



## Wilkerson on Militarism and Regrets About Iraq War

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**Paul Jay (PJ):** Hi, welcome to theAnalysis.news. I'm Paul Jay. In a few seconds, I'll be joined by Larry Wilkerson. We're going to talk about November 11, Veterans Day in the United States, and Remembrance Day in Canada, which is supposed to honor soldiers who have sacrificed their lives. But just how much is that about honor, and how much is it about promoting militarism, and what actually is done for veterans in the United States and Canada, which I don't think amounts to much?

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So, as I said, November 11 in the United States is Veterans Day. In Canada, it's Remembrance Day, which mostly comes out of the— in Canada, at least— from the First World War. I think the name Veterans Day came during or after the Korean War, but it amounts to the same thing. It's a day that is supposed to be where we remember the sacrifices soldiers made in order to maintain our, quote-unquote, "way of life," and quote-unquote, "democracy."

No doubt many soldiers made enormous sacrifices and did give their lives and were wounded and destroyed themselves in many ways, believing they were fighting for what was just, believing they were fighting for the good of their families, their countries, and such. I think in most cases, that wasn't the case. I think a lot of soldiers died in unjust wars. What we do on November 11 is not talk about how to avoid unjust wars, or how to avoid new military confrontations. What's done in both countries is to create this mythology and a, I would call, false patriotism. We're in a very dangerous world now where we can't afford such a culture. Now, joining me to talk about this is a man who spent much of his life in the military, Col. Larry Wilkerson. Thanks for joining us, Larry.

**Larry Wilkerson (LW):** Thanks for having me, Paul. Especially on Veterans Day.

**PJ:** What are your thoughts on Veterans Day, and as I say in Canada, Remembrance Day?

**LW:** I think in the United States, it's been transfigured majorly from what purpose most Americans would attribute to it. Your opening comments alluded to some of that. The major thing that troubles me about the transmogrification of it, if you will, is that it no longer represents what we think as Americans it should represent, which is what you detail there: Defense of the homeland, patriotism, a certain degree of positive nationalism, if you will— if nationalism can have a degree of positivism— and the kind of thing that we celebrate rather than denigrate.

Today Veterans Day marks the fear, the apathy, and the guilt Americans feel about their veterans because they know intuitively, if not intellectually, I think increasingly both, that they've sent them to wars for the past 20-plus years that were absolutely not for anything but the national security state, corporate benefactors like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, Grumman, and other defense contractors, merchants of death, and for the billionaires in the world who make so much money off of wars like they are making, for example, off the war in Ukraine right now. That's why we fight, and that's why we create veterans.

Let me just say to close my opening comment, that's why I feel an enormous amount of guilt. No matter how small my contribution might have been, it nonetheless was palpable in putting across the case for war with Iraq in 2003. A preposterous war, a war that killed British citizens, American citizens, other allies, and literally hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and others in the region. It put millions of them into diaspora or made them refugees within their own countries and destabilized the Levant, the Middle East, for years. We probably won't see it stabilized again in our lifetimes. It all started in 2003 and our invasion of Iraq. It was for nothing, nothing at all positive unless you count making Halliburton's \$44 billion a positive. That's what bothers me.

The other thing is, we've gone from a veterans department that the DOD [Department of Defence] wanted to move out of its budget profile because it was beginning to cost so much at \$35 and \$40 billion a year, to a Veterans administration, now, that costs \$245 plus billion dollars a year. That's all because of these stupid wars we've had over the last 20-plus years. They still don't service our veterans as adequately, comprehensively, and positively as they should.

**PJ:** Well, the suicide rates amongst former retired military veterans, PTSD [Post-traumatic stress disorder], homelessness, I mean, the levels are stratospheric. I don't have the numbers off the top of my head, but I think veterans are one of the most significant portions of homeless people. The lack of care, and then there's Veterans Day, when the reality is veterans are treated like shit.

**LW:** As I said, it's out of fear, guilt, and apprehension. Veterans will tell you more than not, they will tell you if you thank them for their service, and they have a moment to comment, "don't thank me for my service. I don't want to be thanked for my service. I'm really conflicted over my service. Where did you serve, by the way?" And then the person at the airport or the ballgame or whatever will turn and walk away or look sheepishly at them and say, "well, I didn't serve." That's the majority of Americans. Less than 1% of Americans have served in these wars over the last 20 years; that's boys and girls.

It's tragic that that's the circumstance, but when you have that kind of circumstance, no war tax, no threat to the average family that their son or daughter will be drafted, you're going to have more war because it's so much easier to do, and there's so much less political pushback because so few people are involved.

