

Iran Deception: America's Real Goals | Prof. David Gibbs

From regime change to permanent conflict, the war on Iran is not an exception and not an accident. The dark forces of violence in Washington once again won out, but the victory of the warmongers might not be what it seems. While militarism, neoconservative strategy, evangelical fundamentalism, and, most of all, an unwavering alignment with Israel have pushed the United States from one confrontation to the next, the war-making capacity of the US is waning, and the signal this sends to us "allies" across the globe is not what Washington would like it to be. My guest today is again, Dr. David Gibbs from the University of Arizona. Support us on Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Our shop: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Dr. David Gibbs: <https://dgibbs.arizona.edu>

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. I'm joined today once again by Dr. David Gibbs, a professor at the University of Arizona. David, welcome back.

#David Gibbs

Thank you for having me, Pascal.

#Pascal

Thank you for coming back online. We want to talk about Iran, of course. You're a historian, and you've got very good and interesting perspectives on the long-term development of U.S. operations abroad during the Cold War. How do you see this latest Iran war tying in with the long-term policy of the United States?

#David Gibbs

Since I'm an American citizen, I'll give you essentially an American perspective on this war. As I see it, the United States has, since the end of the Cold War, been basically looking for new enemies. At the end of the Cold War, it was remarkable that the United States had no enemies. I remember in 1990, Colin Powell, who was then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave an interview with **Stars and Stripes**, the official military newspaper. I remember the quote exactly: he said, "Think hard about it. I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains," as if that were a bad thing. Obviously, if you're a military man, I guess that is a bad thing, because you're trained for that.

Your whole career is based on the idea of enemies. If you're running out of enemies, I guess that's viewed as a negative. Now, the normal person, without self-interest, might see that as a good thing—since, after all, who would really want war? And the answer is, there were whole vested interests that wanted war, that thrived on war, and that profited from war. There is, of course, Eisenhower's military-industrial complex, but it's broader than that, including think tanks, elite academics, and elite journalists. Academia had, you might say, a gravy train based on the Cold War—at least the American side did.

Lots of grants, scholarships, and book contracts—secret work for the Central Intelligence Agency, often paying you to write books and then editing them for you in secret, that kind of thing. Lots of academics did these things. And with the end of the Cold War, you know, there was a lot of joking about it. There was a left-wing magazine that no longer exists called *The Lies of Our Times* that, I think in the early '90s, had a cartoon with the headline "The Future." The headline read, "War to be declared tomorrow," and the subheadline read, "Enemy to be selected soon." The implication, obviously, was that you need to have some kind of enemy—but we didn't really know who that enemy was. So they were looking for one.

And, you know, Iran was one of multiple enemies. Russia, obviously. China's another enemy. Arab terrorism, defined very broadly, was an enemy too. And all of these, I think, don't come out of nowhere. I mean, obviously, there's a psychological need for a boogeyman—for a simple explanation for all our problems, I suppose. But I don't like psychological explanations. I think there were material interests here. The material interests were to find some justification for this enormous military the United States had. It was only slightly downsized after the Cold War, and they needed a justification for hundreds of overseas bases, which had no function if the Soviet Union was gone. But it needed a function—they had to find one. There were fleets around the world, and there was the security apparatus, the CIA, and all the other agencies.

And so I think looking for an enemy created a psychological construct—a concept—which was that if you look for an enemy, you'll find one. And Iran clearly was an enemy. It was a convenient enemy because, after all, they seized the U.S. Embassy in 1979 and held the U.S. Embassy staff hostage. We never forgave them for that. So there's a bit of personalization there. But I think the broader point was that they were one of multiple enemies. And it's very easy to blame this on Trump and say Trump is an oddball, he's a madman—whatever you want to say—which is, to some degree, true. I mean, look at what he's doing in Iran. But this is a bipartisan project, and what Trump is doing in Iran is much more, I'd say, a broad continuity with the past than a deviation from it.

#Pascal

Yes. So you're putting this, of course, into the context of U.S. foreign policy and how the Cold War ended. But, you know, there are these two schools of thought, I would say, when it comes to Iran. One is—let's call them the Mearsheimerites—who basically try to explain the Iran war and the entire Middle East strategy of the United States through Zionism and the Zionist lobby. And the other, I

would say, are commentators like Brian Berletic—I just read his latest post—who say that if you really believe Israel runs the United States, you're either delusional or dishonest.

His whole argument is that, no, this is the United States running the show. Israel is basically the proxy over there, needed to carry out that kind of policy—this idea of finding an enemy by creating one, by creating something so alien to the region that it inevitably blows up the entire region. Which of the two camps do you think comes closest to what the historical development suggests?

#David Gibbs

I'd answer it closer to Mearsheimer's interpretation. There's no denying the influence of the Israel lobby—it's enormous and extremely powerful. I see it in my classroom. I told my class I'm not going to discuss the Iran war or anything related to Israel-Palestine, because there are groups on campus—on every campus in America, or at least many of them—that track professors based on what they say about Israel-Palestine. You can get into a lot of trouble there. If you say the wrong thing, you'll have to justify yourself, you'll be demonized, and so on. There used to be a time when I could say anything I wanted in class, but those days are over. And a lot of that has to do with the Israel lobby.

