
Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice

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Op-Ed

15 years on: ‘We told you so’?

I remember speaking with Paula Henderson, who used to have the position I currently hold in Bienville House, back in early 2002. This was just before it became all too obvious the United States’ government was dedicated to invading Iraq and justifying that intervention by whatever means. That ‘roll-out’ was soon to come, but only rumblings of it were yet public. I told Paula we had better get ready. The war was coming. Bienville House needed to be vocal in Louisiana against what was approaching.

It’s not very satisfying to tell someone, ‘we told you so.’ That we were right, all too right, actually not nearly pessimistic enough about how destructive the American invasion of Iraq would prove to be. Especially after 5,000 Americans and countless Iraqis are dead and never coming back. A lot of people laughed us off for warning how many would die, how much it would cost, how the justifications for the war were lies, how this war would not bring peace and democracy, but further war, instability, and danger. One young man on active duty at our public forum at the Cox Center for Student Athletes in early 2003 asked words to the effect of, ‘What would you do about Saddam’s WMDs? Because I’m going to be facing them soon.’ Of course, there were none. He didn’t need to worry about how fast he could put his gas mask on. But he had a lot of other things to worry about, some we could foresee, many our opponents brushed off, and

some none of us could even imagine. I wonder what became of him. Did he go to Iraq? Did he get home safely? What does he think of the war now, 15 years later? Not only Iraq, but now Syria, Libya, and Yemen too, pulverized, millions of refugees scattered abroad, entire cities smashed and burned, a generation of children without an education.

And the lessons haven’t been learned. We still fall for the same lies. One of the administrators of the 2000s torture program is running the CIA, confirmed to do so by the U.S. Senate. Our local shock-jock radio DJ, Richard Condon, who drove up in his company’s radio station van to our March 2003 peace march at Wampold Park, the “Iron Warriors” motorcycle gang in tow, threatening to push us in the LSU lakes—he’s still on the air in Baton Rouge, five days a week.

The war hasn’t ended, of course. It wasn’t 15 years ago; it’s ongoing, and escalating. Iraq is a failed state; Afghanistan is more and more dangerous, with more and more civilian casualties, every year. American troops and contractors are now in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, all over the Sahel and Sahara, and who knows where else, doing who knows what. Even after 9/11, the government didn’t ban the population of whole countries from entering America. Under the Bush administration, the government didn’t expel hundreds of thousands with Temporary Protected Status from the same

nations devastated by American dirty wars in the 1980s, like Honduras and El Salvador, and Haiti. Under President Obama, and now Trump, American weapons, American mid-air refueling, American intelligence, American expertise and spare parts and now we learn, covert U.S. Special Forces ‘boots on the ground’ – all that is daily aiding and abetting the strangulation of Yemen by the Saudi Arabian Air Force. An entire country of 25 million held hostage, at the brink of starvation, rampant cholera, and nowhere to run to.

I met with Congressman Graves about a year ago on this issue of the war in Yemen. He listened, took notes on his laptop, asked a question about how to spell the port city of Hodeida, and I believe really didn’t know much about this war. I asked about the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF). The Congress voted just after 9/11 for a still-active AUMF to fight Al-Qaeda, but how on earth are the Houthis, who have nothing to do with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS, or any of that, covered by that Authorization? Mr. Graves told me he’d looked into it, and he thinks it’s legal. But given he knew very little about America’s war in Yemen, I’m not confident he knew enough to know which countries we’re bombing and why to make that legal judgment. He also didn’t seem to know much about the U.S. government’s massive \$1 trillion, 30-year nuclear weapons

modernization program when I brought that up with him as a place to find the \$50 billion to restore Louisiana’s coast.

So, what of our current moment? War with North Korea? We’ll see; I doubt it. (I wrote this before the Singapore ‘summit’; my opinion’s unchanged). War with Iran? We should all get ready. More ‘dodgy dossiers’ are getting teed up for a PR campaign to sell the war. The administration’s moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, tearing up the Iran Nuclear Deal, the whole-hearted embrace of wanton violence by Saudi, UAE and Israeli forces against people who can hardly even hit back – it doesn’t look promising.

Yet, we’re still active. Some of us, at least. And we have a few new faces. Bienville House has provided important support to the LSU Chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine in the past few years. We need young people to be involved. And that gives me hope. We’re getting more Reich-Henderson essays than ever before, too, from Baton Rouge area high school students. And there’s going to be a Wade Mackie Award this year. But in a country that feels a lot like 2002 all over again, I’m not seeing the same surge of opposition to American warmaking that we had 16 years ago. We might not have much more time before that’s really important again.