**PJ:** People who watch the Analysis know I've mentioned this a couple of times. I have ten-year-old twins, and in their school, they've been reciting this poem which was taught to me decades ago. It's called *In Flanders Fields* the poppies blow. This is to commemorate a battle that took place during the first world war in Flanders fields, where thousands of Canadian soldiers were sent to their deaths for absolutely no reason. This is now venerated year after year after year in schools.

On the surface, it is supposed to be a poem where we have sorrow about these young men that were slaughtered. The actual heart of that poem comes in later in the second or third stanza, which essentially says, "if you don't pick up our torch, you will be betraying those of us who died." In fact, that poem, which is taught in schools up to this day, was a recruiting mechanism to get more soldiers to go fight in the First World War and get slaughtered in their tens and tens of thousands for a war that did nothing but make arms manufacturers rich and help create the conditions for the rise of fascism in Germany. And we don't talk about any of this. It's just this vague nationalism about fighting, serving, and preparing kids to go off to war.

I had a really interesting interview a few years ago with General Lewis MacKenzie. He is a Canadian General, and he said something which was, I don't know, he was far more frank than I've ever heard a military guy; because he went on to a bit of a political career. He said to me, "we need soldiers who don't know history. If they really knew history, why on earth would they go off and do what we tell them to and go die in these wars? So we need them to be uneducated about these things." And boy, things haven't changed.

**LW:** Yeah. Poems like *Flanders Fields* and some of Rudyard Kipling's writings and others of that ilk are basically hymns written by people who are defending the right— many of these poets know this— they're defending the right of very rich men and increasingly today women, who send young boys and girls to die for state purposes so they don't have to go themselves or so they can make more money. That's really what it's all about.

The Greeks said, "old men send young boys to die," and then in parentheses, "because the

state needs preserving.” Well, today it’s not even the preservation of the state. Tell me how our invasion of Iraq had anything to do with preserving America.

I remember the blatant lie that Tony Blair told, Prime Minister Tony Blair– I almost fell off my chair in the state department chief of staff’s office. Literally almost fell off my chair when I heard it on the TV because Powell had just told me, “watch it, Prime Minister Blair, he’s going to make a speech.” We had CNN on, I think it was, and we were looking up there and all of a sudden he said, “well, in 45 minutes, Saddam Hussein could blanket London with poisonous gases.” “Where did he get that?” Powell said. I said, “probably the same place he got this dossier he just sent over to us,” which we found out later had been written by a grad student or something like that. It told about all the things that Saddam Hussein had from the first war and what he could do with them, and all this. It’s just a hodgepodge of someone who’d gone through, like, a plagiaristic student, picking things out of other people’s articles and putting them together. And this was Britain’s public policy campaign to support its entry into the war in Iraq. Here’s Blair giving the ultimate statement and saying “that in 45 minutes, the weapons could actually hit London.”

We knew that was preposterous. I think Tom Fingar was in my office. He was the deputy in INR[Bureau of Intelligence and Research], our intel guy. Tom was a very good intel specialist, and there’s no foundation to that whatsoever. No foundation whatsoever. The phones rang off the hook as the White House asked us where he got the information. We asked the White House where he got the information, but we were telling similar lies. Indeed, we would go to the United Nations and put a whole pack of lies out. A whole pack of lies. I wish I’d known they were lies at the time. Had I known they were lies, maybe I wouldn’t have helped put them out.

Why were they lies and why didn’t I know it? I’ve asked myself that question a hundred times, but that brings me to my point. My great angst on Veterans Days is all the boys and girls, mostly boys at that time, that I helped send into harm’s way, and some of them didn’t come back– or some of them came back like the young man on the first day I went over to Walter Reed, to the Wounded Warrior Project, the National Military Medical Center now, Walter Reed. I met him. He was the Air Force’s only triple amputee. Triple amputee! He’s sitting across the table from me as best he could. He’s getting a prosthetic arm, he’s getting a prosthetic right leg, and they’re working on his left leg. They built him a van he can drive. His wife was a third-grade school teacher in Tampa, Florida, and she came up and stayed with him for 19 months through something like 18 surgeries. I’m looking at him and I’m saying to myself, “my God, he’s a triple amputee, and he’s sitting here across, drinking a cup of coffee. I had something to do with putting him there.” The Marine sitting next to him had only one leg. His right leg was severed at the knee, and he felt like he was comfortably okay because Joe was sitting there with a missing arm and two missing legs. I’m thinking, this is the detritus. This is the refuse. This is the aftermath of this war. How horrible this is.

By that time, I had learned quite a bit. It was all a farce. It was all a farce. Not only were there no WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction], but if you go through the streets of Iraq today, especially Al Anbar province or Baghdad itself, and you ask the average Iraqi merchant, male or female, if they were better off under Saddam Hussein, or better off now, they’ll tell you

without equivocation they were better off under Saddam Hussein.