And so I don't think there's any point in trying to minimize the significance of it. I think that Mearsheimer's book, which he co-authored with Stephen Walt at Harvard, **The Israel Lobby**, about 20 years ago—there's no doubt they were right on that. I think it goes deeper than what they said, though. The way I see it, Israel was viewed as—well, you had the growth of the neoconservative ideology. I've spoken about it on this show before. And as I see it, this was an outgrowth of America's failure after Vietnam in the late 1970s. It was an effort to reinvigorate American militarism after its failures in Vietnam and to push back against what they saw as dovish tendencies in the American political system.

And the neoconservative ideology, both its Jewish and Gentile components, saw Israel as their model. What they liked about Israel was that it used military force unapologetically—maximal military force, offensively, not just defensively. They attacked; they didn't just defend. And at least in the mythology—not so much in reality, but in the mythology—they always won, they always performed brilliantly. That didn't actually happen in many cases, but that's how they saw it. So you had a situation where they viewed Israel as what America should be like. Oh, and one more thing: the idea of Israel was also to disparage negotiations, or at least to downplay them—to use them as little as possible.

Military force solves problems; negotiating is for the weak. And so it seemed to the neoconservatives—the neoconservative ideologues who grew up during this period—that Israel was pointing the way to what America should be like. They were heavily funded by the military-industrial complex, the neoconservatives. They had a series of lobby groups, and gradually, over time, they gained more and more influence in both parties. They started out actually in the Democratic Party, then moved to the Republican Party, and they moved back and forth. And they're very much

present. Trump has expressed a lot of skepticism about neoconservatism, but now he clearly is following the neoconservative playbook.

And that essentially is turning America into Israel. And many people have said that—America needs to be more like Israel. We need an Israel-style approach to security, along with the disparaging of civil liberties and privacy. We need to dismiss negotiations. We need to aggressively attack not just people who threaten us, but people who might hypothetically threaten us. I think the use of hypothetical threats to justify aggression was very much part of the Israeli playbook. So I think you had a kind of merging of Israel and the United States into one. That was the neoconservative idea—and that's the policy now. So, as I see it, it's more than just the Israel lobby.

It's also that the Israeli idea is embedded in the U.S. government, and that the vision of what America should be like is based on the Israeli experience. And that's playing out right now before our eyes in Iran. Right? Based on the idea that Iran might hypothetically someday be a threat. Hypotheticals here are very interesting to me—the idea that if somebody might hypothetically threaten you, you should treat it as a certainty and attack them. The opportunities are limitless. I mean, hypothetically, anything's possible. Hypothetically, aliens from outer space could attack us. The Loch Ness Monster could come out of Scotland and attack us. I don't know, I'm being a bit flippant here. But if you wanted to do hypotheticals, why not go all the way, I suppose?

So Iran might hypothetically do something, and therefore it's considered legitimate to attack them. This, by the way, was formalized by Vice President Richard Cheney, a prominent neoconservative. He called it the "one percent doctrine." He said that if a country presents even a one percent chance that it might go to war with us or pose a security danger, we should treat that as a hundred percent threat—with the idea that we should attack them. It's always safer to attack and go to war than to seek peace, I guess that's the idea here. Any threat, no matter how minimal, should be regarded as a near certainty, which makes no sense. Logically, it makes no sense, but that really is the neoconservative idea—the one percent doctrine.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here, but also to my mailing list on Substack. That's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video.

#David Gibbs

It's kind of offensive realism on steroids, right?

#Pascal

Where you basically argue that—no, no, no—I mean, the offensive is the important thing, and you need to make sure that any kind or type of threat is immediately removed. So there cannot be a balance, right? Because balance implies that you accept the other side has a certain weight. No, the neoconservative idea is complete, utter, total domination, and nothing less is acceptable. And it's treated as a security threat—not just as a problem, not just as something to be negotiated. No, it's a security threat that needs to be eliminated. So, like, offensive realism on steroids. The thing with Israel, though—what I'm thinking about at the moment—is how to understand this as a political project.

And I'm at a point where I'd argue that you can't analyze the political process in the United States without also looking at the political process in Israel—and vice versa. These two are, as Mearsheimer would say, joined at the hip, but maybe even share the same bloodstream. They're like Siamese twins. And in a sense, what you just said makes me think of Israel as the unshackled United States—the U.S. without the Constitution and without the same constraints, and hence a model, a model for the neocons. They're trying to import that back in, and the Israelis, for their part, import all the weapons, all the productive capacity of the United States—and round and round it goes.

#David Gibbs

Something like that. I suppose the only thing I'd slightly disagree with is that it is, in a sense, offensive realism on steroids—except that realists, à la Mearsheimer, would insist you have to be cautious, you have to weigh the possibility of risk, that you might fail, might be defeated. Whereas the neoconservatives tend to throw caution to the wind, and they insist it's all a question of will—willpower—or at least they imply that. The idea is that those who disagree with them are showing a lack of spine, a lack of moral certitude, or some character flaw, perhaps. America is only a superpower if it acts like a superpower—that's what they would say.

Acting like a superpower means constant shows of force. The bottom line is that the system we've set up here basically ensures that when you create this enormous military, you have to use it periodically. You have to use it—there's no way to justify the existence of such an outsized military, far larger than any in the world. Again, people talk about the threat from China. China has a GDP approximately the same size as the United States—larger by the PPP standard—but its military is much smaller. Their military spending, as a percentage of GDP, is much lower. So the United States basically has this world-class military like none that's ever been seen before.

And if you have that, you have to use it periodically. So the ideology of neoconservatism fits in very nicely with that idea—with that institutional need to use the military effectively. And again, we're seeing that now in Iran: if you have this constant pressure to use the military to do something, and this ideology based on hypothetical threats of something that might go wrong and attack you, I guess that fits in and justifies what we're doing in Iran. The only problem is, we could very easily—and very likely will—lose this war. And what happens then is anybody's guess.

