



# THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

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## FOREIGN POLICY MESS

*Former State Department insider Lawrence Wilkerson discusses the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the end of the American Empire*

Lawrence Wilkerson is a rarity in Washington, DC, a government servant who can admit mistakes, admonish his own Republican Party and even criticize his own president. Since leaving the George W. Bush administration in 2005, he has been one of its harshest detractors. He has expressed public remorse for his involvement in paving the way to war in Iraq—in February 2003, he had headed the task force behind Secretary of State Colin Powell’s address to the United Nations that made bogus claims about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and ties to Osama bin Laden. In a 2006 interview with PBS, he said: “I participated in a hoax on the American people, the international community and the United Nations Security Council.”

Wilkerson’s outspokenness is more unusual considering his background. For three decades he was in the U.S. army, an institution that frowns on dissenters; in the 1960s he volunteered to fight in Vietnam, later held posts in Korea and Japan, and retired in 1997 with the rank of colonel. From 1993 to 1997 he was deputy director and then director of the Marine Corps War College. He has had a long relationship with Powell, a four-star general and one of the country’s most distinguished soldiers; he served as a special assistant to Powell when the general was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the George H.W. Bush administration, and as chief of staff when Powell was secretary of state in the George W. Bush administration. At the State Department he also served on the Policy Planning Staff with responsibility for East Asia and the Pacific, and briefly as associate director. Wilkerson is currently Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Government and Public Policy at the College of William & Mary. *Cairo Review* Managing Editor Scott MacLeod interviewed Wilkerson in Rosslyn, Virginia, on August 26, 2014.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Start with a critique of the Obama administration’s national security and foreign policy?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** First, one has to realize President Obama inherited a great deal of the foreign

◁ Lawrence Wilkerson, Falls Church, Virginia, Aug. 29, 2014. *Brooks Kraft for the Cairo Review*

policy mess, the lead feature of which was probably one of the most disastrous strategic decisions in the post-World War II era: invading Iraq and destroying the balance of power that we had maintained very precariously but nonetheless successfully since arguably World War II. Certainly since Jimmy Carter declared the Persian Gulf as a vital U.S. national interest and began the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, which evolved into the Central Command and became the dominant, unified, combatant command in the U.S. inventory. I, as a military officer, was involved in all of that for thirty years, so I viscerally understand what we tried to do for thirty years, what we successfully did. However one might cite the humanitarian negatives, we maintained the balance of power essentially with the Shah on one side and the Saudis on the other. Then when the Shah went down, we maintained a balance of power between the Arabs on one side and the Persians on the other. Whether we liked either side really didn't matter as long as they stood each other off. When the Iran-Iraq War occurred, one of the bloodiest wars in the world, certainly the bloodiest war faced since World War II, we sat there and essentially said, "Okay, let's let it go until there's one Arab left and one Persian left. Then we'll give them dueling pistols and let them shoot each other across the Gulf." That was essentially our military policy and I suspect it was our policy in the highest realms of the land too. Well here comes George W. Bush into office and destroys that balance of power in one fell move. His father [President George H.W. Bush] had the good sense not to do it, not to go to Baghdad in '91. George W. Bush didn't have any strategic sense at all and [Vice President Dick] Cheney's sense was dominating the national security decision-making process. And Cheney's sense was oil. One can argue, playing realpolitik, that oil is essential and therefore we had to do it. That's the reason he changed from being totally against going to Baghdad in the first Gulf War to being for it.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *And Obama?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** President Obama has been dealing with that, at least as part of his problems, ever since. He also inherited a disaster in Afghanistan. Why was it a disaster? Because of Iraq. Secretary [Colin] Powell told [George W. Bush]: "Mr. President, I don't object to taking Saddam Hussein out, but your timing is bad and you have no international legitimacy, so you shouldn't do it right now." The president went ahead and did it anyway. What he meant by timing: he had been the chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] and I had been his assistant when H.W. Bush gave the American people their peace dividend, that is to say that we cut the armed forces by 25 percent. He had then been the chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] for the first year of [Bill] Clinton's presidency, when that moron came in and cut five to six percent more out of the armed forces. I'm really down on Clinton because of NATO

