

*Distinguished Lecturer James O. Goldsborough presented "Hard Times" to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at UCSD on February 26, 2007.*

*He comments: "It was very a stimulating meeting, one showing that the apathy that infects so many does not yet infect us all. Groups like that, wherever they are, provide hope we can pull out of this tailspin."*

## HARD TIMES

James O. Goldsborough

These are hard times. I'm not sure enough of us are aware of the calamity we're in. Yes, the November election showed that marginally more people understand the situation than understood it two years ago, when George W. Bush was re-elected. But there are still a great many people who don't understand, or who just don't care.

And bad as it is, it can get worse. The occupation and suppression of a nation like Iraq contains the seeds of catastrophe. And this is the war; I would remind you, that Bush and his neo-conservatives said would spread democracy across the Middle East and make America safer. It has done the exact opposite. Has any presidency been so disastrously wrong in stewarding our national interests, which is the job of government?

In this situation, to have had 40 percent of the electorate stay home last November can only be taken as a sign of national amnesia, a self-protecting flight from reality. To have a third of the electorate say it still approves of the job Bush is doing and approves of his war, is a sign not of amnesia, but of dementia.

Let's be clear what I'm talking about. Nine months after taking office, this administration, seizing on the 9/11 attacks, invaded Afghanistan to punish those responsible. The nation and the world cheered. The detestable Taliban, which gave cover to al Qaeda, was chased from power.

Then, perverting the national consensus – the WORLD consensus – that grew out of 9/11, Bush launched a second war, this one having nothing to do with 9/11.

This second war, Bush's war, was the pet project of the band of neo-conservatives brought into the administration. These people – nearly all of them, like Bush and Cheney themselves, people who had never served in the military – had been itching for war as only people who have never served can itch. For years, they'd dreamt, should they get the chance, of showing that the son was a better man than the father. The father – and those around him, Baker, Scowcroft, Powell – had refused to invade Baghdad, refused to make America, as Powell put it, borrowing language from the Romans, "proconsuls on the Tigris." The neo-cons set out to prove them wrong.

Bush, Cheney and the neo-cons sold their war to the nation with lie after lie, linking it, falsely, to 9/11, to WMD, to al Qaeda, to a threat to America, to an axis of evil, to oil prices, to mushroom clouds. With their lies,

they seduced Congress, the people and the media just as surely as Goebbels' lies had seduced the Germans. They used 9/11 to scare Americans just as Hitler had used the Reichstag fire to scare Germans. "We don't want the smoking gun to become a mushroom cloud," said Condoleezza Rice, in an unforgivable flight of hyperbole. But there wasn't any smoking gun in Iraq. Nothing.

Later we learned just how determined these people had been to have their war. We learned they began planning to invade Iraq the first weekend after 9/11. The weapons inspections, negotiations, consultation with Congress, U.N. votes, Powell's U.N. testimony – all of it was a fraud, a façade, a charade to dupe Americans and the world.

It was an easy sell to a gullible and intellectually lazy American public. Some of us knew this war was doomed, but most Americans applauded. Put little flags on their cars. Weren't we attacking the, "axis of evil?" "How can you argue with the commander-in-chief," said the public? He has all the information. Iraq is in league with al Qaeda, is buying uranium from Niger for bombs, and aluminum tubes for uranium enrichment.

What a con job. Only one-third of the House voted against Bush's war, and only 23 senators. Not one senator running for president today, who was in the Senate in 2002, opposed Bush – but how many wish they had? You don't think Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, Chris Dodd, John Edwards – wishes he had voted, no? Barack Obama voted no as an Illinois state senator. "Even a successful war against Iraq," said Obama in 2002, "will require an occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences." It's that prescient Chicago speech, when the other Democratic senators now running for president were voting for Bush that puts Obama in the catbird seat today.

Worse, far worse in my view, no major newspaper opposed Bush's war or challenged the lies he told to launch it. Congress has been seduced before – remember the Tonkin Gulf Resolution? We should always be suspicious of politicians, too many of whom, through history, have shown readiness to put politics and party ahead of country.

But the press! The entire daily American press. How was it possible? The press is not unpopular for nothing. Its job is to be unpopular, to stay OFF bandwagons, to be skeptics, critics, contrarians, tireless investigators searching for the truth, willing to speak up, speak the truth to power. You wouldn't know that if you've lived in this town too long, but that's the way it's supposed to be.