#Pascal

When I talked yesterday to Mohamed Marandi, he made it very clear that Iran is not waiting for the United States to offer peace. Iran already rejects any kind of short-term ceasefire, and the war will end when Iran decides it will end. So their strategy seems to be to absorb as much as they can and basically, in essence, chase the United States out of West Asia and demand not only a ceasefire on paper, but also take away the material capability of the United States to wage war again in the coming years. How likely do you think it is that this is an achievable goal? Because after all, you're right—the United States has the most formidable military force on earth, but even that is not infinite.

#David Gibbs

I was listening to Theodore Postol, the weapons specialist at MIT, who is extremely informative and very much an expert. He basically said that missile defense systems don't work against ballistic missiles. I think they work against fighter planes, which are barely being used here—at least not at close range—and they work against drones. But ballistic missiles? They just don't work. So the United States and Israel can't really shoot down many of these missiles. The interceptors are extremely expensive, few in number, and being depleted very rapidly, whereas Iran seems to have a remarkable supply of missiles and drones. And if they run out of them or the ability to manufacture more, I'd think there's a good chance Russia or China would help replenish them, because they have a strong interest in doing so.

And so I... there is a reasonable possibility Iran may just win this war, in the sense that all they have to do, as many have noted, is survive—to be standing at the end of the day. And also, they're engaging in what some have called vertical escalation. They're not just attacking Israel; they're attacking almost all of America's allies in the Middle East. They're attacking multiple Gulf states, and they're trying to demonstrate—and are demonstrating—that America not only cannot protect you, but actually makes you more vulnerable to attack. That far from protecting you, the alliance with the United States weakens your security. And I think the Gulf states are figuring that out. And the Europeans, if they were smart, would figure that out too—that maybe NATO is not such a good thing.

Maybe rejecting neutrality by Sweden and Finland is going to be a disaster because it makes you a target. It puts a target on your head—just as the UAE just found out, as Bahrain just found out. And Iran is making it very clear that what's going on here is that America will not protect you; it makes you more insecure. So I think what they really want to do, as an endgame, is to force America to withdraw from the Middle East. Now, for America to do that would be almost like announcing the end of the American empire. Right? It would be the end of the Trump presidency and the end of the American empire. It's very hard for me to believe Trump would be willing to accept that. But what he will do if we simply start running out of missiles and start tiring—

Oh, one more thing, of course, in vertical escalation is the closing of the Strait of Hormuz and the possibility of causing an economic downturn—maybe a very severe economic downturn—with

devastating consequences. All of these things basically play to Iran's favor and will eventually risk tiring the United States. But this could be a major turning point. And I wonder if Trump would want to be the president who presides over the defeat of the U.S. empire in the most humiliating way possible, by a country we've always regarded as inferior—inferior at every level. We had no respect for the Iranians, and here they're going to defeat us. It would be a repeat, under worse circumstances, of what the Vietnamese did to us in 1975.

#Pascal

Right, right. And on a much larger scale, in a sense, because it's not just a retreat from a country—it would be a complete retreat from the region. At least that's what the Iranians are apparently aiming for. And, you know, just to underline what you just explained, they're also making the point in another way by deliberately not attacking anyone who doesn't have U.S. military bases. Absolutely—not a single strike on Oman, not one—because no U.S. military bases, no installations. Oman is a friend of the United States, but not an ally. Oman is also a friend of Iran, and this is well understood.

Marandi actually says, yes, I mean, if these Gulf states declared their permanent neutrality from now on and expelled the United States—or at least said, “We’re not going to renew any of these leases”—then that would solve it, aside from the question of reparations. But the security structure is definitely the one the Iranians are looking for. Now, for the United States, one of the questions in the back of everybody’s mind at the moment—if I’m reading all the newsletters I’m subscribed to—is whether there’s a point where the U.S. or Israel might actually use their nuclear weapons to escalate to something so unthinkable that, in the neocon mindset, it’s like, “Okay, this is the real power, and this will end it once and for all.”

#David Gibbs

That’s the worry in my mind, and in many people’s minds—and with good reason, I think. If the United States were backed into a corner, and more significantly if Israel were backed into a corner—if Israel were facing defeat in this war, if Netanyahu personally were facing defeat—what would Israel do? Well, nuclear weapons are one possibility. That is, it’s one possibility. Israel is claimed—falsely, by all indications—but is claimed nevertheless as existential for them. And they’ve acted, at least superficially in public, as if it’s existential. If that’s the case, they can easily justify it to themselves, and to each other at least, as a cause for using nuclear weapons.

Israel will be the first cause of concern. The United States also—under Trump—I would not think it impossible that the United States would resort to nuclear weapons, because they would see that as a last resort. If we can’t win with conventional weapons, then maybe we need to move to nuclear weapons, because, again, acknowledging defeat in a war that might mean a permanent setback in a key region with global implications—that might be considered unthinkable and intolerable, not just

for Trump but for his advisers and some of the top military personnel. And so, nuclear weapons would be considered an option under those circumstances. That is an enormous risk—an enormous danger—here, I think.