expansion and what's happening in Ukraine right now, because that's Clinton's legacy. He was such a neophyte in foreign and security policy and he had such neophytes around him that he didn't understand what he was doing by going to Georgia and Ukraine and other places with NATO. Any fool could sit there with any geostrategic cell in his body and know that [Vladimir] Putin was not going to tolerate what we were doing in Georgia, Ukraine, and perhaps elsewhere too. So, Obama has inherited a great deal of this from two very incompetent—security policy-wise and foreign policy-wise—presidents. He inherited a mess, a mess that is now coming to fruition in places like Ukraine, Afghanistan and Iraq. Took our eye off the ball in Afghanistan when we went to Iraq, and it became an economy-of-force theater because we didn't have enough troops to handle it. Tried to make up for that with 250,000-plus civilian contractors. That didn't work very well, made a mess out of a lot of things including privatizing the ultimate public function: war.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How has Obama handled the mess?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Now, he's a neophyte in foreign and security policy too. And who did he bring in? A neophyte as secretary of state. I like Hillary [Clinton], but she has no bona fides as a security and foreign policy expert. Now he's got another guy [John Kerry] in there who is more attuned to emotionalism and spinning this or that policy off the top of his head. He's not had a lot of help in other words. While I might be critical of his foreign policy and critical of some of his decisions, I certainly understand where it comes from, at least from what he inherited and the people he's got helping him. It's hard to critique a man who inherited such a mess.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Have these disasters that you describe changed the dynamic of American security policy?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** All of what I just said and more corresponds with a real diminishment of American power in the world caused by two things, probably more than two, but two significant things. One, others rise. The leading character there is China, but we're also talking about Brazil. I was just down in São Paulo recently, what a country that is becoming. What a powerful, huge, well-endowed country that is. Lula [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva] left office after eight years with 80 percent plus in the polls. India. You have a set of powers in the world today that, combined, match ours. Throw the European Union into that with its GDP which matches ours, or surpasses it in any given year, and you've got a balance of power developing in the world that we haven't seen in a long, long time. The second aspect of it is our own stupidity and incompetence and our own arrogance. As Rome did, we are frittering away a lot of treasure, which we should be husbanding, on the peripheries of our empire.

It's disastrous. So, that combination of self-inflicted disaster and other powers rising has caused us to be an ineffective power in the world in ways that feed on themselves. Every time we make a bad decision, we come and reinforce that decision rather than backing away from it and recalculating it and saying, "Whoa, we really don't have the power to do these sorts of things anymore." We've got to start using instruments other than our hard power, than our military power. Foremost amongst that I would call political-diplomatic power, but also cultural, economic, financial, informational and so forth. We don't have really smart plans, strategies. So we resort increasingly to the one thing that seems to work, temporarily at least—it hardly ever works in the long run—the military. That's how empires disappear. By around 2050, we are going to be a middling power. My students are always willing to accept that this all happened throughout history but not that it can happen here. "We're different, we're exceptional." If you've read [Thomas] Piketty's book [*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*] you know the imbalance of wealth in Europe is approaching 1789, just prior to the French Revolution, and for us, 1929. This is all going to come in my view to a train wreck well before the mid-century. Then our security and foreign policy is going to change dramatically. It's going to have to change.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Does Obama have a security and foreign policy vision?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Democrats since [George] McGovern lost their bona fides in national security and, by extension, in foreign policy. They regained it when Osama bin Laden died. That's a major political feat and largely that was done by this president. He can't surrender that, neither can Hillary. So that's why they go so far the other way. Hillary right now is making statements like she was a neoconservative hawk. They don't think they can show any ankle at all on any national security issue, and that keeps him making bellicose statements about Ukraine and Putin and about all of the mess in northern Iraq and Syria right now and God forbid may make us start entering the war in Syria. I think he understands intellectually how dangerous it is to continue the path that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney put us on, that is, hard power for almost every problem in the world. And yet, he can't back away from seeming to want to do that at least from time to time. He's sort of trapped in his own mess.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why did the United States invade Afghanistan in 2001?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I was getting out of a taxi on that beautiful morning, September 11, 2001. I heard on the radio in the taxi what just happened, and then saw the smoke rising from the Pentagon. It was a visceral reaction, a reaction anyone could've anticipated including Osama bin Laden, who did anticipate it. But it started