-- Brian Marks

2017 Reich-Henderson Student Writing Competition winner

The 2017 Reich-Henderson Student Writing Competition winner is Aris Williams, a 10th grade student at Baton Rouge Magnet High School. Her winning essay is entitled, “Alton Sterling: His Death, and the Aftermath.” You can read her winning essay at: www.bienvillehousecenter.org. Ms. Williams receives a \$250 prize. We thank her, and the several dozen other student contributors and their teachers, for their participation.

The Reich-Henderson Writing Competition on Student Engagement in Social Justice is named in memory of Paula Henderson and ‘Doc’ Reich, two of Bienville House’s most stalwart members. We’re pleased to announce a good response to our 2018 Reich-Henderson competition, and will announce a winner or winners later this summer.

For links to prior newsletters and other Bienville House news, check out our website:
<http://www.bienvillehousecenter.org>

Edgar Cage and Together Baton Rouge win 2018 Wade Mackie Peacemaker Award

This year's Wade Mackie Peacemaker Awardee is Mr. Edgar Cage, on behalf of Together Baton Rouge. Mr. Cage, a long-time and tireless volunteer with Together Baton Rouge, has led many initiatives of that organization around Louisiana's capital city. He is a major part of the food access campaign to eliminate food deserts in the city, serving on the East Baton Rouge Food Access Commission and the Scotlandville Mobile Food Pantry. Earlier, he helped lead the tax initiative for the Baton Rouge bus system and he remains a highly active member at TBR meetings, the Legislature and Metro Council, public fora, and media interviews. We believe the work of Mr. Cage exemplifies the activism needed on the justice issues Bienville House advocates for internationally, right here in our home city. We also recognize Mr. Cage doesn't do this work

alone, but is part of the larger umbrella of Together Baton Rouge. Thus, we are awarding the Wade Mackie to him and TBR.

The Wade Mackie Peacemaker Award is named after Mr. Mackie, an American Friends Service Committee representative who participated in the Civil Rights Movement in Baton Rouge in the 1950s and 1960s. The AFSC office in Baton Rouge was on Government Street, not very far from where Together Baton Rouge's office is today. We think if Mr. Mackie were still living, he and Mr. Cage would have a lot to talk about how our city has changed, and how it's not, in the past half-century.

Stay tuned to Bienville House's social media and website for an announcement of when and where the 2018 Wade Mackie Award presentation will take place.

-- Brian Marks

Two speakers at LSU present alternate views on Israeli politics: Gilad Katz (Israeli Consul General) and Haneen Zoabi (Member of the Israeli Knesset)

Not long after the New Orleans Palestinian Solidarity Committee was able to successfully pass the Human Rights ordinance surrounding the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) campaign, LSU hosted Consul General of Israel, Gilad Katz, on February 21st, 2018. (Less than two weeks after the ordinance had passed, the city council was pressured to reconsider their decision and so the ordinance was revoked.) Initially LSU requested another speaker to come, but the consulate sent Gilad Katz, the Consul

General of Israel to the Southwest, to speak instead. Katz is notorious for being an outspoken anti-BDS advocate, so his presence in Louisiana at this time is unlikely to be a coincidence. Katz spoke in front of LSU students and faculty about what was meant to be an academic lecture, but instead it was far from it. His speech was full of propaganda and lacked factual history. When students wanted to acknowledge Palestine's role in his talk, he dismissed it, and offered that the students inquire with MK Haneen Zoabi. For the

rest of the lecture he ignored the existence of Palestinians in the “conflict” he was talking about.

Fortunately, MK Haneen Zoabi came to LSU on April 9th, 2018 and spoke about how Israel legitimizes its regime by implementing racist laws that either justify Israeli racism against Palestinians or condemn Palestinians for calling Israelis out on their racism. Ms. Zoabi, a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship from Nazareth in the Galilee, is the founder of *I’lam*, the Media Center for Arab Palestinians in Israel, and has served in Israel’s national parliament since 2009. A strong proponent of Palestinian rights and

democratic norms in Israeli society, Zoabi is frequently the target of efforts to expel her from the Knesset. In her remarks at LSU, she explained her vision for a democratic Israel and peace between Israel and Palestine, discriminatory laws in the Israeli legal system, and their evolution over time in response to growing hostility to Palestinians in Israeli politics.

MK Zoabi met with several Bienville House members. I think I can speak for all of us in wishing Louisiana had a Congressperson half as impressive as her to represent us in Washington.

