an Iraqi prisoner into divulging information about a car-bomb factory. Encouraged by that successful use of torture, Fair proceeded to employ it against many other Iraqis,

none of whom had any incriminating evidence to provide.

Klay points out that both Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay were major turning points in the Iraq War because prisoner abuse at both camps became a driving force for Iraqis to join the insurgency in Iraq. Thus, while Fair may have saved lives through his successful use of torture, he and other U.S. personnel who tortured and abused people at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay may well have cost the lives of many more U.S. soldiers in the long term.

Klay, however, suggests that none of that was really Fair's fault. While he might have crossed some moral lines, everything he did, Klay suggests, was in accordance with legal rules and regulations. Klay writes,

And Eric did what our nation asked of him, used techniques that were vetted and approved and passed down to intelligence operatives and contractors like himself. Lawyers at the highest levels of government had been consulted, asked to bring us to the furthest edge of what the law might allow. To do what it takes, regardless of whether such actions will secure the "attachment of all good men," or live up to that oath we swear to support and defend the Constitution.

Klay refers to the oath that U.S. soldiers take to support and defend the Constitution. Clearly patting himself and other members of the U.S. military on the back, he says U.S. soldiers fight with honor to defend a "set of principles" that are reflected in the Constitution and that define America.

It would be difficult to find a better example of a life of the lie than that of Phil Klay. He provides an absolutely perfect demonstration of what a national-security state does to soldiers' minds and why the Founding Fathers were so opposed to that type of governmental structure.

The rights of invaders

Notice one big omission from Klay's self-aggrandizing article: Iraq never attacked the United States or even threatened to do so. Instead, it was the U.S. government, operating through its troops, that was the aggressor nation in the Iraq War. Wars of aggression — i.e., attacking, invading, and occupying other countries — were among the crimes of which the defendants at Nuremburg were convicted.

It is absolutely fascinating that that critically important point seems to escape Klay so completely. It's as if it just doesn't exist or just doesn't count. His mindset simply begins with the fact that U.S. troops are engaged in war and then it proceeds from there to focus on the courage and humanity of the troops, how their bravery in battle inspired him, and how they treated the enemy humanely. It never occurs to him to ask the vital question: Did U.S. troops have any legal or moral right to be in Iraq and to kill anyone there, including Iraqi soldiers, insurgents, civilians, and civil servants working for the Iraqi government?

Many years ago, I posed a question about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq to a libertarian friend of mine who was a Catholic priest. I asked him, If a U.S. soldier is placed in Iraq in a kill-or-be-killed situation, does he have a right to fire back at an Iraqi who is shooting at him?

My friend's answer was unequivocal: Absolutely not, he responded. Since he has no legitimate right to be in Iraq, given that he is part of the aggressor force that initiated the war, under God's laws he cannot kill anyone, not even by convincing himself that he is only acting in "self-defense."

I responded,

"Are you saying that his only choice is to run away or permit himself to be killed"? He responded, "That is precisely what I am saying. Under the laws of God, he cannot kill anyone in Iraq because he has no right to be there."

Suppose a burglar enters a person's home in the dead of night. The homeowner wakes up, discovers the intruder, and begins firing at him. The burglar fires back and kills the homeowner.

The burglar appears in court and explains that he never had any intention of killing the homeowner and that he was simply firing back in self-defense. He might even explain to the judge how bravely he reacted under fire and detail the clever manner in which he outmaneuvered and shot the homeowner.

The judge, however, would reject any claim of self-defense on the part of the burglar. Why? Because the burglar had no right to be in the homeowner's house. Like the U.S. soldier in Iraq, when the homeowner began firing the burglar had only two legal and moral options: run away or be killed.

That's what my Catholic priest friend was pointing out about U.S. soldiers in Iraq. They had no right to be there. They invaded a poor, Third World country whose government had never attacked the United States and they were killing, torturing, and abusing people whom they had no right to kill, torture, or abuse.