out being a very rational reaction. Powell's team at the State Department, the very day of 9/11, defied the order and came back into the State Department and began working on the strategy for a riposte. And that strategy was to take positive advantage of the solidarity. The whole world was on our side at that point. *Le Monde* ran a headline "We're All Americans Now." A million people marched in Tehran with candlelight. So Powell wanted to exploit that solidarity to get a lot of things done that needed to get done. Everything from a reasonable relationship with China to fixing the problems he saw in the transatlantic relationship, you name it. The strategy the secretary of state then gave to the president was one that covered the entire world. It had a little part called Afghanistan where hard power was going to be used, and used briefly, to eliminate Al-Qaeda and to bring the Taliban at least to a point where you could deal with it. Nine months to a year maybe. We stayed there how long? We're still there? So somewhere along the road, and it happened in the Bush administration, this strategy got turned around and instead of world solidarity and taking advantage of that to accomplish a lot that we needed to accomplish, we invaded Iraq and destroyed that global solidarity and found ourselves on the weak side of the power equation and stuck in two long, interminable wars. One thing people don't understand about the oil business, it's not about making money for Halliburton or making money for Royal Dutch Shell, it's about access and price. That's essentially what my thirty-one years in the military was about, protecting oil. Protecting our and our allies' and friends' access to it. I think that has to be the geostrategic backdrop. Afghanistan was a theater in this mess, a theater caused by a passion and a desire for revenge because of 9/11. It started out as a reaction to 9/11, an understandable reaction by the entire world. It morphed into being an occupation, a nation-building effort in a place that is the graveyard of empires, and became the over-commitment of American power in a region of the world that is not strategic to its interests, other than access to and price of black gold.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Was there a national security interest in the original invasion?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Not really, other than the fact that the United States, as Dick Cheney said, had to demonstrate to the world after 9/11 that it could still do things and still take people out if they hurt us. We knew Al-Qaeda had a base there. We helped them build it, we helped them train, we helped them fund themselves and we helped arm them. Just as we are doing now in Syria and they're coming now to Iraq and killing us with our weapons and our own training. We helped put all this together. During the attempt in Afghanistan to defeat the Soviets, we grew Al-Qaeda up, we helped it, we funded it. The Saudis were behind them. The Saudis are behind the Islamic State right now. The Saudis were behind 9/11 as much as anybody else. There are Saudis right now who are funding the Salafis and Wahhabis, the worst aspects of

