

Gaslighting Nobody, The Blob Struggles For Primacy

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Ten years ago, “restraint” was considered code for “isolationism” and its purveyors were treated with nominal attention and barely disguised condescension. Today, agitated national security elites who can no longer ignore the restrainers—and the positive attention they’re getting—are trying to cut them down to size.

We saw this recently when Peter Feaver, Hal Brands, and William Imboden, who all made their mark promoting George W. Bush’s war policies after 9/11, published “In Defense of the Blob” for *Foreign Affairs* in April. My own pushback received Drezner (he of the Twitter fame): “For one thing, her essay repeatedly contradicts itself. The Blob is an exclusive cabal, and yet Vlahos also says it’s on the wane.”

One can be *both*, Professor. As they say, Rome didn’t fall in a day. What we are witnessing are individuals and institutions sensing existential vulnerabilities. The restrainers have found a nerve and the Blob is feeling the pinch. Now it’s starting to throw its tremendous girth around.

The latest example is from Michael J. Mazarr, senior political scientist at the Rand Corporation, which since 1948 has essentially provided the brainpower behind the Military Industrial Congressional Complex. Mazarr published this voluminous warrant against restrainers in the most recent issue of *The Washington Quarterly*, which is run by the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University. Its editorial board reeks of the conventional internationalist thinking that has prevailed over the last 70 years.

In “Rethinking Restraint: Why It Fails in Practice,” Mazarr insists that the critics have it all wrong: “American primacy” is way overstated and the U.S. has been more moderate in military interventions than it’s given credit for. Moreover, he says, the restrainers divide current “US strategy into two broad caricatures—primacy or liberal hegemony at one extreme, and restraint at the other. ...Such an approach overlooks a huge, untidy middle ground where the views of most US national security officials reside and where most US policies operate.”

There is much to unpack in his nearly 10,000-word brief, and much to counter it. For example, Monica Duffy Toft has done incredible research into the history of U.S. interventions over the last 70 years, in part studying the number of times we've used force in response to incidents of foreign aggression. While the United States engaged in 46 military interventions from 1948 to 1991, from 1992 to 2017, that number increased fourfold to 188 (chart below). Kind of calls Mazarr's "frequent impulse to moderation" theory into question.

But I would like to zero in on the most infuriating charge, which mimics Drezner, Brands, Feaver, et al.: that the idea of a powerful, largely homogeneous foreign policy establishment dominating top levels of government, think tanks, media, and academia is really all in our heads. It's not real.

This weak attempt to gaslight the rest of us is an insult to George Cukor's 1944 Hollywood classic. It's unworthy. In the section "There is No Sinister National Security Elite," Mazarr turns to Stephen Walt (who wrote an entire book on the self-destructive Blob) and Andrew Bacevich (who has written that the ideology of American exceptionalism and primacy "serves the interests of those who created the national security state and those who still benefit from its continued existence"). This elite, both men charge, enjoy "status, influence, and considerable wealth" in return for supporting the consensus.

To this Mazarr contends, "Apart from collections of anecdotes, those convinced of the existence of such a homogenous elite offer no objective evidence—such as surveys, interviews, or comprehensive literature reviews—to back up these sweeping claims."

Then failing to offer his own evidence, he argues:

on specific policy questions—whether to go to war or conduct a humanitarian intervention, or what policy to adopt toward China or Cuba or Russia or Iran—debates in Washington are deep, intense, and sometimes bitter. To take just a single example from recent history, the Obama administration's decision to endorse a surge in Afghanistan came only after extended deliberation and soul-searching, and it included a major, and highly controversial, element of restraint—a very public deadline to begin a graduated withdrawal.

Let's go back to 2009, because some of us actually remember these "deep, intense, and sometimes bitter" times.

First, the only "bitter debates" were between the military, which wanted to "surge" 40,000 troops into Afghanistan in the first year of Obama's presidency, and the president, who had promised to bring the war to an end. After months, Obama "compromised" when in December 2009, he announced a plan for 30,000 new troops (which would bring the then-current number to 98,000) and a timetable for withdrawal of 18 months hence, which really pleased *no one*, not even the outlier restrainers, like Mazarr suggests.

In fact, restrainers knew the timetable was bunk, and it was. In 2011, there were still 100,000 troops on the ground. In fact, it didn't get down to pre-2009 levels until December 2013.

But let it be clear: the only contention in December 2009 was over the timetable (the hawks at the Heritage Foundation and AEI wanted an open-ended commitment) and whether the president should have been more deferential to his generals (General Stanley McCrystal had just been installed as commander in Afghanistan and the mainstream media was fawning). Otherwise, every major think tank in town and national security pundit blasted out press releases and op-eds supporting the president's strategy with varying degrees of enthusiasm. None, aside from the usual *TAC* suspects, raised a serious note against it.