That's what Klay as well as most other members of the U.S. military and, for that matter, many Americans still don't get: that the Iraqi people were the ones who wielded the right of self-defense against an illegal invasion by a foreign power and that U.S. forces, as the aggressor power in the war, had no legal or moral right to kill any Iraqi, not even in "self-defense."

Klay waxes eloquent about the U.S. Constitution and the oath that soldiers take to support and defend it, but it's really just another perfect demonstration of the life of the lie that he and so many other U.S. soldiers live. The reality is that when U.S. soldiers vow to support and defend the Constitution, as a practical matter they are vowing to loyally obey the orders and commands of the president, who is their military commander in chief.

There is no better example of this phenomenon than what happened in Iraq. The U.S. Constitution is clear: The president is prohibited from waging war without a declaration of war from Congress. No declaration, no war. Every U.S. soldier ordered to invade Iraq knew that or should have known that.

Everyone, including the troops, also knew that Congress had not declared war on Iraq. Yet, not a single soldier supported or defended the Constitution by refusing George Bush's order to attack and invade Iraq. Every one of them loyally obeyed his order to attack and invade,

knowing full well that it would mean killing people in Iraq — killing people who had never attacked the United States. And they all convinced themselves that by following the president's orders to invade Iraq and kill Iraqis, they were supporting and defending the Constitution.



[George W. Bush](#) addressed the [General Assembly of the United Nations](#) on 12 September 2002 to outline the complaints of the United States government against the Iraqi government. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

How do U.S. soldiers reconcile that? They convince themselves that they are supporting and defending the Constitution by obeying the orders of the president, who has been democratically elected by the citizenry. It's not their job, they tell themselves, to determine what is constitutional and what isn't. Their job, they believe, is simply to do what the president, operating through his subordinates, orders them to do. In their minds, they are supporting and defending the Constitution whenever they loyally and obediently carry out the orders of the president.

That means, then, that the standing army is nothing more than the president's private army. As a practical matter, soldiers are going to do whatever they are ordered to do. If they don't, they are quickly shot or simply replaced, which provides a good incentive for others to do as they are told. That's why soldiers invaded Iraq, which had never attacked the United States, and killed people who were defending their country against an unlawful invasion. That's also why soldiers and defense contractors tortured and abused people at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere. They all believed they were carrying out the orders of their superiors, from the president on down, and that they were supporting and defending the Constitution in the process.

As people throughout history have learned, that is also why a standing army constitutes such a grave threat to the freedom and well-being of the citizenry. It is the means by which a tyrant imposes and enforces his will on the citizenry. Just ask the people of Chile, where the troops of a military regime installed into power by the U.S. national-security

establishment rounded up tens of thousands of innocent people and incarcerated, tortured, raped, abused, or executed them, all without due process of law and with the support of the U.S. government.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, I read that some Catholic soldiers were deeply troubled by the prospect of killing people in a war that the U.S. government was initiating. I was stunned to read that a U.S. military chaplain told them that they had the right under God's laws to obey the president's order to invade Iraq and kill Iraqis. God would not hold it against them, he said, if they killed people in the process of following orders.

Really? Are God's laws really nullified by the orders of a government's military commander? If that were the case, don't you think God's commandment would have read:

"Thou shalt not kill, unless your ruler orders you to do so in a war of aggression against another nation"?

To this day, there are those who claim that George W. Bush simply made an honest mistake in claiming that Saddam Hussein, Iraq's dictator, was maintaining weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that U.S. soldiers were justified in trusting him by loyally obeying his orders to invade and occupy Iraq to "disarm Saddam."

They ignore three important points: it was a distinct possibility that Bush and his people were simply lying. It certainly wouldn't be the first time that a president had lied in order to garner support for a war. Lyndon Johnson's lies regarding a supposed North Vietnamese attack on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam come to mind. Two, Bush didn't secure the constitutionally required congressional declaration of war, most likely because he knew that congressional hearings on the issue would expose his WMD scare for the lie it was. And three, only the UN, not the U.S. government, was entitled to enforce its resolutions regarding Iraq's WMDs.

