



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Regime Change: Promise and Peril, Part 1

by Stephen Kinzer

This article is a transcript of Stephen Kinzer's speech given on June 6, 2008, at The Future of Freedom Foundation's conference "[Restoring the Republic 2008: Foreign Policy and Civil Liberties](#)."

Thomas Jefferson is the author of the phrase that I take as my guiding principle, and it's the principle that has pushed me through all the books I've written. I actually had this up on my wall 20 years ago when I was a correspondent in Nicaragua, and I've followed it ever since. It's a line from the Declaration of Independence and it reflects my view. I don't consider myself a polemicist or an ideologue or a Bush basher, but I am reality-based. I'm fact-based. I like to deal with what's real, not with visionary fantasies of utopia, and in the Declaration of Independence it says, "Let facts be submitted to a candid world." That is all we are trying to do.

This is not a radical departure, the foreign policy that we are trying to promote. What we are trying to promote is actually the foreign policy that George Bush promised us in his first debate. If we're strong but humble they'll respect us. That's true, but what happened to that? It's the political process that Ron Paul talked about that sucks people into this Republican-Democratic combine, and that is the real difference on Capitol Hill. It's those in the large majority who are part of this Republican-Democratic group, and then there are the few outsiders. That's the real division, and I think the challenge for us is to make sure that those few outsiders don't remain a few.

We need to keep building up that group, and one of the ways I think we can do that is to show America that we now have an example going on every day in the Middle East of what our interventionist foreign policy brings. You don't have to look in the history books anymore. You don't even have to buy my books anymore. You can read it every day in the newspaper, and the tragic toll of this war is just the latest in a long series of episodes that have put us into a position so different from the America that our Founding Fathers imagined. When John Winthrop wrote, "We shall be as a city upon a hill and the eyes of all people are upon us," what he meant, as he

explained in his other writings, was, We're going to create a great system and a great country here. And then if other countries like some things that we're doing they can copy us.

That was what he meant, but at some point, somewhere in the nineteenth century, we abandoned that position and we decided that we're not just going to set an example. We're going to go out in the world and make everyone be like us. We decided that we'd found the magic key to prosperity and democracy and we were going to share that with everyone else. And not coincidentally, that kind of democracy that we envisioned meant the access of American corporations to the resources of the whole world on the terms that we decided were just for us. And a policy that used to be called the Open Door Policy, which I like to call the Kick in the Door Policy, was forcing ourselves on every country.

Now we've gone so far, to the point where in our last quadrennial defense review we have declared as the official policy of the United States that we are not going to tolerate even the beginnings of the rise of any country that could one day become a "peer" power, they call it. In other words, what we've told the world is we've decided that no other countries are allowed to try to increase their power.

Now if all the leaders of all the countries in the world read that and say, "Oh, I guess America doesn't want us to increase our power so we'll do it; we'll just do what they say," that would be wonderful. This is an example of the magic-wand theory of government, I like to call it, but that can't happen. In fact, countries logically want to increase their power, and that means they're automatically going to come in conflict with the United States. This doctrine is a recipe for constant conflict, constant war, constant intervention.

And a couple of weeks ago in Chicago I had a debate with a prominent neoconservative columnist and theorist who was a great promoter of the Iraq war and now wants to bomb Iran yesterday. During my opening statement, I thoughtlessly used a phrase that really got him going. I said, "The policy you guys are trying to follow is really the modern version of Trotskyism. It's constant revolution." And he took great umbrage at this. I hadn't really thought it through, but actually a lot of these neocons are ex-Trotskyites from their college days, so he got very nervous about that. So I said to him, "Okay, okay, excuse me please. I didn't mean to insult you. If you don't consider yourself a Trotskyite, what do you consider yourself? What historical tradition would you place yourself in?" And he said, "Well, how about a Wilsonian?" And I want to ask, "What's the difference?"

Now as you heard earlier, I've written a series of books about the history of American intervention. I wrote a book about how the U.S. overthrew the government of Guatemala in the '50s, and another book about how the U.S. overthrew the government of Iran. I've also written a book about Nicaragua that talks a lot about American intervention there. After each of those books, I've really felt satisfied that I had told the whole truth. People didn't know what had really happened in Guatemala, but I went out there and I ripped the veil of lies off and I told the whole

truth and showed everyone what really happened; and I felt very satisfied with myself, but that emotion never lasts long.

After a while I began to realize that I really hadn't told the whole story. There was one thing that was missing. I came to realize that if you want to understand American intervention abroad and all of these coups and overthrows and interventions that we've carried out, you cannot consider them as a series of distinct, unrelated episodes. You have to look at them as a continuum that stretches out over more than a hundred years, and that's what I did in my *Overthrow* book. During that process, writing that book, I began to see that there are certain patterns that reemerge over and over again.

The process of intervention

They have to do with, for example, why we do it. Why do we do it? Well, usually there is a three-part process. The first part is that some big corporation finds that the government in a country where it's operating is giving it problems. The government of Country X is giving our big corporation problems — they're taxing us, they're restricting us, they're nationalizing us, they're forcing us to obey labor laws — and then the head of that corporation will go to Washington and complain. That's phase one.

