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U.S. Foreign Policy Elites, The Masters of Disaster

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My good friend and Nobel Laureate, the late Friedrich Hayek wrote many path-breaking, influential books. One was published in 1988, when Hayek was 89 years of age. In [The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism](#), Hayek argued that man's "fatal conceit" is the presumption that he "is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes." This conceit is behind every central planner's scheme to make the world a better place to live and prosper in. Even though the USSR, China, and a long string of great centrally planned economies have collapsed, the fatal conceit of central planning remains alive and well.

The central planner's conceit resides in the White House in the person of President Trump and his cabinet. The same defect also resides on Capitol Hill in the person of Senator Bernie Sanders, and virtually all his colleagues in both Houses and on both sides of the aisle. This central planning mentality is not restricted to economic policy, which was Hayek's sphere of focus.

Indeed, the fatal conceit haunts the halls of foreign policy, too. That is why the U.S. has engaged in so many foreign policy interventions and why the world is strewn with the wreckage. To get a better handle on how Hayek's fatal conceit has worked when it comes to U.S. foreign intervention, there is no better read than the scholarly works of [Ted Galen Carpenter](#), my colleague at the Cato Institute. Carpenter's new book, [Gullible Superpower: U.S. Support for Bogus Foreign Democratic Movements](#), is a real eye-opener. Gullible Superpower contains ten chapters; they are, in fact, ten case studies of fatal conceit.

Chapter One: The Nicaraguan Contras: The "Moral Equal of America's Founders"?

The United States support for Nicaraguan Contras was part of a Reagan Doctrine of providing aid to any "Tom, Dick, or Harry" who claimed to be an anti-Soviet insurgent. Carpenter believes Reagan had a "blind spot regarding the Contras" and never considered that the press might be right in failing to see the Contras' metaphorical "white hats." Reagan genuinely believed the Contras were "freedom fighters" and seemed unaware of what was obvious to everyone else: The Contras' forces were stacked with Somoza's National Guard officers, who cared more about re-gaining power than instituting democracy. Of note is the fact that Elliott Abrams, President Trump's Special Representative for Venezuela, was part of the cabal responsible for the Iran-Contra Affair that threatened to bring President Reagan down, and certainly left a big stain on Reagan's many achievements.

Chapter Two: The Afghan Mujahideen: Holy Warriors, not Freedom Fighters

Bipartisan backing in the U.S. for Afghan insurgents, the mujahideen, saw Afghanistan as the clear victim of Soviet aggression. In hindsight, the U.S. backing might have had less to do with supporting freedom fighters and more to do with concerns about being cut off from oil in the Persian Gulf. In 1980s, the U.S. forked over \$2 billion to the mujahideen. That sum was more

than the combined funding for all other CIA covert operations in the 1980s. Carpenter writes, “U.S. officials’ glamorization of the mujahideen as freedom fighters who would bring reasonably tolerant secularism to Afghanistan is an example of Washington seeing what they wished to see, not what was actually there.” As the U.S. prepares to fold its tent and cut its losses, one finds it hard to fathom the magnitude of the fatal conceit that afflicted the elites in Washington who engineered the Afghan disaster.

Before closing Carpenter’s chapter on Afghanistan, I am reminded of another good friend Nobelist Robert Mundell’s contribution to my understanding of the country. Mundell called it the “Afghan Effect.” Following the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, the United States imposed a grain embargo on the Soviets in January 1980. With that, American farmers were prohibited from selling grain to the Soviets who had a huge grain deficit. President Jimmy Carter, on the ill-conceived advice of his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, weaponized grain.

In response, the Soviets looked for an escape. They found one in Argentina. Indeed, the Argentines were delighted to cut a deal with the Soviets. The Argentine farmers sold large quantities of grain, the Soviets obtained a good price, and American farmers were left out to dry. The icing on the cake (read: Bob Mundell’s Afghan Effect) was the fact that the Argentine military junta was handed an enormous benefit on a silver platter. As it turns out, Brzezinski suffered from the fatal conceit big time.

Chapter Three: Jonas Savimbi: The Reagan Doctrine’s Biggest Embarrassment

In Angola, Carpenter believes the United States is guilty of the “embrace of an insurgent faction despite a weak to nonexistent security rationale and despite evidence that its principal leader was a psychopathic charlatan [Jonas Savimbi].” Carpenter’s synopsis: “Embracing fraudulent democrats like Jonas Savimbi did little to enhance America’s interest or values; to the contrary, it tarnished America’s image as an advocate of democracy and human rights.”