Moreover, the circumstantial evidence establishes that Bush was lying and that the WMD scare was entirely bogus. Many people forget that throughout the 1990s the U.S. government was hell-bent on regime change in Iraq. That's what the brutal sanctions were all about, which contributed to the deaths of half a million Iraqi children. When U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright was asked on *Sixty Minutes* whether the deaths of half a million Iraqi children from the sanctions were "worth it," she responded that such deaths were "worth it." By "it," she was referring to regime change.

That desire for regime change in Iraq grew with each passing year in the 1990s, both among liberals and conservatives. Demands were ever growing to get rid of Saddam. Therefore, when Bush started coming up with his WMD scare after the 9/11 attacks, everyone should have been wary because it had all the earmarks of an excuse to invade Iraq after more than 10 years of sanctions had failed to achieve the job.

The best circumstantial evidence that Bush lied about the WMD scare appeared after it was determined that there were no WMDs in Iraq. At that point, if Bush had been telling the truth, he could have said,

"I'm very sorry. I have made a grave mistake and my army has killed multitudes of people as a consequence of my mistake. I am hereby ordering all

U.S. troops home and I hereby announce my resignation as president.”

Bush didn't do that. In fact, he expressed not one iota of remorse or regret over the loss of life for what supposedly had been the result of a mistake. He knew that he had achieved what the U.S. national-security state had been trying to achieve for more than a decade with its brutal sanctions — regime change in Iraq — and he had used the bogus WMD scare to garner support for his invasion. And significantly, the troops were kept occupying Iraq for several more years, during which they killed more tens of thousands of Iraqis.

One thing is for sure: By the time Phil Klay arrived in Iraq in 2007, he knew full well that there had been no WMDs in Iraq. He also knew that Iraq had never attacked the United States. By that time, he knew full well that the U.S. government had invaded a country under false or, at the very least, mistaken pretenses. He knew there had been no congressional declaration of war. He knew that there was no legal or moral foundation for a military occupation that was continuing to kill people in an impoverished Third World country whose worst “crime” was simply trying to rid their country of an illegal occupier.

Yet, reinforced by people who were thanking them for “their service in Iraq,” Klay, like other U.S. troops, convinced himself that their “service” in Iraq was a grand and glorious sacrifice for his nation, that they were defending Americans’ rights and freedoms, and that they were keeping us safe. It was a classic life of the lie because our nation, our rights and freedoms, and our safety were never threatened by anyone in Iraq, including the millions of Iraqis who were killed, maimed, injured, tortured, abused, or exiled, or whose homes, businesses, or infrastructure were destroyed by bombs, missiles, bullets, and tanks.



A squad leader with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (15th MEU (SOC)), moves his Marines to their objective during a mission in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

In fact, the entity that actually threatened the rights and freedoms of the American people was the U.S. government, given the totalitarian-like powers that it assumed as part of its effort to keep us safe from the enemies its interventionist policies were producing. Coming to mind are the totalitarian-like power to assassinate Americans, secret mass surveillance,

and the incarceration and torture of American citizens as suspected terrorists — all without due process of law and without trial by jury.

This is what a national-security state does to people — it warps, damages, or destroys their conscience, principles, and values; induces them to subscribe to false bromides; and nurtures all sorts of mental contortions to enable people to avoid confronting reality.

Many years after Brian Chontosh's exploits in Iraq, Phil Klay was surprised to learn that Chontosh was experiencing some ambivalence about what he had done.

"It's ugly, it's violent, it's disgusting. I wish it wasn't part of what we had to do," Chontosh later wrote.

Perhaps that's because conscience was beginning to stir within him. That's a good sign. Maybe it will begin to stir in Phil Klay too. And other members of the military as well.

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