the opposition to [Bashar] Al-Assad in Syria. We don't want to say our chief ally in the region is working against us, but they are.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Two reasons, I think. One, as Powell says, the Saudis always place their money on multiple horses, that's just Saudi practice. The second reason is they mistrust us badly after [Hosni] Mubarak. They were giving us powerful, constant advice to back Mubarak, we didn't. Mubarak collapsed and the Saudis think that's what we will do to them eventually. So they're looking for different power arrangements, they may even be talking privately, secretly to the Iranians. The power structure in the Gulf is shifting just as the power structure in the world is shifting.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *So the Afghan invasion was justified on the grounds of national security to destroy the Al-Qaeda infrastructure on the ground?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I think so. I think the smart strategy, and there were those who advocated this at the time, the smart strategy was to go in, pound the hell out of Al-Qaeda, try to get bin Laden and his leadership. If you didn't, so be it. You'd keep hunting. You'd do it mostly with special operation forces and the CIA, you would pound the Taliban a little bit and as you left you would tell them, "Do it again, and we'll do it again." That was a very formidable, persuasive, strategic brief and the president rejected it. I shouldn't say that. The vice president rejected it.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You were there—if the focus was going to now be put on Iraq, why didn't the administration see the logic of getting out of Afghanistan?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I would say at that point there probably weren't half a dozen people who knew we were going to Iraq. *Knew* we were going to Iraq. In summer of 2001, Ambassador Richard Haas, my boss at the State Department at the time, blew our socks off when he came in and said, "I just talked to Condi [National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice]. We're going to war with Iraq." This was before 9/11. We thought it was kind of nutty. Along comes 9/11, and by January 2002 and February 2002 I'm hearing all kinds of confirmation. There is no national security decision document codifying a decision by the president of the United States to go to war with Iraq. We just did it. We marched inexorably into war.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *But why didn't they get out of Afghanistan before going to Iraq?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** The lethargy of government. You're there, your Pentagon wants to stay there, your Pentagon feels like it can handle the economy-of-force mission it's given, you got soldiers engaged, you got marines engaged, these Taliban

are still fighting us. It's kind of nice when you get a little theater you can fight around in and get billions of dollars allocated to you.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Military-industrial complex?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Precisely. I would call it the military-industrial-terrorism complex. Counterterrorism has become the art of the day. You know what we're doing around the world in the name of counterterrorism? We're doing precisely what we did for some forty-plus years in the Cold War. We're arming, training and helping dictators to suppress their own people. But we're doing it under the guise of supporting counterterrorism efforts in that country. It's astonishing. It's like we picked up the template for the Cold War—Fulgencio Batista, name your dictator that we supported in the Cold War in the name of anti-communism—we took up that template, scratched out “anti-communism” and put counterterrorism, and we put it back down on the world again.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How has Obama handled Afghanistan?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Imagine you're the freshly elected president of the United States. In walks this be-medaled four-star general who is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who now by the DOD [Department of Defense] Reorganization Act of 1986 is the single [military] advisor to the president of the United States. Not the committee anymore, a single individual, and he walks into your office and says, “Mr. President, we got to stay. Not only do we have to stay, we have to surge, and here's all the expertise behind that.” You sort of hedge your bets, but you go ahead and follow the advice of the guy with all the medals and all the stars.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *The result?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Stasis. We haven't changed a damn thing. The Taliban are waiting us out. They know we're leaving. The most effective thing that's happened perhaps is the exchange of Bowe Bergdahl for the five “hard case” Taliban who were actually Taliban pre-U.S. attack. That was an attempt, I think, to seed the ground a little bit so that when we do leave, there can be some kind of political reconciliation. Whether or not it happens is anybody's guess. At least it was an attempt in the right direction to try to do something. Because we know we won't be able to leave sufficient force there to offset the Taliban for an extended period of time.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Should the policy have involved reconciliation from the beginning?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Yes. I think so. Maybe Mullah Omar and others like him are irreconcilable. Maybe you can't have any kind of political reconciliation with him. In that case, the best policy would've been to leave and let the civil war work