Chapter Four: Washington Empowers a Ruthless Kosovo Faction

“Washington’s wishful thinking about the nature of so-called freedom-fighters did not disappear with the end of the Cold War,” a fact demonstrated by “the Clinton administration’s military intervention in the Balkans during the mid- and late-1990s.” Carpenter believes America “embraced a violent and morally dubious insurgent force, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)” due to an oversimplification of complicated ethnic and geopolitical struggles. The United States continued to support the KLA even after “Robert Geldard, President Clinton’s special envoy to the Balkans, stated in early 1998 that the KLA ‘is without any question a terrorist group’.” This was coupled with significant evidence that the KLA had ties to al Qaeda. After Kosovo gained independence, thanks to NATO air strikes, the “KLA proceeded to wage campaigns of terror and intimidation against non-Albanian inhabitants,” a prime example of the unforeseen negative consequences of American aid to a foreign faction the United States failed to research before funding.

Chapter Five: Color Revolutions Produce Bleak Outcomes

“Color Revolutions” is an umbrella term for the movements that took place in “diverse countries ranging from Ukraine to Lebanon to Kyrgyzstan (now the Kyrgyz Republic).” “The West’s pervasive hope that such movements would produce stable, lasting democratic governments is puzzling in retrospect, none of the countries had a significant heritage of political pluralism or

strong civic societies,” Carpenter muses. He goes on to regale the details of Georgia’s Rose Revolution, which he aptly describes as “a template for disillusionment,” as well as Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. To Carpenter, it was clear: “the gap between the democratic models that George Bush and other Western admirers of the Color Revolutions held up for display when promoting Georgia and Ukraine and those nations’ actual democratic performance is massive.” Carpenter concludes that the Color Revolutions were “a sad commentary on the wisdom and ethics of U.S. foreign policy.”

Chapter Six: The Iraqi National Congress Cons Washington into War

The United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be credited to a group of well-known neoconservative interventionists, who urged U.S. leadership to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein. The Iraq War was “a textbook example of how ambitious foreign activists can manipulate well-meaning American leaders.” Carpenter chastises policymakers during the Clinton and Bush administrations who, in his words, “failed to do their due diligence.” Carpenter notes, one former CIA counterterrorism specialist laments, “with Chalabi [founder of INC], we paid to fool ourselves. It’s horrible. In other times, it might be funny. But a lot of people are dead as a result of this. It is reprehensible.”

Chapter Seven: More Suspect Freedom Fighters: Iran’s MEK

In this chapter, Carpenter moves to an issue still flanking American political leaders. In Iran, the People’s Mujahideen (MEK) had little domestic support and equally meager demonstrated respect for democratic values and human rights. “The MEK is guilty of numerous terrorist acts, and until February 2012, the United States government formally listed it as a terrorist organization.” Carpenter’s chapter outlines the MEK’s troubling past and their ever-growing “romance” with the United States. He ends with a warning: “Trump should avoid the blunders of other administrations that backed supposedly democratic foreign groups who then turned out to be nothing of the sort.”

Chapter Eight: The Obama Administration’s Calamitous Crusade in Libya

The 2011 military intervention in Libya was a wrongheaded experiment to test the Obama era “responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine.” It is clear to the naked eye that the results to date have been disastrous. As Carpenter concludes, “Among the various parliaments, cabinets, and militias competing for power in post-Qaddafi Libya, their one common feature is a lack of values. Instead, they display a pronounced trend towards various types of authoritarianism, often with distinctly Islamist overlay.”

Chapter Nine: Washington Backs Ukraine’s Murky Maiden Revolution

Carpenter writes, “one could certainly argue that supporting efforts to remove Yanukovich from office before the expiration of his term was ill-advised. Although Western officials were pleased that their clients ousted a pro-Russian president and brought Kiev into the West’s orbit, achieving these goals must be measured against disturbing costs.” The Washington backed Maiden Revolution fell somewhere between a “fascist coup and democratic uprising.” It appeared to be a bloodless revolution, but it ultimately led to the annexation of the Crimea, an ongoing border war, and a country buried in corruption.

Chapter Ten: Into the Syrian Maelstrom and Another Frustrating Search for Elusive Freedom Fighters

In his final chapter, Carpenter recounts the United States' involvement in Syria. He believes "U.S. officials were operating in their own fantasy world" when they insisted on intervening in what would become a vicious Syrian civil war. Carpenter concludes, "Washington's regime-change efforts have destabilized already fragile states and caused massive refugee flows and other manifestations of acute human suffering... Unfortunately, few signs indicate that the Syrian debacle will be the last such episode for the United States."

Carpenter's *Gullible Superpower* shows that the U.S. foreign policy elites suffer from Hayek's fatal conceit, rendering them the masters of disaster.

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