And I don't know what to say about it, except that we've been playing this game with nuclear weapons—we haven't used them since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and therefore it's not really seen as a serious problem. It's remarkable how the nuclear threat was treated as a constant worry when I was a child growing up during the Cold War. But after the Cold War ended, we pretended it stopped being an issue. There's almost no discussion of this. There's no anti-war movement, no anti-nuclear weapons movement in the West. There used to be an enormous one, but it's gone now. It's gone. And so people have forgotten about the risk here. And I think, in that situation, the risk of using nuclear weapons has greatly increased.

#Pascal

Yeah, instead of denuclearizing, we denuclear-feared. Exactly. We still have the nukes, but we don't have the necessary fear about them anymore. So this is the most unfortunate development. But one of the things I was wondering—and I know you're probably not the person who has all the information on this; we'd probably need to talk to Ted Postol—is about the nuclear reactors that Israel has on its territory. Aren't they a huge liability? I mean, if Iran got struck by a nuclear weapon, wouldn't it be the most natural thing to just fire a couple of conventional missiles at those nuclear reactors and wreak havoc that way? Isn't that a kind of deterrent at the moment? But I haven't talked about this with anyone who actually knows how these things work. I just wonder if you have any thoughts on it.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, Israel's main nuclear production facility is at Dimona in the Negev Desert. It was built by France in the 1950s. And, you know, again, you'd have to talk to Ted Postol—he's a technical specialist, which I'm not—but off the top of my head, I can't see any special reason why Iran couldn't use one of its more advanced missiles to target Dimona. They haven't done that yet, and I think for very good reasons they haven't. Yeah. They've shown restraint, which I appreciate personally as a human being who values his life. But if they were struck with a nuclear weapon, of course, all bets are off. And striking at Dimona would, of course, be a realistic possibility. I'm assuming—and again, this is something you'd have to ask a specialist about—but I'm assuming there'd be considerable danger of spreading radioactivity over a large area, including neighboring countries, with very deadly effects.

#Pascal

Yes, yes. And, you know, one thing is the Iranian leadership. And also, according to Morandi, they usually don't really talk about Israel—they usually talk about "Occupied Palestine." They're very

much aware that the land Israel sits on is the land of the Palestinians, and they have no intention whatsoever to permanently occupy or radioactively poison Palestine, right? So, I mean, these are part of the constraints they operate within. Now, coming back to the United States, though—what do you think? I did a couple of episodes about the evangelical component and this doomsday ideology of bringing about Armageddon, and how the U.S. president now has a faith office in the White House.

And just last weekend, they had this ceremony with him at the desk, his pastor praying over him and saying really dumb things. But I'm pretty sure Donald Trump loves to hear them. It's like saying no to Donald Trump is saying no to God, and stuff like that. And Pete Hegseth, with his tattoos and the Jerusalem Cross and "Deus Vult," and so on. The acknowledgment that there's a very, very strong component that wants this war—not to win or project power, but to bring about the end days and the Second Coming of Christ. That's a completely different motivation for war from the neocons. Of course, it goes hand in glove with the neocons, but it's a different motivation. How important do you judge that stream of U.S. politics to be in this war?

#David Gibbs

It's very significant. I mean, just a little bit of the history is that evangelical Christianity—again, by "evangelical," what we mean is a branch of mostly Protestantism that has a very literal interpretation of the Old and especially the New Testament, and is somewhat separate from the more mainstream Christian groups like the Presbyterians or the Methodists. It also has a very emotional connection between individual Christians and Jesus Christ. The modern version—well, the U.S. is an exceptionally religious country.

It stands out among all industrialized countries for its exceptionally high level of religious identification. And we've always had periodic upsurges of evangelical interest. One of them was in the '70s, and it emerged precisely at the moment of neoconservatism. The distinctive thing about the 1970s version of evangelical Protestantism is that it established the idea of Christian Zionism. That was a whole new idea, and I'm not aware of any significant antecedents to it before the '70s.

#Pascal

For the evangelicals—because Christian Zionism is very old in the UK, at least 250 years—but for American evangelicals, this was new.

#David Gibbs

I'm sure there were always elements of it, but it became a mass phenomenon that took hold of the whole evangelical movement and turned into a central feature of it. That was the '70s—very much the '70s. It's somewhat ironic because they did have a history of anti-Semitism, but nevertheless, they put that aside. And for purely religious reasons, they became more intensely identified with the

survival of the Jewish state, even more than many Jews. The Israel lobby appreciated this. I've been through the papers of one part of the Israel lobby, the American Jewish Committee, from that period, and people are openly saying this is a good thing because, after all, it increases our political punch.

Jews at that time, in the '70s, were only about 3% of the U.S. population. I think now they're around 2%. They didn't really have that much electoral power; they didn't have that many votes. Evangelical Christians—that's, I think, if I'm not mistaken—about 35% of the U.S. population by the mid-'70s said they had been born again in Christ, the defining feature of being an evangelical. That's a lot of people. That's a lot of votes. And so the Israel lobby put aside whatever reservations they had and ultimately cultivated and forged a relationship with these evangelicals because it increased their political power.

#Pascal

And mostly, you know, just to interject, it's very interesting because Christian evangelicals—Christian Zionists, of course—see Jews as necessary instruments to bring about Armageddon. But as soon as Armageddon comes, the Jews, of course, go to hell. And they're fine with that, right? That's just how it's supposed to be. That's the plan. So, we're nice to the Jews now, we help them with Israel and with the Third Temple, and then at the end, they're in hell and we're in heaven. That's how it's supposed to be, right? But they see them that way, which can't be something Jewish Zionists are very happy about. Still, if you can use it, then why not? Exactly.