I'm speaking of the press – not of the MEDIA. Not of the vast rightwing cable TV-radio talk show conspiracy media – Murdoch, Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Hannity, Fox News and other entertainers. But the daily press!

This time the watchdog just rolled over on its fuzzy back, exposed its soft underbelly and let this band of incompetents lead the nation to the calamity it now faces, with no clue how to end it.

Yes, a few columnists here and there spoke out, but not one editorial page of the nation's top 50 newspapers opposed Bush's war. They swallowed the lies and became cheerleaders. It was 1914 all over again, nations

hurrahing as they marched off to war, flags waving, drums rolling. And four years later 20 million were dead in a war that no one could quite remember the reasons for: So easy to start a war; so hard to end one.

A word about newspapers:

Today, a great many papers, like a great many senators, wonder how they could have been so wrong. They also wonder why circulation is falling. Could there be a connection? No, newspapers say, it's the Internet.

But I say it's because newspapers have forgotten their job. They've forgotten that they're a public trust. They've come to believe their job – like that of any business – is to make money. Anything under 20 percent return, and stockholders – or family members – won't be happy.

But if newspapers are like any other business; if they're no longer a watchdog, a public trust looking into the lies of politicians and looking out for the good of the nation, who cares if they go extinct?

A few years ago the *L.A. Times* was heading for 1.5 million circulation; today it sells half that, and is on the block. A few years ago the *Union-Tribune* was heading for 400,000 circulations; today it sells 300,000, and is a shell of what it was. Population grows. Newspapers sink. They've abandoned the field to cable-TV and talk radio. When their big moment came three years ago, they blew it. Had one newspaper stood against Bush three years ago, that paper would be like Barack Obama today: sitting in the catbird seat.

What's happening to the press is dangerous for the nation. Six months after the war began, I wrote a column about a study done at the University of Maryland about public misconceptions on Iraq, misperceptions involving Iraq's alleged links to 9/11, its alleged possession of WMD and worldwide support for the war.

The study analyzed a series of national polls, asking respondents' about their primary source of news. It then correlated the misperceptions with the news source.

Among people whose primary source of news was the printed press, 47 percent held at least one of the misperceptions.

Among people whose primary source was network news, 62 percent held at least one of the misperceptions.

Among people whose primary source was Fox News, 80 percent held at least one of the misperceptions.

In this calamity the nation faces, our institutions failed us. There have been no checks and balances on this president. Cheney's goal of enhancing executive power at the expense of all countervailing power was too easily achieved. Yes, it took lies to do it, but the lies had to be believed.

It's easy to say today – as Clinton, Edwards, Biden and Dodd say – that they were lied to. But 23 senators didn't buy the lies; and a third of the House. Barack Obama didn't buy the lies. It's easy to say today – as many of those newspapers say – we were lied to. But some of us didn't believe the lies. Why would so many newspaper columnists have opposed Bush's war, when all the editorial pages supported it?

The mood of the nation is sour, but not as sour as it should be. Some say we don't care about Bush's war because there's no draft. Students aren't protesting aren't even paying much attention because students aren't fighting Bush's war. And the parents of those students don't care because their children aren't the ones being sent off to die – as in Vietnam.

It's not the elites who are fighting Bush's war. Perhaps you saw recent news about how the military has lowered its moral standards to fight Bush's war. Testing standards are lower and more school dropouts are accepted. And since the war began, more than 125,000 people with criminal histories have joined up. How easy will it be, one wonders, for those people to reintegrate into civilian society after Iraq?

Many Americans are indifferent because the war doesn't touch them directly, as Vietnam did. But this war is worse than Vietnam because it is a private, personal, illegal, war of choice. It meets no test of [a] just war. It's not a war of last resort, not defensive, not proportional, and it kills civilians, lots of civilians. It touches us all because America's reputation is at stake. This great land of ours, founded on the highest principles, has become, under Bush, a place of malevolence. It will take many years to restore us to our historic place; to where other nations look upon us again, and are inspired, in the words of John Quincy Adams, "by our good name and our good example."