itself out, however long it takes. It's been going on for thirty years already. For us the best policy certainly; not the best policy for Afghanistan probably. One has to ask the questions about what we have done. I just read the report by a lieutenant colonel for [Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin] Dempsey, who went all over the country on behalf of the chairman, that essentially said, "There's no way we can succeed with the number of forces we're going to have left there." You read between the lines in this report and you see there's not a whole lot of hope that's going to be sustainable or ultimately victorious. The more damaging assessment was of the ANP [Afghan National Police] and ANA [Afghan National Army]. How much is it going to cost just to pay them in the numbers we have arrayed right now? Well, you know, 20-35 percent of the Afghan budget. That's untenable. Is Congress prepared to continue to appropriate that money and so forth? How many of these people do you think will go AWOL the moment we're gone; they are already going AWOL at an alarming rate. This is not a very pleasant report. This is a report that essentially says that the best we can do is hang on by our fingernails and maybe a 1975 in Saigon retreat won't be forthcoming.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Will history record that Afghanistan was an American defeat?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I don't see any way that Iraq and Afghanistan can be logged any other way. It is going to be two defeats.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What impact will that have? We saw repercussions for America's international stature and power after the fall of Saigon.*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** If we had good leadership, we'd use this opportunity to not just retrench, but to reassess our role in the world, reassess our power against that role. Then come up with a strategy and a way to execute that strategy, and a means to execute that strategy, that would be more fitting to our present position and our present power in the world and more accepting of the fact that, one, we're not an exceptional nation and two, we can't continue to keep frittering away our power at the edges of our empire. We simply can't. That would mean a shift away from a \$1.4-1.5 trillion national security budget every year. That's intelligence, now over \$100 billion. That's Homeland Security. That's Veterans Affairs. That's the nuclear weapons, the Department of Energy, and so on and so forth. We are going to have to shift a lot of that money from the hard power, the nukes, the Pentagon, toward the "150 Account" at State [for spending on global economic, diplomatic and humanitarian programs], the USAID [United States Agency for International Development] account, and so forth. Those things have to take place for us in the next ten, fifteen years from now to look around the world and say, "Hmm, we had a modicum of success, we've deemphasized the military instrument, we've reemphasized the diplomatic, political, economic, financial and cultural instruments, and we're using

them now with finesse, and we're getting along okay in the world and so are our allies." Do I think that's going to happen? Not on your life. No, I think we're going to continue to muddle and muddle and muddle, and put Band-Aids on problems and use the military. It's going to be a really difficult psychological experiment. How this nation of 300-plus million people, stretching for three thousand miles from ocean to ocean, figures out that it isn't exceptional, and that it's not any different than any other nation that tried to accrue an empire and protect it. That's going to be traumatic.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Has the United States defeated Al-Qaeda?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I think the answer is the answer that I read in an intelligence report recently, which I thought was very well done. "Yes. However." And the however is a pretty bad however. There are quite a few organizations out there who were basically oriented towards their own problems—that is to say, they wanted something in Algeria, they wanted something in Morocco, they wanted something in Mali, they wanted something in Indonesia, maybe Malaysia, and so forth—that have now seen what can be done to the empire. They have also discovered that there's money in the world to create what they never had before, what we talked about at the CIA immediately after 9/11: global capability. Bin Laden didn't create this, Al-Qaeda didn't create this. We did. With our irrational response to the attack on 9/11. We created the recruiting mechanism, the recruiting incentive and the warriors out there to flock to the banners of whomever, whether it's [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leader Abu Bakr] Al-Baghdadi, or whoever throws his banner up and seems to be successful a few minutes. Guantanamo continues to be a recruiting tool for them. The problem in Iraq is the Sunnis who Nouri Al-Maliki and his dictatorial political rule made essentially disbelieve the trust that [David] Petraeus built up in the awakening in 2007 and put on our side and to make Al-Maliki's ascendance to power possible. Now he's treated them so badly that they're back helping the Islamic State to try to overthrow his government. We did all of this and we continue to do it. We're just inept.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Is this worse than things before 9/11 in Afghanistan?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** That's an excellent question. If we have people like General Dempsey and people like my old friend of twenty-plus years [Defense Secretary] Chuck Hagel and people like John Kerry, if they keep painting them ten feet tall and keep deciding to do things that make them appear ten feet tall and giving them all kinds of capabilities they shouldn't have, whether it's rhetorical capability or real capability, yes is the answer to your question. Not because of their real capability—they don't have that capability, they drive around in Toyota pickup trucks with heavy machine guns and shoot people. They've proven the peshmerga were never the