#David Gibbs

In other words, it was realpolitik. This is the way politics is done. It was an alliance—an alliance of convenience—but an alliance all the same, and a very politically potent one. I think that's a key element of the Israel lobby: the alliance with the evangelicals. Many of them were, it should be noted, working class, and not just white. There's also a strong African American element in the evangelical movement, and many more recent Mexican American immigrants are involved in it as well. So it's huge. It's multiracial, and it's working class to a significant degree. Many of these people once voted for the Democrats, which enabled the Republicans to forge an electoral realignment based, to some degree, on religion.

And again, Israel was a key component in all of this, and a component that was very useful to the Israel lobby and to the Israeli government. And Trump—it's somewhat ironic. Now, Trump, of course, is blasphemous. He talks in a blasphemous way. His personal conduct is blasphemous. You know, his personal life is totally dissolute. But the evangelicals tend to overlook that, because he's engaging in activities they approve of, including, obviously, rock-solid support for Israel. So I think that this kind of intense pro-Christian attitude is another influence on Trump. It's an electoral

influence. I find it very difficult to believe Trump has any real, deep interest in Jesus Christ, or the Second Coming, or the end times, or any of these things. But he likes power, and he likes adulation, and he gets that from the evangelicals. So I think this is another very significant influence on him.

#Pascal

He's also at an age where becoming more faithful, or adopting certain beliefs, would make a lot of sense psychologically.

#David Gibbs

It's possible.

#Pascal

But I have no indication of that whatsoever. So let's rather discuss—where do you see this influencing the other huge war the United States is still involved in, the proxy war in Ukraine? I mean, the last two weeks have been quite interesting. Ukraine has been immediately crowded out of the media—completely gone from the headlines of the New York Times and so on. And in a sense, Iran is now doing to Ukraine what Ukraine did to COVID—it just takes up the oxygen, the media oxygen. Do you think this will actually translate into developments on the ground, or what? What information do you have on how things are going in Ukraine?

#David Gibbs

I mean, others have noted this, and it's no doubt true. There's no way this can work out except to the benefit of Russia, in the sense that the United States just doesn't have a lot of weapons left to give to Ukraine. Whether Europe pays for them or not makes no difference. The U.S. simply doesn't have the inventory if it's expending everything on the war with Iran—and giving so much to Israel, which it is. So there's that. There's a lack of focus and attention on Ukraine, which I'm sure must be very personally galling to Zelensky.

And finally, there's the issue that this is very beneficial to Russia in terms of raising the global price of oil—obviously very unbeneficial to oil importers like Europe, for example, which are going to suffer heavily from this and accelerate their deindustrialization. I mean, the dilemma of Europe is remarkable. On the one hand, they cut off their main supply of oil and gas, which was Russia—very clever of them—and then they bought much more expensive U.S. fossil fuels and remained reliant, of course, on supplies from the Persian Gulf. Now the Persian Gulf has been cut off.

And, of course, we shouldn't be surprised at all if Donald Trump, with his nationalism, imposes export controls on U.S. oil and gas. So Europe will be left out to dry, so to speak, and the deindustrialization of countries like Germany will accelerate rapidly. This will probably be a turning

point for Europe, including politically. We have every reason to expect parties like the AfD in Germany, the Assemblée Nationale in France, and so on to rise very quickly in response to these conditions. And nevertheless, Russia will be the beneficiary, in the sense that it will gain much more revenue from the higher global price of oil and gas. That, I'm sure, is already happening.

#Pascal

Yeah, you know, the pickle that the Europeans managed to maneuver themselves into—willingly, seemingly, knowingly—is something future historians will study. I agree.

#David Gibbs

It's incredibly strange.

#Pascal

But on the other hand, when you look at the Caucasus and Central Asia, we're already seeing how this war is unfortunately spreading there as well. Do you have any thoughts about the potential involvement of Azerbaijan, Aliyev, and how Central Asia might view this? I mean, Iran is a direct neighbor of Afghanistan, right? And Afghanistan was fighting a war with the United States for 20 years. And actually, Iranians are saying, "Look, we've seen all these U.S. wars in our region. We've studied them. We know how the U.S. operates. This is where we now apply the knowledge we've gained from that." But how do you think the rest of the region, which has already suffered wars with the United States, is going to develop or approach this?

#David Gibbs

I'll say this. Honestly, I don't have a good answer to that. What I would say is, if they're smart, they'll establish as close as possible to a neutral position on America's wars and try to achieve some kind of proper *modus vivendi* with their nearest neighbor, which is Russia—just because it's their nearest neighbor. It's always wise to be on good terms with your nearest neighbor. And I think what's being demonstrated very clearly in the Middle East—something everybody should have anticipated—is that having American bases or an alliance with the United States actually reduces your security. One of the things I did want to comment on is that I've been fascinated—and in some ways confused—by Sweden and Finland.

Sweden and Finland—Finland had been neutral since '47, and Sweden for centuries, literally, had been neutral. And they did quite well with neutrality. Their security was ensured; they didn't get drawn into conflicts. And now they're giving up that security for an America that is not only unreliable and views Europe with contempt, but is openly a threat to their security, as is being demonstrated in the Gulf right now. One wonders if somebody should perhaps have taken the Swedes and the Finns and shaken them a bit by the scruff of the neck and said, "What are you

thinking, guys?” Because it doesn’t seem that what they’re doing is rational. A lot of this is based on hypotheticals—“What if Russia does this?”