Few of Bush's neo-con supporters are ready to admit their war was a mistake. They see the carnage we all see – they're not blind – but they say, it wasn't the war that was wrong, it was a "failure of leadership" and "errors of execution." It was the planners' fault, or the military's fault, or the CIA's fault, or Rumsfeld's fault. We weren't wrong, they say. How were we to know Bush would botch the war?

That makes them twice wrong: Today's disaster isn't the planners' fault, or the military's fault, or Rumsfeld's. The mistake was the invasion itself; the war itself: The arrogant attempt to repudiate America's "good name and example," and defy the lessons of history.

Hans Morganthau was one of the great political scientists, father of the U.S. realist school of international relations. In 1965, when public opinion still strongly supported the Vietnam War, Morganthau opposed it. He and Walter Lippmann, alone among our most influential opinion makers, were the earliest critics of what they saw as an arrogant colonial adventure, a misuse of power doomed to fail.

A refugee from Nazi Germany, Morganthau was no pacifist. His uniqueness was in the development of scientific tools of analysis for international affairs. Drawing on balance of power relationships, national interest and the lessons of history, his models could help guide statesmen, he believed, keep them from blundering into wars, protect them from the errors that throughout history have destroyed peoples and ruined nations.

In 1965, Morganthau looked at Vietnam and pronounced it un-winnable. Defeat, he said, would result not from "failures of leadership" or "errors of execution", but from "false assumptions and dubious principles." To believe a great power could impose its military will on a nation like Vietnam, he said, was a failure of analysis. Look what happened to the FRENCH in Vietnam. Look at Algeria. The colonial era was over.

He was savagely attacked. In a famous article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled: “American Intellectuals and Foreign Policy,” Morgenthau was accused of “denouncing, mocking and vilifying” our government. “The activity of such people,” said the author, is “singularly unhelpful.” Get on the bandwagon.

That article is ironic today not just for being wrong-headed, but because the author’s name was Kristol, Irving Kristol, a man popularly known as the father of neo-conservatism. Forty years later, his son, William, supported as editor of a money-losing, neo-con magazine called the *Weekly Standard*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, is the leading cheerleader for Bush’s war. In 40 years, the Kristol family has learned nothing. They are imperialists come two centuries too late. Or even one century. The great wars of the past century were imperial wars. And look how they ended. And at what happened to the nations that started them.

What is to be done about the Bush calamity?

First, we must guard against trusting the politicians. Bush is no more likely to admit and correct his mistakes than were Johnson and Nixon. Politicians are like stock market speculators, doubling up, throwing good money after bad. But you don’t get well in the market that way. You get well by cutting your losses.

If Bush is bad, Cheney is worse, a Rasputin-like influence on Bush, the czarina. If we needed more evidence about this perverse human being, the Libby trial provided it. Before the war, Cheney was the most egregious of the liars, insisting despite all evidence that Iraq was linked to 9/11. After Abu Ghraib, he defended torture, including water-boarding. He has been the most vicious in accusing war opponents of disloyalty and asserting we are “winning” in Iraq, whatever that means. Last week he said that Britain’s further reduction of forces in Iraq, at the very time Bush is sending more forces, was a good sign. He takes us for ignorant fools.

-----

History is to the nation as memory is to the individual, so let us go back a moment. Anyone grounded in history knew this war had to fail. It wasn’t blind luck to have opposed Bush’s war, it was applying the lessons of history. Nations don’t like to be invaded and occupied – would we? – and if some of them tolerated it in past centuries, for lack of means or national identity, none will tolerate it today. Believing it could reject history, defy the times and create its own reality; the Bush Administration was tripped up by hubris, ignorance and arrogance.

Here are some things written and said in another month of February (March), this one 38 years ago, in 1968.

“The American people,” wrote the *WSJ*, “should be getting ready to accept, if they haven’t already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed, that it may be falling apart beneath our feet.”

Walter Cronkite weighed in a day when CBS News still had a reputation: “We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of our leaders,” he said, “to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds.”

Robert McNamara, who opposed the latest troop buildup and was about to leave the government, wrote to Johnson: “I do not understand what the strategy is in putting in more men.”

Clark Clifford, brought in to replace McNamara, wrote this to Johnson:

“The country we are trying to save is being subjected to enormous damage. Perhaps the country we are trying to save is relying on us too much. We may be denigrating their ability to take over their own country.”