Then while the intervention planning is working its way through the foreign-policy process, the motivation suddenly changes; it morphs. We decide that we're actually intervening not for economic reasons, even though those are the only reasons why we're ever even talking about this country, but we're doing it for political or geostrategic reasons. We're doing it because the government of Country X is a threat. Now how do we know it's a threat? For one reason, because it's bothering this big American corporation. What more proof do you want? That means it's got to be anti-American, anti-capitalist, probably a tool of all of our enemies. But these countries in most cases are only trying to build the capitalist economies that they admire so much from us. What we want is to have a free capitalist system here but not allow anyone else in other countries to develop that. So there is the second phase, where the motivation morphs suddenly from an explicitly economic one to a so-called political one.

And then there is a third phase that happens after the intervention when it's time for our leaders to explain to us and to the world why we did it. And then you usually get a third reason that didn't even come up during the planning and execution of the operation, and that is we only did it to help them. Not only did we not seek anything for ourselves, but we actually sacrificed ourselves in order to bring something good to other people.

I think that the American people are slowly, perhaps because of the events of the last few years, beginning to cast some doubt on this, and we're beginning to see the real reasons for these, the real motivations, the fact that these interventions only serve a tiny piece of the American public. They don't serve the interests of America. They serve the interests of a small clique of

people who are making huge amounts of money from the outside world and see that the American military is prepared to serve as their private enforcing police force. That is the deal that has been made over generations between the private and public sector in Washington.

Now as we look around the world and see the forces that have shaped American interventionism and American foreign policy over the last half-century, I see three countries that have turned into obsessions for us. These obsessions have completely distorted our foreign policy and deeply shaped the errors that we've continued to make. They have totally shaken our psyche. The first of course is Cuba. It's kind of a laugh to look back now and see how pathetically meaningless Cuba is, but there was a time when we were told Cuba was this huge threat and Cuba was undermining American power all over the world. Cuba was inspiring the leftist revolutionaries all over Latin America; Castro communism was a great anti-American force in the world. So Cuba was one country that America became obsessed with and that caused America great damage.

The Vietnam intervention

Second, the huge overhang of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War's impact on American life cannot be overstated. Most of us are old enough to remember what a huge trauma that was for the United States, and it set in motion forces that are still shaping us today. The so-called Vietnam syndrome is very much a part of the American political psyche. What it means is we got beaten by a bunch of peasants wearing B.F. Goodrich sandals and we have to show the world that that can never happen again, so we're going to go out and fight more wars and win more wars. That Vietnam overhang has pushed us into one intervention after another.

The third is our current obsession, and that is Iran. We are now using Iran as the great demon of the world and the next place where we can demonstrate how much money we can spend on bombs and planes to destroy a country, and then how much more money we can give to Halliburton to rebuild all the stuff we just destroyed.

Now what do these three countries have in common: Cuba, Vietnam, Iran? They were all decisively set on the course that they went off on by American intervention. All the trouble that we suffered at the hands of those three countries is the result of our own intervention in their internal affairs. In 1954, the governments of Indochina and the governments of Britain, China, and the United States met at the Geneva Conference to decide what to do about Vietnam. An agreement was reached under which Vietnam would be divided for two years between 1954 and 1956, and at the end of 1956 there would be an election in the whole country; the winner of that election would then take over as the leader of a united Vietnam.

Just before that election was to be held, President Eisenhower made a statement in which he said that probably 80 percent of the people of Vietnam would vote for Ho Chi Minh as their president. That was the beginning of our decision to abandon and override the Geneva Accords.

We decided to ignore that, and that was the beginning of our involvement in Vietnam. There was a treaty that was going to produce a calm, peaceful result, but we decided not to obey that because we thought we could get a better result. Let's have America go in. We'll fix everything.

Now why did we decide we couldn't tolerate Ho Chi Minh as president of the united Vietnam? It's because we thought if we allow this election to go forward you're going to have a united Vietnam under a communist leadership. Instead of accepting that, we went to war, we lost 58,000 American lives, something like a million Vietnamese were killed, a country was ravaged, and our country was psychologically disoriented forever. And what was the end result? A united Vietnam under a communist leadership, the same result that we could have had in 1956 without any bloodshed.

And the saddest or most pathetic aspect of this is that having a united communist Vietnam actually isn't so bad for us. We're getting along with them. Now, we don't particularly like them, but we're trading with them; we have an embassy. It's not so bad. The world didn't end, but we had a sense that communist rule over this one country was going to be devastating for us. And I remember — I'm old enough to remember, as most of you are — the reason why we were told we had to stay in Vietnam, and that's because it's not just about Vietnam. China is behind all this. China's the big expansionist power, and Vietnam is just their little cat's paw.

Like most other Americans, I didn't know anything about East Asia and that sounded like a reasonable theory. I still remember my shock when just two years after the end of the Vietnam War, China and Vietnam went to war. I thought, wait a minute; I thought they were — one was the cat's paw of the other. Then I started reading and found out they'd been bitter enemies for a thousand years, but facts were never presented to a candid public because our leaders were not candid with us.

*Stephen Kinzer is an author and newspaper reporter. He is a veteran **New York Times** correspondent who has reported from more than 50 countries on five continents. His books include **Overthrow** and **All the Shah's Men**.*

This article was originally published in the December 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.