Report: The 2016 National Students for Justice in Palestine annual conference

Editor’s note: Bienville House helped fund the travel of two LSU students to this national conference in late 2016. Our organization is proud to continue our tradition of supporting student activism about U.S. foreign policy. Only through your contributions can we continue to help young people in Baton Rouge engage with the crucial international questions in our world and confront injustice at home and abroad.

National Students for Justice in Palestine (NSJP) is an organization working to develop a network of student-led activist groups. This organization specifically seeks to form a developed solidarity front for the Palestinian cause, while combatting an array of other social justice issues. NSJP was first established in 2010 and the first conference was held in 2011 at Columbia University. The 2016 annual conference was held at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Majdal Ismail, an LSU alumnus, and Saida Mizyed, a freshman at LSU, recently reactivated the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapter at LSU. Through this establishment they have been working to recruit other activists and promote political awareness on campus. Majdal and Saida decided to attend the National Students for Justice in Palestine conference in hopes to strengthen their leadership skills, find alternative recruitment practices, and form alliances with other like-minded student organizations on nearby

campuses. The Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice helped sponsor the trip in hopes that Majdal and Saida’s efforts would aid them in gaining success towards their common goal of enhancing the awareness and involvement of social justice issues in the community.

The conference was held over the weekend of November 4th - 6th, 2016. The event brought together a group of around two to three hundred students, all from different backgrounds and levels of awareness, seeking to gain knowledge and improve their understanding of the situation in order to further spread awareness to their peers back at their universities and beyond. Each day a multitude of workshops and panels were held from which students had to choose which to attend. The workshops spanned over many topics including but not limited to: the study of Zionism, the history of Palestine, Syrian and Palestinian liberation, SJP, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, and even dabke (a style of Palestinian dance). The organization emphasized that no one social

issue is divorced from another, which was seen with the open solidarity with the NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) movement. Various prominent speakers were featured during the conference including Ramah Kudaimi, Thomas Stanley, and Sa'ed Atshan. A cultural night was held with performances, emceed by Remi Kanazi, which included poetry by Meriem Abou Ghazaleh and Joseph Green, Piscataway music and dance by Sebi Medina-Tayac, rap by Safi G, and dabke and music by Ahmed Hamad and Hamze Allham.

In the span of this event the organization worked to aid participants in obtaining cultural

fluency and political awareness. The conference was successful in creating an environment that was conducive to learning, networking, as well as encouraging students and attendees to openly discuss the often suppressed topic of Palestine on most college campuses and offering resources on the topic that are often scarcely found on most college campuses. Going to the conference gave Saida and Majdal the confidence and tools they needed to continue organizing within their SJP chapter at LSU. Without help from the Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice this trip would not have been possible.

Bullet points from a constituent's letter regarding gun control

The following is an excerpt from a letter sent to my congressional representatives, following one of the recent school shootings. The letter focuses on issues relevant to mass shootings; however, in terms of numbers, mass shootings cause a tiny percentage of gun-related deaths, while suicides represent the majority. For an excellent, data-filled summary of data on gun ownership and gun-related deaths, check out Nicholas Kristof's opinion piece in the New York Times:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/06/opinion/how-to-reduce-shootings.html>

The gun violence epidemic is a complex problem for which there is not single solution, and so there are many partial solutions that you should support.

- 1) There is no reason for a civilian to own a military-grade weapon like an AR-15. Those weapons were designed to kill people, not for hunting or self-defense. I am not advocating that the government "take away everyone's guns." We don't allow civilians to own bazookas or hand grenades; assault-style rifles should be placed in the same category.
- 2) Following the same logic as #1, prohibit sales of high-capacity magazines.
- 3) Cut out the loopholes that allow people to purchase guns without a background

check. Background checks should be required for EVERY gun purchase, including at gun shows, etc.

- 4) Require a waiting period for gun sales.
- 5) Require gun owners to have a license, and have safety training be a requirement for obtaining a license. In the state of Louisiana, first-time drivers are compelled to take a driver's education course, and yet an 18 year-old can purchase a gun without having even the most cursory safety training!
- 6) Raise the age limit for purchasing a gun to 21. It makes absolutely no sense that an 18 year-old can legally purchase an AR-15, and yet they can't buy a beer.

