

A Walk in the Northwoods

An astonishing proposal created by the Pentagon four decades ago illustrates our government's capacity for large-scale deception — even of the American people.

by William Norman Grigg

For those working in the darker corners of the Military-Industrial Complex, 1962 was a busy year. On March 10, Lincoln P. Bloomfield of MIT submitted a report entitled *A World Effectively Controlled by the United Nations: A Preliminary Study of One Form of a Stable Military Environment*.

Funded by the U.S. State Department on behalf of the Institute for Defense Analyses, the Bloomfield study offered a breathtakingly candid assessment of the various ways in which large-scale crises could be used to manipulate the public into embracing some form of world government.

In the scheme described by Bloomfield, the nations of the world would be required to disarm down to a level sufficient to maintain internal order through centralized and militarized police agencies. Global disarmament would be enforced through a collection of “supranational institutions, characterized by mandatory universal membership and some ability to employ physical force.” The international system would be administered by the United Nations, albeit “not necessarily ... the organization as it now exists, [but] the present UN Charter could theoretically be revised in order to erect such an organization equal to the task envisaged, thereby codifying a radical rearrangement of power in the world.”

Though Bloomfield wrote that it was possible for the international system to evolve in the direction he describes, he also cited another possible route involving “a grave crisis or war to bring about a sudden transformation in national attitudes sufficient for the purpose. According to this version, the order we examine may be brought into existence as a result of a series of sudden, nasty, and traumatic shocks.”

Pretexts for War

Three days after Bloomfield submitted his report, General Lyman Louis Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, filed a memorandum for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara describing “Operation Northwoods,” which was intended to create “pretexts ... provid[ing] justification for U.S. military intervention in Cuba.” Among the staged provocations suggested in that memorandum are the following:

We could develop a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities and even in Washington. The terror campaign could be pointed at Cuban refugees seeking haven in the United States. We could sink a boatload of Cubans enroute to Florida (real or simulated). We could foster attempts on lives of Cuban refugees in



NATO photo

General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, seen here as supreme commander of NATO, was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when he signed off on “Operation Northwoods.”



Air Force

“Godspeed, John Glenn,” declared Mission Control as the Navy pilot became the first American to orbit the Earth. Had the space shot failed, the architects of Operation Northwoods were prepared to frame Cuba for the tragedy as a pretext for war.

the United States even to the extent of wounding in instances to be widely publicized. Exploding a few plastic bombs in carefully chosen spots, the arrest of Cuban agents and the release of prepared documents substantiating Cuban involvement also would be helpful.

“Use of MIG type aircraft by U.S. pilots could provide additional provocation,” continued the “Northwoods” document.

“Harassment of civil air, attacks on surface shipping and destruction of U.S. military drone aircraft by MIG type planes would be useful as complementary actions. An F-86 properly painted would convince air passengers that they saw a Cuban MIG, especially if the pilot of the transport were to announce such a fact.”

The memo also described several variations on the theme of “Remember the Maine!” For instance: “We could blow up a U.S. ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba.... We could blow up a drone (unmanned) vessel anywhere in the Cuban waters.”

The most shocking proposal found in the memo involves a staged shoot-down of a civilian jetliner:

It is possible to create an incident which will demonstrate convincingly that a Cuban aircraft has attacked and shot down a chartered civil airliner enroute from the United States to Jamaica, Guatemala, Panama, or Venezuela. The destination would be chosen only to cause the flight plan route to cross Cuba. The passengers could be a group of college students off on a holiday or a grouping of persons with a common interest to support chartering a non-scheduled flight.

The Northwoods proposal sketches out a rather baroque scheme involving “an exact duplicate for a civil registered aircraft belonging to a CIA proprietary organization in the Miami area,” the use of an unmanned

drone equipped with a radio transmitter and a remote control self-destruct device, and provisions for evacuating passengers, who would have boarded the CIA’s plane under “carefully prepared aliases.”