warriors that everybody claimed they were. They've proven the Iraqi military was not worth a crap as long as Al-Maliki was the one in charge of it. If the Iraqi military wanted to fight, it could drive the Islamic State out of Iraq in a month. All of them and put them back in Syria, if it wanted to fight. They're not a formidable military force. Not anything like what Dempsey is talking about: "apocalyptic." Yes, it's a dangerous situation but it's not a dangerous situation because of the capability of these terrorists, it's because of what we do in response to them.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What's the solution to this?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** The solution to the particular situation in Iraq is that the Iraqis get their act together and kick these guys out of Iraq. They can do it in a month, but maybe with a little U.S. air power to help them.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *But ISIS is a transnational threat?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** If we start bombing them in Syria, what are we doing? Helping Al-Assad? What a mess we got ourselves into. They're shooting at the Kurds—at the peshmerga—with U.S. M-16s and U.S. Browning M2 heavy machine guns.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You've mentioned Guantanamo as a recruiting tool.*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Well, what we don't see in this country because we're blind and we don't want to see it is that it doesn't matter that we torture one and they slit the throat of four or five, and therefore they are ahead of us in bad deeds. What matters is how the other side perceives what we say and then what we do. That's a real disconnect. Whether they are part of the 1.3 billion Muslims around the world, and many of them are still trying to make up their minds whether to support these harder core groups or not. Or whether they're Europeans, or Brazilians or Russians or whatever, judging American foreign policy by our actions and not by our rhetoric. The more we make our actions differ dramatically from our rhetoric, the more they judge us as untrustworthy, as hypocrites, and the more radical elements of them flock to the banners of those who are killing us. We don't see that. Since 9/11, our rhetoric about human rights, international criminal justice, human dignity, women's rights, is utterly defied by our actions on the ground and other people see that.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Examples?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Guantanamo is a perfect example.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You have problems with Guantanamo on moral as well as political grounds?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I have them on efficacy grounds—it doesn't work. I have that from more than a dozen interrogators. And I have them on moral grounds, yes. It doesn't matter if it did work. If you say that you are a signatory to the Geneva Conventions and you spent half of your national life, actually since the Civil War, making sure your forces abide by those conventions, and refining those conventions, and now suddenly you throw them out the window?

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why does that become American policy?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Because the president was a neophyte and listened to his vice president. He signed the February 2002 memo [denying enemy combatants in Afghanistan rights under the Geneva Conventions] without even reading it at a luncheon with his vice president who told him, "Sign this Mr. President." A more salient question is why do 53 percent of the American people in polls still show that they would torture if they had to in a national emergency? It's because we are that kind of people. After all, we ethnically cleansed hundreds of Indian tribes from this country, so we are that kind of people. We've always been, and I would argue, and I'm an American, I would argue more so than most people in the world, attuned to violence. Just look at our country, look at the guns across the country. I'm a gun owner. I don't advocate the number of guns we've got in this country today. We're a very violent people, in many respects we're a very bloodthirsty people, especially when it comes to our prerogatives being trampled on or our lives being risked, however minutely. That's who we are.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Where do drones fit into this?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Wonderful. We kill them and they can't kill us. It's a wonderful technology. It's like nukes from 1945 to 1949, when Stalin tested his first one. "We have it, let's use it."

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What is the problem with that?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** One, we haven't developed the international law or even domestic law. Now police forces across this country are talking about arming drones. "Why pop the 'perp' later? Get him coming out of the door of the 7-11." That's an actual conversation in a county police force in the United States within the last six months. That's one problem. The second problem is we haven't developed the ethics around it. That is to say we're destroying some of our warriors. The latest count on post-traumatic stress is coming from drone operators, as one might imagine. The way it works with soldiers and marines, you got to have some reason for killing for the state. That reason has to be one that the lowest private can accept and live with. The third problem is that other countries, prominent amongst which is China, are developing