What if Russia does that? There was a book recently published by a German academic called **If Russia Wins**. It's a bestseller in Europe, I'm told. It's by this guy named Masala, who's a professor with very close ties to the Bundeswehr and to NATO. And it's literally fiction—Russia starts acting militarily aggressive, beginning with the Baltics. It's fiction, yet people are treating it and reviewing it as if it were real. And that’s happened before. In the 1980s, a British general did exactly the same thing. He wrote a book called **The Third World War**, a fictionalized account of Russia attacking Western Europe, and people treated it as if it were a documentary.

And I think what we have here is an extreme case of the neoconservative logic now being applied to Europe—treating hypothetical threats as actual threats, and remote threats as certainties, then planning accordingly. And it’s always “safer to militarize than to demilitarize,” right? None of that makes any sense when you think about it, but that’s the logic being applied in Europe, as well as in the United States and Israel, of course.

#Pascal

I have two pieces to explain this. One is, of course, that yes—the Europeans, the Swedes and the Finns included—swallowed the pill, the neoconservative pill you just described. They work in these hypotheticals, and they've worked themselves into a point where the hypotheticals are believed as dogma. It's basically: if Russia wins, then naturally the next step will be the Baltics. It's absolutely clear. It's like the domino theory. It's taken as a certainty that this is what's going to happen, right? And if you question that, then you're the delusional one.

#David Gibbs

The fact that there's no evidence to support that is of no importance. It doesn't matter.

#Pascal

Dogma doesn't depend on evidence; it depends on belief.

#David Gibbs

Can I just add to that? I mean, coming at it from the United States—and with a long memory, because I've been around for a while—during the Cold War there was this tendency among Americans to look at the Europeans as the smart ones. They were the ones who showed nuance, who didn’t get carried away with the boogeyman rhetoric and so on. And the European press was much better than the American press. I remember reading **Le Monde**, and it was much better than **The New York Times**. Even the British press—the BBC—was better than their American

counterparts. Now, everything in Europe... I don't read German, but I read French. It's *The New York Times*.

#Pascal

I know, but it makes sense, doesn't it? After 30, 35 years of having won the Cold War and having to admit that the United States' approach was actually correct in winning it, right? Everybody in Europe started integrating, right? Including the newspapers. So all of the newspapers are downstream of *The New York Times* these days. They'll open *The New York Times* to understand how the world needs to be framed, and then they go along with that because that's objective truth to them. And the other element, by the way, with Finland and Sweden, is that the Europeans have lost the capacity to think outside the realm of deterrence. Deterrence is all they can think about, and within that framework you just have no space. Your frame excludes the option of having neutrality as a security strategy, because it's not deterrence—because you need to scare the other side into not attacking you. That's it.

#David Gibbs

The possibility that you could scare them into actually attacking you doesn't seem to have crossed their minds.

#Pascal

It does. It does. But it's the reason why they argue we need to militarize—because we are too weak, so we'll invite attack. Therefore, we need to militarize. The whole idea of, "Oh no, if we're no threat to anyone, if we only have friends on all sides, then we're perfectly fine," is just outside the way they can think about military strategy. And a large part—not all, but a large part, especially in the establishment—has lost the ability to think in those non-deterrence terms. So what we need to study is how they managed to install that mindset. How did 35, almost 40 years of that manage to crowd out the other security paradigm?

#David Gibbs

It's interesting. I mean, basically, it's not just a political but almost an intellectual conversion of the European elite and the European thinking class, shall we say, into carbon copies of the United States. Another thing that's rather interesting is that it's not as if the American alliance has worked out that well. Again, we're seeing the effects of the American alliance in the Gulf. I'm just wondering if people in Sweden and Finland would say, "Gee, I wonder if that's—look, the UAE and Qatar are allied with the United States, and now they're getting attacked. They wouldn't have been attacked if they hadn't done that." We'll see if this has any effect on causing them to rethink their strategy. Another one, of course, is the issue of guns versus butter. I mean, Europe is deindustrializing.

They're making themselves actively poorer. They've been doing that all along, and it's going to make things even worse. They've done it to themselves—through policies they chose to follow but didn't have to. And now they're going to raise the military budget, talking about going from maybe 1% to 5%. You know, this is going to come out of their living standards. And they're openly saying we should happily do that. They might look at the United States. The United States is basically a country with enormous social problems. Its infrastructure has broken down to the level of a much poorer country. You go to Europe and it's much nicer there. Europeans want to give all that up so they can look like the United States. It just seems like a very strange idea.

#Pascal

It is, but in their mental framework, it's not the Americans doing that to them. It's not themselves doing it to them. It's the Russians. The Russians create that threat, and because of that, we are suffering, right?

#David Gibbs

That's the rationalization.

#Pascal

If they stopped threatening us, if they were civilized people, we wouldn't have to do this. I mean, it's perfectly rational within their framework. So it's very unfortunate, but it will continue for quite a long time, I think—at least another 20 years—until a new generation comes along that will have to restudy what actually happened and reassess it. But the people who are within the current mindset will maintain it until the end.

#David Gibbs

You might get a social rupture in Europe. Well, I mean, in the medium term, it's very easy to imagine an AfD government in Germany, for example. It is—the right coming to power in the major countries of Europe. Now, will they function differently? I don't know. I wouldn't vote for them, I'll tell you that. But still, this is something the European establishments very much fear, and they brought it upon themselves.