All of these proposed provocations “are based on the premise that U.S. military intervention will result from a period of heightened U.S.-Cuban tensions which will place the United States in the position of suffering justifiable grievances,” explains the memo. “World opinion and the United Nations forum should be favorably affected by developing the international image of the Cuban government as rash and irresponsible, and as an alarming and unpredictable threat to the peace of the Western Hemisphere.”

Although the Northwoods scheme would have resulted in war with Cuba, its immediate target was to be the American people themselves. Investigative reporter James Bamford, a U.S. Navy veteran and author of the 2001 book *Body of Secrets*, points out that the proposal represented “the military trying to trick the American people into a war that they wanted but that nobody else wants.” Bamford’s *Body of Secrets* describes the aborted Northwoods project in detail.

Schemes of the Policy Elite

It’s important to clarify that it was not the military per se, but the policy elite controlling the Pentagon, who contemplated the war with Cuba. And Northwoods was just one of several possible gambits under discussion to “provoke, harass, or disrupt Cuba,” in the words of a February 2, 1962 memorandum from Brig. Gen. William Craig to Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale, who presided over the CIA’s “Operation Mongoose” program targeting the Castro regime.

The Craig memorandum outlined 10 possible anti-Cuba initiatives, ranging from sabotage to psychological warfare. Among the most audacious would have been “Operation DIRTY TRICK,” intended “to provide irrevocable proof that, should the MERCURY manned orbit flight fail, the fault lies with the Communists [in] Cuba”; and “Operation BINGO,” which would “create an incident which has the appearance of an attack on U.S. facilities ... in Cuba, thus providing an excuse for use of U.S. military might to overthrow the

current government of Cuba.” The BINGO proposal included a detailed operational plan:

- (1) Simulated attack on Guantanamo.
- (2) Word flashed to the President.
- (3) President orders counterattack to include:
 - (a) Immediate launch of alerted aircraft whose targets are Cuban airfields
 - (b) Immediate launch of counter-attack down strategic lines of communication in Cuba.
 - (c) Fleet force standing by on alert would make way toward pre-selected targets/landing areas.
 - (d) Immediate embarkation of airborne troops previously alerted to pre-selected targets.
 - (e) Launch of additional combat aircraft to clear drop areas and further interdict lines of communication.
 - (f) Ships and aircraft would land/airdrop troops and secure airfields, road/rail terminals, etc.

Gen. Lansdale synthesized those proposals, and many others, into a January 20 document entitled “The Cuba Project,” which envisioned intervention to bring about what is now called regime change in Cuba. The objective, wrote Lansdale, was to “help the people of Cuba overthrow the Communist regime from within Cuba and institute a new government with which the United States can live in peace,” headed by a “New Cuban Leader” selected by Washington.

Why the Pretext?

Just a few years before these extravagant plans for war with Cuba were hatched, Fidel Castro had been thrust into power with the support and applause of America’s political and media elite, which hailed him as the “George Washington” of his country. By the early 1960s, Castro and his forces had slaughtered thousands of people, and driven tens of thousands more into exile. Now Washington was contemplating an unnecessary war that would have made

“Twisted Generals” and “Wise Men”

General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, whose signature is affixed to the Operation Northwoods proposal, is characterized by U.S. Navy veteran and author James Bamford in his book *Body of Secrets* as a “rabid” anti-communist — as if passionate opposition to the most murderous variety of militant collectivism constitutes a form of derangement. During World War II, Lemnitzer was a staff aide to Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight Eisenhower. After the war he was deeply involved in the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a regional political and military affiliate of the United Nations. He was also instrumental in shepherding the NATO treaty through the Senate.

“In Lemnitzer’s view,” writes Bamford, “the country would be far better off if the generals could take over.” He depicts Lemnitzer and other Pentagon “superpatriots” at the time as incurably disaffected with the Kennedy administration and itching for a chance to stage a coup. The Northwoods scheme, he concludes, was intended “to satisfy the egos of twisted generals back in Washington, safe in their taxpayer-financed homes and limousines.”