and arming drones. Anyone who thinks that any tactic, any technology that you use against someone else, isn't eventually going to be used against you, is smoking something. Wait till you see a Chinese Hellfire missile come down on Times Square. My son is in the air force. He's a drone guy now. They pulled him out of the cockpit and put him in a drone. I understand this from a perspective that others might not.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You describe a very dysfunctional system in the United States for making national security policy. How did this happen?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** We have become a massive bureaucracy that for all practical purposes looks like Louis XIV. When you become that bloated, that huge, that expensive, it becomes a very difficult place to make good decisions. We started that in 1945, when we became the new Rome. Institutionally we started it with the 1947 National Security Act that created the CIA, the National Security Council. The NSC was supposed to give visibility to national security decision-making. Not visibility to the American people, but to the overseers and others involved. It was supposed to make the president have to come clean from time to time about what he was thinking. What we did was build an institutional edifice upon which this bureaucracy could flourish. So now what we have is a true bureaucratic nightmare. Good decision-making in that bureaucratic nightmare is almost an impossibility. There are too many interests, moneyed interests. We have huge food, energy, pharmaceutical and other interests that are counter-productive to good decision-making because they bring incredible influence to bear on that decision-making. Why did Clinton want to expand NATO? So Lockheed Martin can sell missiles and airplanes and guns to a host of countries from Poland to Georgia. "Why are we expanding NATO?" I'm asking Powell. "This is crazy. Jim Baker told [Mikhail] Gorbachev we wouldn't go any farther east, why are we doing this to the Russians? They are a country of eleven times zones, they have nuclear weapons. I don't care if they're down and out right now. We should not be sticking it to them. George H.W. Bush said he was not going to exploit the end of the Cold War, why is Clinton doing it?" Frankly, I'm not sure we could decide our way out of the mess we got ourselves in because we can't make good decisions anymore. You have to have leadership, you have to have management, and an apparatus to be led and managed. We don't have that anymore.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You were involved in the ill-fated presentation that Secretary Powell gave to the UN on going to war in Iraq. How does that speak to this problem?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Perfect example. What Cheney did was capture the CIA. He influenced key members of the CIA including [George] Tenet to essentially give him the intelligence that was necessary to prove a case against Saddam Hussein.

Before Bush was even determined to be the president by the Supreme Court, Cheney was picking people for his network. Cheney designed the network. Cheney was a bureaucratic entrepreneur of the very first order. He knew the bureaucracy, he knew this machine I'm talking about, he knew how to isolate segments of it. He put his people throughout it. They were ruthless, they had a strategy, they had a leader, they had a management process and carried out their strategy. And they did it against the rest of the bureaucracy because the rest of the bureaucracy was just that, a bureaucracy. They forced their way through it and succeeded for several years. That's called tyranny in other places in history. The wresting of power for other than national interests, purposes and so forth, and using that power and abusing that power even—that is essentially what happened in my view. I watched it from up-close and personal.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *How did you get sucked into the Iraq presentation at the UN?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Powell walked through my door after we had had a fairly lengthy discussion about Iraq and slammed a forty-eight page document [on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction] down on my desk—slammed it—and said, “This is what I've got to give at the United Nations in six days and I want you to head the task force to get me ready.” The first thing I said was, “Not enough time. This is nonsense. Count me out.” Then I say, “Let me read the script.” It's a Chinese menu. It's everything we know, disconnected, not sourced like an intelligence document would be. I pick up the phone and call my wife, “I'm quitting, I'm leaving.” “No you can't do that and desert him now.” This wasn't because I disagreed with the approach or anything in there. It was because I thought the task he had just given me was impossible and I didn't want to fail or die of a heart attack. Then I became mired in, “I got to succeed.” We went out to Langley and didn't sleep for five days and five nights. The first thing I did was hand Tenet the script. About an hour into that and only two pages done of the forty-eight page script, I said, “Mr. Tenet, this isn't going to work. We can't possibly make this in the time that we have remaining.” I thought I was smart. I was stupid and playing right into their hands. Tenet goes, “The October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate, that's what we'll use.” We got the NIE out, put all the pages up. It was as bad as the script. Anyone reading it today would wonder how it ever got signed, especially on the aluminum tubes, and the mobile biological labs and the existing stockpiles of weapons. But we got caught up in it, just like one gets caught up in any massive bureaucratic effort like that.