#Pascal

What right-wing conservative friends in Germany told me is that the AfD, on the national level, is already converted to the standard way of thinking. It's the AfD on the local level that still has some of this—not pacifist, but non-militarist—soul in it. But the process, the system, is already doing to the AfD what they did to the Greens. It's washing them, on the national level, into becoming a government party and basically getting them, especially on that part, in line. I don't know how true

that actually is, but that's what my sources there tell me. Because it's systematic, right? The problem is systematic.

And I do believe it's the way these last 30 years have actually developed for many Europeans. And look at the Epstein files and what they tell us about the intermingling of these elites, right? All the names—they're American, British, European. Then you've got a political figure in the Middle East, but that's about it. There's no Japanese, not many Russians, and so on. It's this entanglement. It's one blob, one thing, and it's going to be really painful and take a long time to actually disentangle it—if it disentangles at all. I don't know.

#David Gibbs

One possibility would be, obviously, that the standard political system does not address basic social problems, and they fester. Politics will often move to the streets, and you'll get social disorder, riots, violence. I mean, I wouldn't rule that out as a possibility in Europe or in the United States, for that matter.

#Pascal

No, no, it's true. Actually, in the end, what the U.S. plan for Iran in January this year was might very well happen at home—that real civil discontent might start haunting these countries. But the question to me, I mean, just to come back again to Iran, is whether or not that was ever meant seriously. You know, this whole idea that Donald Trump touted, like, "Okay, we're going to bomb your regime, and then you Iranians stand up and take over the government." Was that ever really meant as a strategy? Do you believe, within the neoconservative framework, they actually thought something like that was possible? Or was it really just another kind of excuse to justify bombing people over there?

#David Gibbs

Well, there's a remarkable superficiality to neoconservative thinking. There always has been—basically a kind of deification of military force and covert operations, and this belief that military force solves all problems. I think the idea of decapitation here was something that transfixed both the Israelis and the United States. And I think the superficial, immediate success of the Venezuela operation—the kidnapping of the president and his wife, as illegal as it may be—probably supercharged the idea of trying to do something like that in Iran. There's a very big focus on personalization in their thinking, this notion that the problems the world faces are caused by bad men.

There's a great man theory of history here—it's all about bad men. Not very many bad women, but bad men. And they always have names: Putin, Milosevic, Kim Jong-un, Castro back in the old days, Gaddafi. So I guess the idea is that we've so convinced ourselves it's all about bad men that the

superficiality of it all has kind of sunk in, you might say. If we simply decapitate the bad men—kill them or kidnap them—all will be well. I think there was some of that thinking going on here. In addition, I think there was a fallback option from the Israeli standpoint. I don't know if the Americans thought this, because I don't think this fight penetrated.

But the Israelis may very well have felt that if you destabilize Iran to the point of social chaos, civil war, and national breakup over an extended period, that's not a bad outcome. Because basically, that would mean Iran would be effectively decapitated as a major country. They seem to rule out the fact that chaos itself can produce threats—they leave out that detail. Nevertheless, I think that could very well be the Israeli thinking. From the American standpoint, the idea seems to be that if you eliminate the leadership, eliminate the bad men, kill them, the problem will take care of itself.

It's remarkable how the same thing happened in Iraq when it was invaded in 2003. The idea was to overthrow Saddam Hussein and everything would fall into place. There was no planning. As I recall, the number of American personnel—military and civilian—who even spoke Arabic was very small, and they never really had a plan for what to do after they overthrew Saddam Hussein. In retrospect, and even at the time, it looked crazy, but somehow they had this certitude that all you needed to do was use military force to overthrow the government and everything would fall into place. That's been the neoconservative idea for a long time, and I think we've seen it play out here as well.

#Pascal

Yeah, I think you're also right about Israel. I mean, the main strategy, in my view—anything discernible if you take the last 30 years as a reference—is that chaos, chaos in the environment, actually solves the problem, right? If the potential adversaries are in utter disarray, then you're snug over there on the Mediterranean, right? Everything's okay. And if the same can be done to Iran and maybe Syria, right, that's also the idea. Libya is another one. I mean, other former enemies like Libya were dealt with in that way. And they were dealt with—they're not on the list of concerns anymore.

#David Gibbs

Yes, that's right. I think that, you know, the long-term perspective is that chaos can produce terrorism. It can produce, obviously, subnational groups possibly seeking weapons of mass destruction for who knows what purpose. There are all sorts of things that can rise out of chaos, none of which are good. But for some reason, again, the Israelis don't think about it in those terms. They just simplify the issue to destroying a country as a solution.

#Pascal

Yeah, because, you know, if you look at the people who make those decisions, all of them so far have fared quite well with that strategy, right? None of the Israeli prime ministers, especially

Benjamin Netanyahu, have really suffered any kind of serious repercussion. On the contrary, I mean, the next airport over there might be named after him, and he might be remembered, you know, alongside Ben-Gurion and Herzog as one of the people who really built the capacity of the state. The U.S. president built his "Peace Board of Peace," and he's thinking of himself as one of the three or four greatest presidents of the U.S., deserving another head on Mount Rushmore.

#David Gibbs

And they're not far from achieving that.

#Pascal

So the people responsible for this have only ever had success with the strategy they used in the past.

#David Gibbs

You're right about that. Obviously, there's the phrase "nothing succeeds like success," but also "nothing fails like failure." And my guess is the odds heavily favor some form of failure here. Exactly what form that will take is very hard to predict, but I just don't see it as likely that this is going to end in a U.S.-Israeli success. If it doesn't end in U.S.-Israeli success, that would probably encourage more interventions, further militarism, further risk-taking—with who knows what consequence. I mean, Cuba, I assume, would be next.