- 7) Oppose arming school teachers as a strategy for limiting shootings. As my 10 year-old pointed out, if there are more guns at schools, there are more chances of an accident happening. He also pointed out that a teacher with a handgun can't do much against a shooter armed with an assault-style weapon. Are we going to equip teachers with ARs? Or are they expected—in the midst of a chaotic situation with people screaming and running every which way—to stand their ground against someone with an AR... with only a handgun in their hand? Get real. I would also ask you to imagine a school shooting... teachers pull out their weapons and start shooting, too... police arrive... faced with multiple shooters at the scene, how are they to know who are the good guys and who is the bad guy?
- 8) Mental health is clearly a problem in our country, and I support funding for treatment of mental health problems. But this is not the solution for our gun violence problem. Countries comparable to our own (e.g., Canada, Australia, Great Britain) have gun violence rates that are FAR lower than ours—is mental health care that much better in those countries? Or, perhaps, does our astronomical gun violence rate have something to do with the much, much higher gun ownership rate in this country compared to others?
- 9) Repeal the Dickey Amendment, and fund CDC research on gun violence. We need good data and rigorous study of gun violence in order to take an evidence-based approach to addressing the problem.
- 10) Reflexively citing the 2nd Amendment as a reason for not supporting gun control legislation is inexcusable, especially when lives are at stake. The 2nd Amendment was written at a time when

state-of-the-art guns were muskets, and its wording explicitly mentions regulation (“highly regulated militia”).

Furthermore, the constitution was meant to be a document that could be amended as necessary (e.g., the Constitution once “enshrined” the “right” to own slaves, and prohibited women from voting). I will remind you of the words of Thomas Jefferson, inscribed on the walls of the Jefferson Memorial:

"I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

As parents, it is our duty and responsibility to do everything we can to care for our children and keep them safe. As a parent, I am writing to advocate and support legislative action that will curb gun violence in our country. Enough is enough. As a parent and elected representative, you have a duty to protect our children's right to living without the threat of being shot when they are at school, or at the movies, or at the mall, or at a concert. If you fail to do something to limit access to guns, then the next time there is a mass shooting you will have blood on your hands. It is as simple as that. As a legislator, you are in a position of power that most of us parents do not have, and have been given the responsibility to pass laws that defend the rights of your constituents, to protect their life, liberty, and their pursuit of happiness.

-- Jessica Eberhard

Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice
June 14, 2018

To: Louisiana Congressman Garrett Graves

Subject: Legality of American support for Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen

Congressman Graves:

I write on behalf of the Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice, a non-profit organization in Louisiana in existence since 1978. I serve as the president of the organization.

The subject of this letter is ongoing American material support for the Saudi / Emirati blockade and air war on Yemen. Specifically, we question the legality of American involvement in this conflict due to the lack of an Congressional AUMF (Authorization for the Use of Military Force) against Ansar Allah ('the Houthis') in Yemen, the existence of Congressionally unauthorized American ground combat operations in Yemen, the use of American military hardware and aerial refueling in Saudi bombing of Yemen's essential humanitarian infrastructure vital to keep 20+ million people alive, and the employment of American weapons, aerial refueling, and other services facilitating starvation as a weapon of war through air, land and sea blockade and assault upon the port of Hodeida.

I last spoke with you on this matter in person in Baton Rouge on April 18th, 2017 at a meeting with constituents. (At that time, the assault on Hodeida was being hinted at again; among your questions to me was how to spell the name of that city).

The specific 'ask' of this letter is for Congressman Graves to sign onto [the June 13th letter](#) by Rep. Ro Khanna and co-sponsorship of [House Concurrent Resolution 81](#) seeking a stop to American military assistance to the Saudi/UAE intervention in Yemen's civil war.

Yemen is the poorest nation in the Middle East, at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula. Even in times of peace, it is a country gravely lacking fresh water and reliant on imports for 90% of its food. A nation long destabilized by foreign powers, Yemen has experienced numerous civil wars in the 20th century, all of which have resulted in the failure of foreign military interventions, from Britain in the 1950s, to Egypt in the 1960s, the Soviet Union in the 1970s and, now, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s 'coalition' since 2015.

Yemen's current internal political conflict has been overshadowed by massive aerial bombardment and suffocating land, naval and air blockade by Saudi Arabia and its partners in the past three years, violence universally recognized to have caused tens of thousands of civilian deaths and the collapse of Yemen's food distribution and public health system, resulting in the world's largest cholera epidemic and largest famine with more than 20 million people desperately close to starvation in mid-2018. Time and again, over the past three years Saudi air power has struck civilian hospitals, funerals, prisons, ports, and other essential infrastructure and protected sites contrary to the laws of war. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia could not possibly continue this bombing campaign a single day without the constant, sustained support of U.S. military assets, American foreign military sales deliveries of spare parts, bombs, missiles, and other equipment, and the active participation by USAF mid-air refueling, American contractor aircraft maintenance, and United States military intelligence cooperation.