I saw the whole presentation for the first time at the UN Security Council, sitting off to the side. I remember thinking afterwards, “Failure to disarm”—f---ing circumstantial evidence out the ass and none of it hangs worth a shit. I think to myself, “I'm going to submit my resignation as soon as I get back.” [Afterwards] people are sending in emails, cards, letters and telegrams saying, “I wasn't convinced but I am now.” Powell

started giving out awards. He comes in to me and says, “What do you want? You want a letter from me or an award or something like that?” I said, “I don’t want anything.” I don’t feel good about it. He disappears into his office, and maybe an hour later he comes in and hands me on secretary of state stationery a handwritten letter thanking me for chairing, honchoing, the task force. There aren’t too many handwritten letters from the secretary of state. I tear it into about twenty pieces and throw it into the garbage can. I take out my resignation letter and stare at it for about twenty minutes. Then put it back in the central drawer. Worst decision in my life was not to submit that letter and go public with everything I knew.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You’ve been very outspoken since leaving the government, something relatively rare in Washington.*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Edward Snowden proves that it may be rare, but can sometimes be devastating.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Has that been hard for you?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** Of course it was difficult. It’s difficult because I’m a military man and they don’t speak out, by and large. It’s against protocol for them to do so. And it’s difficult because of Powell, and it’s difficult because I love my country.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Why are you speaking out?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I will not subscribe to the theory, “My country right or wrong.” The issue that really fired me up is what I found out about Abu Ghraib. The secretary walked into my office and he said, “There are going to be some photographs coming out”—this is in April 2004—“and they’re going to be horrible, from a place called Abu Ghraib in Iraq. I want you to find out what happened, how we got there.” The Abu Ghraib scandal had nothing to do with the soldiers on the ground and everything to do with Dick Cheney and David Addington and the Office of Legal Counsel in the Justice Department and Donald Rumsfeld. For the first time in American history, the White House and its colleagues had actually ordered the armed forces of the United States and certainly the CIA to torture people. That did it. I decided to go public.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *What was the consequence of that for you personally?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** FBI searches of my quarters, tapping of my phone, reading of all my emails, and so on and so forth. I’m seventy years old, not a whole lot of courage involved in what I did, because I had no intention of ever coming back to government. I’ve been harassed and that sort of thing, but frankly, I think I’ve been protected by Powell. They think, whoever “they” are, that Powell still protects me,

and thus they don't want to make him angry because he knows where all the skeletons are hidden. I don't know that he does but I suspect that he does, at least some of them. They don't want to piss him off.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Have you made enemies you didn't really want to make?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** A few. I got a barrage of emails after an appearance I made on a TV show. My guess is that 95 percent of the emails, letters, telephone calls and so on have been, "Right on, brother," and they've been from the military, foreign service officers, Germans, French, Indonesians, Japanese, Koreans. Probably one of the most common comments I get is, "It's good to have someone who has been there, done it and who seems to be telling the truth as he sees it."

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *Does that have any positive effect on the system? Does it give Congress any kind of backbone to fix these kinds of things?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** On the latter part, the answer is no. I've been to see a lot of congressmen, other than one or two there is no audience for criticism unless you're going to make it specifically political, "You hate President Obama," that sort of thing. Long term, I think I'm educating a group of young Americans who will have a hell of a lot better understanding of what's happening to their country.

**CAIRO REVIEW:** *You mentioned Snowden—what impact do you think that has had?*

**LAWRENCE WILKERSON:** I think it has been more or less positive. I think there are more whistleblowers out there. I was of mixed emotion until I started reading some of the documents and I started understanding what his motivation was, I think. I think on balance what Snowden did was positive. It got the American people at least to a certain extent aware of things that were going on with their money and in their name. The NSA [National Security Agency] is just off the charts in terms of what it's doing. One of the things we found out was that if you correspond, or telephone, an overseas location, then everything you do after that is scraped up, vulnerable, put into the stockpile, assessed. Who doesn't talk or email overseas every day?