And I don't know—maybe a ramped-up war against Russia because it gets so cocky. Perhaps a war with China. It's hard to know how far this would go. But hubris, obviously, is kind of a self-fueling activity. The more hubris you have, the more risk you take to feed it. So I think—hate to say it—but the idea of the United States or Israel doing anything that could be defined as "winning" would be a more dangerous outcome than losing. Although losing is very dangerous too, because, as you noted, the U.S. and/or Israel could resort to nuclear weapons.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, absolutely. And that's true as well. In German, we've got a saying: hubris comes before the fall. And it works—you know, it works until it doesn't. It reminds me a little bit of the Black Swan problem and the turkeys, right? The turkeys right before Thanksgiving saying everything is fine. The whole last year was just one steady growth of population, right? "We're fine now." It's fine until you're not. But whether this Iran situation is going to be the event that actually becomes the final Thanksgiving for the turkeys is, of course, another question. The issue is that it, again, costs a lot of people's lives. I wish there were a way to constrain it, but it's just so bloody again.

#David Gibbs

Well, I mean, the loss of lives isn't just military. But again, you know, there was that Lancet study—I'm sure you've seen references to it—which looked at the cumulative effects of U.S. sanctions over 50 years. I believe the figure they gave for the total death toll, cumulative across all regions, was 38 million from U.S. sanctions alone.

#Pascal

Five hundred million people a year die from U.S. and EU sanctions—sorry, I mean five hundred thousand, half a million people every year from the sanctions. The direct and indirect effects include, of course, not getting medicine. Funnily enough, my interview yesterday was with one of the authors—not of that study, but from the overall research group. It's devastating. It's devastating. And that's just economic sanctions. That doesn't even count the bombs that kill people. Although, interestingly enough, that number is bigger than the number of people dying from the bombs.

#David Gibbs

That's right. Yeah, that's true. We're getting close to, I guess, wrapping up the interview. But I did want to bring up the domestic politics in the United States around the war and note something. This really has been a kind of historical turning point for my country. Traditionally, we have that familiar idea of "rally around the flag," and when the president goes to war, he initially gets a big bump in popularity. That doesn't work anymore. A majority of the public, even at the very beginning of the war, did not support it. That's very unusual, and usually support declines over time. So if Trump loses this war, it's going to be devastating for him. Many people in his entourage—the Make America Great Again crowd—Tucker Carlson, for example, and Marjorie Taylor Greene, a very conservative congresswoman, have already condemned the war in the strongest possible terms.

They said, you know, we voted for you as president because we thought you wouldn't start wars like this. You wouldn't be as interventionist as the Democrats. And here you're being just as bad, or worse, than they are. So I think this could cause something of a political explosion in the United States. It also suggests it's going to be much more difficult for future presidents of either party to go to war, because if you can't mobilize public opinion even at the beginning, that's going to be very hard to sustain politically. And I think that part is actually a big positive. What caused Trump to change? I don't know, because his first term was much less interventionist than previous presidents. So this is a big reversal. Why he changed suddenly in the second term—that I can't tell you.

#Pascal

I keep wondering if somebody actually, you know, literally physically threatened him. Because the one thing he was not—there are a lot of bad things to say about him in his first term—but the one thing he was not was bloodthirsty. And if you look at the speech he gave at the beginning of the war, it was completely bloodthirsty. It was like, "You either surrender, or we will kill you all. Everybody will die." He didn't talk like that before. I mean, something moved him into that space,

and I wouldn't be surprised if he got physically threatened, you know, with a knife on the table or something like that.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, I mean, it's a big mystery to me what exactly happened there, and I don't really have a good answer right now. I do note, though, that there's that huge, huge change. I also wonder about people like Tulsi Gabbard, who's the national intelligence director, who in her career as a Democrat and then as a Republican was railing against the warmongers—Hillary Clinton was a warmonger, part of the war machine. That was her vocabulary. And here she is, still in the administration, at least publicly speaking in support of the war. J.D. Vance, not quite as vociferous as Tulsi Gabbard, but somewhat similar—he's also publicly supporting the war. So again, how long this will last if things start to fall apart, as they may in the next couple of days, I don't know. But so far, at least, it's very surprising that people who really should know better have stuck with Trump.

#Pascal

I mean, it's a huge mystery, right? Because these two figures, Vance and Gabbard, are obviously not happy about this. They clearly belong to the non-neocon camp. The only thing I can see is that they're strategically waiting for the right moment to put the knife in Donald Trump's back and publicly come out against him. But maybe that's just wishful thinking.

#David Gibbs

I don't know. I can't predict what they're going to do. But on the whole, there's going to be no good outcome to this war, that's for sure. I think the best outcome would be that Israel and the United States get taught a strong lesson—that interventionism is a disaster. And hopefully other countries will learn that aligning with the United States, having U.S. bases on their territory, actually decreases their security in a very real and direct way. Hopefully that will sink in for a lot of countries.

#Pascal

If that lesson were taken, it would be even more reason to do neutrality studies—to understand how to be safe without interventionism. David, that's a wonderful final word. For people who want to find your writing or your publications, where should they go?

#David Gibbs

dgibbs.arizona.edu. When you put up the page for this video on YouTube, I'll give you the URL.

#Pascal

I'll put the link in the description box below. Everybody, check out David Gibbs' writings. Professor Gibbs, thank you for your time today.

#David Gibbs

Thank you, Pascal. Thank you.