So what did we do all that for and why did we do it? When you start answering those questions categorically and with some authenticity to your answers, it's revolting. It truly is revolting, because we did it for money, basically. We did it for money, and we did it for the complex, and we did it for people who— like I used Halliburton, Dick Cheney's favorite company. I mean, he was CEO of Halliburton before he became Vice President of the United States. Forty-four billion they made off of Iraq and Afghanistan combined in the years of those wars. That's why we have wars.

We ask ourselves, why do these people come home and commit suicide? Why do they have post-traumatic stress? Well, there are a lot of reasons, but one of those reasons has to be, just has to be, logically speaking, it just has to be that they come home and they understand what they've done. They understand they spent three tours in Iraq shooting at women, children, and other soldiers, and they were shooting at them, not for freedom and democracy, not even for the defense of their nation, but for Lockheed Martin, or for Halliburton, or for George W. Bush, or for Donald Rumsfeld.

**PJ:** I think it's important for viewers that don't know that you were not just some bureaucrat in an office sending people to their deaths or to fight. You believed all this yourself and went to fight in Vietnam and put your own life on the line. You could have easily been one of these people because you so believed the mythology. How did you get from that person who volunteers to go to Vietnam and fight to a person who now is one of the sharpest critics of U.S. foreign policy?

**LW:** It was a long, difficult road in the distance from Vietnam to just before I became what you might call a member of the top power echelon in Washington, first when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, and then when he was Secretary of State. The distance between Vietnam and there, I learned about Vietnam. So it's not like I went into the Iraq war totally ignorant of what had been done to me in Vietnam. I not only learned about Vietnam, but I also taught it at the Naval War College and at the Marine Corps War College.

I'm entering— and this increases my guilt, as far as I'm concerned— I'm entering this environment of war with Iraq in 2002 and early 2003 with this sure knowledge of Vietnam being a farce. Worse than a farce. Not even a tragic farce, a diabolical farce where so many boys and girls were killed, where 59,000 names are over there on that black marble wall that doesn't need to be there. I went into this with that idea, as did Colin Powell. One of the first things he told me, as we knew that we were getting closer and closer to war in January, early January, right after Christmas, 2002-2003. We knew that there were so many similarities between Vietnam and Iraq that we needed to tell the president about them.

So he ordered me to get it. He ordered me to get a hold of everything I could get on the Vietnam War, from David Halverson to General [John L.] Throckmorton, to whoever had written something about the Vietnam War telling LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson], “don't do this, don't do this.” Or had written afterward about, “you shouldn't have done this, LBJ”. All the

material. Then he said something with a smile, “he won’t read any of it. So we’ll just do a memo. We’ll do a one or two-page memo summarizing all of it because we can’t get him to read that.”; he being George W. Bush President of the United States.

We did all that, and we shipped it over to the executive secretary, Condi Rice, a national security advisor, and we said, “you got to tell the president about this. This is looking a lot like Vietnam.” Did he read it? Did he do anything about it? Did he have any conversation with anybody about it? I mean, Powell told me he didn’t even think he read it. It didn’t have any impact at all. So then I waltz over to the CIA to listen to George Tenet and John McLaughlin tell me all about how Saddam Hussein does have weapons of mass destruction, et cetera, et cetera.

Everything pointed towards the possession of WMD that we were shown. If he was working on an active nuclear program, as General Powell said repeatedly, that was the only one that really frightened him, then we needed to do something. Did we need to invade? Did we need to do that? Maybe not. Today I look back on it, and I wish that I had done what I anticipated doing when I was asked to put together the UN presentation; that was quit, retire, get out, leave, resign, go, and tell the president I was leaving. But I didn’t, and so that’s the reason I come full circle; that’s the reason I say I share some of the blame for those boys and girls who were killed in Iraq.

**PJ:** In a recent interview I did with Dan Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers, but before that worked for RAND corporation who were developing American nuclear war plans, he said, both for his participation in the nuclear war planning and his role in Vietnam, prior to the Pentagon Papers release, if he was accused of war crimes, he said he wouldn’t plead not guilty.

**LW:** Nor would I. I once said publicly if Dick Cheney will go before the bar, I’ll go with him.

**PJ:** Well, you certainly made amends. Dick Cheney should have been and still should be, along with Bush, charged with war crimes for the Iraq war.

**LW:** The most significant comment I ever made to Colin Powell was when he was going on the show for memorial day, the concert on the Capitol lawn and I said, “you know, sir, the best thing you can say, the best thing you could stand up there and say is stop these stupid wars and quit making veterans.” Of course, he wasn’t going to say that.

**PJ:** That’s a good ending. Alright, that’s good. Thanks very much, Larry.

**LW:** Thank you, take care.

**PJ:** Thank you for joining us on theAnalysis.news.

**END**