In offering this assessment, however, Bamford misreads his own evidence. He points out that in 1963, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul H. Nitze sent a plan to the White House proposing “a possible scenario whereby an attack on a United States reconnaissance aircraft could be exploited toward the end of effecting the removal of the Castro regime.” The idea was to send U.S. pilots “on dangerous, unnecessary low-level reconnaissance missions with the expectation that they would ... be shot down, thus provoking a war.”

Nitze was not a “twisted general,” but one of the most notable of the establishment “wise men” who directed U.S. foreign policy during World War II and the Cold War. Deeply tied in to the world of high finance, Nitze was an intimate adviser to figures such as George C. Marshall and Ford Foundation head H. Rowan Gaither, the latter of whom admitted that his foundation and others were involved in a high-level campaign to “merge” the United States and the Soviet Union.

Bamford believes — with ample justification — that the Gulf of Tonkin incident that led to the Vietnam War was a successful application of the Operation Northwoods strategy. It was the “wise men” and their apprentices, the Johnson administration’s “whiz kids,” who presided over that betrayal — not the “twisted” generals on whom Bamford seeks to lay the blame. ■



General Lyman Louis Lemnitzer

U.S. Army

matters immeasurably worse. Why?

One answer is suggested in Bloomfield's *A World Effectively Controlled by the United Nations* memorandum, which explains how the "Communist dynamic"

— the threat of nuclear war or conventional war, terrorism, subversion — could be used to prod a reluctant American public into accepting some form of trans-national governance.

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Ghosts of pretexts past: Despite the absence of evidence linking Spain to the destruction of the *USS Maine* in Cuban waters, that 1898 disaster was used to rally support for an eminently avoidable war. That successful disinformation campaign helped inspire the Northwoods proposal.

"This is the central dilemma of world politics today, and it applies with ultimate force to the proposition of world government," wrote Bloomfield. "Given a continuation unabated of communist dynamism, the subordination of states to a true world government appears impossible; but if the communist dynamic were greatly abated, the West might well lose whatever incentive it has for world government. For purposes of this exercise, we assume that, if the communists would agree, the West would favor 'a world effectively controlled by the United Nations.' The remaining question is then how to transform and tame the forces of communism, in any event, to the point where the present international system might be radically reshaped."

The key was to keep the communist threat (or some plausible surrogate menace) alive, while also keeping it under control.

It's interesting that none of the "Northwoods" scenarios was employed during the Cuban Missile Crisis, which erupted a few months after the memo was submitted. However, variations on the "Northwoods" playbook may be in use to this day — despite the fact that at first glance "Northwoods" looks like the kind of stuff that would

have been concocted by an *X-Files* fan whose tinfoil hat was a couple sizes too small.

The so-called "Downing Street Memo," a leaked transcription of an intelligence briefing given to British Prime Minister Tony Blair in July 2002, describes the way in which the Bush administration considered a "Northwoods"-style campaign of deception to mislead the American (and British) electorate into supporting an unnecessary war in Iraq.

"Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy," reported the memo, which was compiled by Matthew Rycroft, a former foreign policy aide to Blair. Although U.S. forces in the region "had already begun 'spikes of activity' to put pressure on the regime," the full-scale military assault awaited a suitable "Iraqi *causus belli*," or justification for war. The memo relates that among the possible triggering incidents discussed by Bush and Blair was "flying U2 reconnaissance aircraft with fighter cover over Iraq, painted in UN colours. If Saddam fired on them, he would be in breach [of UN Security Council resolutions]."

In 2000, literally years before Bush and Blair contemplated "Northwoods"-style strategic deception in Iraq, the Washington-based Project for a New American Century (PNAC), a neo-conservative think-tank, published a report suggesting that a "new Pearl Harbor" would be necessary in order to create public support for a radical redefinition of our nation's role in the world.

The PNAC report, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, called for transforming our military into an instrument of global hegemony. PNAC's adherents included future Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, future Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, future Vice Presidential Chief of Staff Lewis Libby, future Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, and other architects of the Iraq war and the "Long War" against terrorism. Page 51 of the PNAC's report envisioned a "catastrophic and catalyzing event — like a new Pearl Harbor" that would inaugurate a lengthy and transformational military campaign focusing on the Middle East. ■