That is precisely what Generals Abizaid and Casey, U.S. commanders in Iraq, told Bush about his planned troop buildup – before they were replaced.

A year later, in a long article in *Foreign Affairs*, Clifford wrote:

“I was convinced that the military course we were pursuing was not only endless, but hopeless.”

All those comments apply to Iraq. “Those who cannot learn from history,” said Santayana, “are doomed to repeat it.”

So what now?

Well, we can start by listening to the independent commissions. That’s why they exist, these commissions, to offer advice and counsel free from political careerism and partisanship. That’s why we’ve had so many commissions over the years on vital issues facing the nation, most recently the 9/11 Commission and the Iraq Study Group. A report from the non-partisan Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) this month also weighed in.

The 9/11 Commission told us the truth about the origins of Bush’s war, and its non-connection to 9/11. The Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by James Baker, told us, without mincing words, to get out of Iraq; that our presence there serves as a “catalyst for violence.” Imagine how hard that report must have been for Baker, a man whose entire public career is linked to the Bushes. The CFR study states simply that “U.S. interests in the Middle East and Persian Gulf can be more effectively advanced if the United States disengages from Iraq. Staying longer means more damage and a later start on repair.”

But Bush, like Johnson, will keep throwing soldiers at the problem until he is stopped. He will never voluntarily stop, for that is to admit failure, and failure on Iraq leaves the Bush presidency with nothing ... the emperor with no clothes. Bush is desperate, and his main hope now, like Kissinger and Nixon in Vietnam, will be to claim that he was sabotaged by Congress; that if he could have escalated just a little bit more, things would have turned out differently.

That’s the McCain position you know, on Iraq as it was in Vietnam. McCain says we should have fought on in Vietnam, until we reached Hanoi. He claims to speak for the military on Iraq, but his support of the Iraq buildup – he wanted more troops even than Bush – was opposed by Generals Abizaid, Casey and Pace. McCain has learned nothing from history. What would we have done in Hanoi, had we reached Hanoi? We’d have been like the Romans in Carthage, presiding over a desert; or Napoleon in Moscow, surveying a city burnt to the ground.

Republicans in Congress, who privately call the Iraq war a disaster, won’t help end it, because it is a Republican war. Another case of party over country. In the Senate, the Republicans wouldn’t even allow the

issue to be debated. Their objective is to “stay the course.” To disengage now, they say, will plunge Iraq into a bloodbath.

Iraq is already a bloodbath. Not only does a majority of Americans want out of Iraq, but polls show a majority of Iraqis want us gone, too. Three-fourths of Iraqis said they would feel safer if U.S. troops were gone, in a recent State Dept. poll. This suggests – not the disaster the Republicans predict – but that the situation will improve when we’ve gone, and Iraqis must face their future squarely. The issue of moral hazard, “denigrating their ability to run their own country,” as Clifford said.

The stalemate in Iraq is political, not military, and the sooner the military occupier is gone, the sooner Iraqis can get on with the issues of power-sharing, federalism or partition. And, oh yes, the return of the 3.7 million refugees Bush’s war has created. Those are THEIR issues to face. Saddam is gone. We did that for them. Now it’s time for us to be gone.

What’s needed now is a process of disengagement and consultation, removing our troops gradually, and beginning discussions with all the groups and all the nations that have an interest in the future of Iraq, who have a stake in seeing Iraq survive as a unitary and peaceful state. If Bush won’t change course, Congress should force him to do so. The executive branch doesn’t make foreign policy on its own, and it’s time Congress faced up to its responsibilities. Running from the issue, as the Senate Republicans have done, is a disservice to the nation.

But political fecklessness has been a source of the problem all along, hasn’t it, since Bush took office as a president who’d lost the popular vote and had no mandate. Our institutions allowed him to sweep them aside, all of them. It’s time now for them to take their rightful place again. The courts already have begun, slapping down some Bush’s more egregious legal excesses, and now it’s the turn of Congress to stand up. Maybe even the daily press will screw up its courage again, before it’s too late.

We can’t undo the damage that’s been done to our country, let alone to Iraq, but we can begin to take corrective action. Now. We can’t afford to wait for the next election.