Examples:

John “Eating Soup with a Knife” Nagl, Center for a New American Security: “This strategy will protect the Afghan population with international forces now and build Afghan security forces that in time will allow an American drawdown—leaving behind a more capable Afghan government and a more secure region which no longer threatens the United States and our allies.” Each of the CNAS fellows on this press release offer a variation on the same theme, with some more energetic than others. Ditto for this one from The Council on Foreign Relations.

Vanda Felhab-Brown, Brookings Institution: “there would have been no chance to turn the security situation around, take the momentum away from the Taliban, and hence, enable economic development and improvements in governance and rule of law, without the surge.”

David Ignatius, The Washington Post: “Obama has made what I think is the right decision: The only viable ‘exit strategy’ from Afghanistan is one that starts with a bang—by adding 30,000 more U.S. troops to secure the major population centers, so that control can be transferred to the Afghan army and police.”

Ahead of Obama’s decision (during the “bitter debate”), the Brookings Institution’s Michael O’Hanlon, a fixture on The Washington Post op-ed pages and cable news shows—was pushing for the maximum: “President Barack Obama should approve the full buildup his commanders are requesting, even as he also steels the nation for a difficult and uncertain mission ahead.”

Meanwhile, all of the so-called progressive national security groups, including the Center for American Progress, Third Way, and the National Security Network, heralded Obama’s plan as “a smarter, stronger strategy that stated clear objectives and is based on American security interests, namely preventing terrorist attacks.”

“Counterintuitively,” they said in a joint statement, “sending more troops will allow us to get out more quickly.”

Anthony Cordesman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has always been a thoughtful skeptic, but he never fails to offer a hedge on whatever new plan comes down the pike. Here he is on Obama’s surge, exemplifying how difficult it was/is for the establishment to just call a failure a failure:

The strategy President Obama has set forth in broad terms can still win *if* the Afghan government and Afghan forces become more effective, *if* NATO/ISAF national contingents provide more unity of effort, *if* aid donors focus on the fact that development cannot succeed unless the Afghan people see real progress where they live in the near future, and *if* the United States shows strategic patience and finally provides the resources necessary to win.

That's a lot of "ifs," but they provide amazing cover for those who don't want to admit the cause is lost—or can't—because their work depends on giving the military and State Department something to do. This is what happens when your think tank relies on government contracts and grants and arms industry money. According to *The New York Times*, major defense contractors Lockheed Martin and Boeing gave some \$77 million to a dozen think tanks between 2010 and 2016.

They aren't getting the money to advocate that troops, contractors, NGO's, and diplomats come home and stay put. Money and agenda underwrites *who* is heading the think tanks, *who* speaks for the national security programs, and *who* populates conferences, book launches, speeches, and television appearances. Mazarr doesn't think this can be quantified but it's rather easy. Google "2009 Afghanistan conference/panel/speakers" and plenty of events come up. Pick any year, the results are predictable.

Here's a Brookings Panel in August 2009, assessing the Afghanistan election, including Anthony Cordesman, Kimberly Kagan, and Michael O'Hanlon. Not a lot of "diversity" there. Here's a taste of the 2009 annual CNAS conference, which featured the usual suspects, including David Petraeus, Ambassador Nicholas Burns, and 1,400 people in attendance. Aside from Andrew "Skunk at the Garden Party" Bacevich, there was little to distinguish one world view from another among the panelists. (CNAS was originally founded in support of Hillary Clinton's 2008 campaign; she spoke at the inaugural conference in 2007. Former president Michele Flournoy later landed in the E-Ring of the Pentagon.) Meanwhile, here's a Hudson Institute tribute to David Petraeus, attended by Scooter Libby, and a December 2009 Atlantic Council panel with—you guessed it—Kimberly Kagan and two military representatives thrown in to pump up McChrystal and NATO and staying the course.

On top of it all, these events and their people never failed to get the attention of the major corporate media, which just loved the idea of warrior-monk generals "liberating" Afghanistan through a "government in a box" counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. Honestly, thank goodness for Cato, which before the new Quincy Institute, was the only think tank to feature COIN critics like Colonel Gian Gentile, and not just as foils. The Center for the National Interest also harbored skeptics of the president's strategy. But they were outnumbered too.

This is what I want to convey. Mazarr boasts there is a galaxy of opinion today over U.S. policy in Iran, China, Russia, NATO. I would argue there is a narrow spectrum of technical and ideological disagreement in all these cases, but nowhere was it more

important to have strong, competing voices than during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and there was none of that in any realistic sense of the word.

I challenge him and the others to take down the straw men and own the ecosystem to which they owe their success in Washington (Mazarr just published a piece called “Toward a New Theory of Power Projection” for goodness sake). Stop trying to pretend what is there isn't. Realists and restrainers are happy to debate the merits of our different approaches, but gaslighting is for nefarious lovers and we're no Ingrid Bergman.