It is as morally and legally bankrupt for America's government to supply weapons, refueling, and maintenance to bomb Yemen's civilian infrastructure as it is for Russia to do the same for Bashar Al-Assad's air force in Syria. It is blatantly obvious to international observers, international humanitarian organizations, and journalists the Saudi Air Force is waging indiscriminate war Yemen's vital, fragile, battered humanitarian sector that is perilously close to failure and the deaths by famine and cholera of millions of innocent people. People who have never done anything to America, people who aren't in ISIS, or Al-Qaeda, who had nothing to do with 9/11 or any other terrorist attack upon American territory, American citizens or American interests.

I don't consider Ansar Allah, better known as 'the Houthis,' are the moral equivalent of America's Founding Fathers. Nevertheless, this organization is not a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, they have never attacked the United States, and they have no relationship with AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) or ISIS. The post-9/11 AUMF Congress authorized allows American presidents to attack those who attacked America on 9/11 and the organizations behind them, and since the Obama administration's reinterpretation of that AUMF, 'associated forces' of those organizations. The Houthis are none of those things. I therefore question how on Earth American military action in Yemen such as USAF aerial refueling of Saudi F-15s bombing Yemeni civilian targets or American special forces on the ground inside Yemen hunting Houthi rocket launchers is a legal use of American military power. Simply put, Congress has not declared war on these people, and neither President Obama nor Trump have the power Congress has Constitutionally vested in it to decide who America's enemies are.

Yet, that is what has been happening the past three years. In the *New York Times* on May 3rd, it was revealed U.S. special forces 'boots on the ground' are inside Yemen, engaged in tracking down long-range Houthi rocket launchers. As, again, Congress has not declared hostilities against this organization, nor does America have a bilateral or multilateral defense treaty with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia pledging America to defend the Kingdom from such attacks, nor have the Houthis fired these rockets at American interests, this is an illegal use of American ground forces in a country we are not at war with, intervening in someone else's civil war by taking sides with a foreign power failing to bomb and starve one side into submission.

We also know, due to an Associated Press investigation, the UAE is running 18 secret prisons and torture centers across Yemen. The AP cites a source claiming the U.S. receives intelligence from these torture centers and American personnel participate in interrogations at these centers. Senators McCain and Reed (D-RI) have questioned in writing the U.S. Defense Secretary about these allegations of U.S. complicity in UAE torture inside Yemen. Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) also advanced an amendment in the House Rules Committee to investigate these allegations. You should sign onto that amendment, because America's military should not be engaging in torture, even more so torturing people who aren't at war with America.

The war in Yemen is not an Iranian proxy war against America's allies. This is made clear in the recent PBS *Frontline* documentary on the war, in which Houthi leaders say they'd love Iranian help, but can't get any material support. The simple fact is you can't drive from Iran to Yemen, because Saudi Arabia's in between and controls all the border crossings. Nor can you fly in from Iran, because the Saudi Air Force controls Yemen's air space and bombed Sana'a airport in 2015. And it's exceedingly hard to smuggle in anything by boat to Yemen, because of the Saudi / Emirati blockade of the country and control of all its ports, save one, Hodeida on the Red Sea coast. Given that Yemen already had SCUD missiles in-country since the 1970s, and is the most heavily armed country on the planet per capita, there is no shortage of small arms, heavy weapons, rockets, and almost anything else to fight a war with already

there. The Houthis' weapons are, in considerable part, U.S.-made equipment taken or handed over by Yemeni Army units defecting to the Houthis since the civil war started.

Furthermore, this is not a 'Sunni-Shi'a proxy religious/sectarian war'. The majority faith in Yemen's highlands is 'fiver' Zaidi Shi'ism, not Iran's state religion of 'twelver' Imamiyyah Shi'ism. Yemeni and Iranian Shi'a are about as theologically similar as Presbyterians and Latter Day Saints are by way of both being rooted in Martin Luther's Reformation, which is to say not very much. Nor are Yemen's complex problems a result of age-old religious feuds. Yemen is torn by north-south divides, by rival political leaders, by poverty and environmental precarity, by a super-abundance of weaponry, and much else. But more than anything, the scale of the killing, famine, disease and horror is amplified by foreign military intervention by Saudi Arabia. This intervention has not and is not showing any sign of bringing the civil war to an end. In a reckless attempt to break this deadlock, this week Saudi/UAE naval and air forces and pro-Saudi and -Emirati ground forces are attacking the last open port to rebel-held north Yemen, Hodeida. If Hodeida is closed to humanitarian imports of food and medicine, then more than 10 million people will be in immediate danger of death. They already hold on by the barest of means, through the very thin trickle of assistance allowed into the port past the Saudi Navy. American military assistance must not be the handmaiden of a slaughter of so many people who have never lifted a finger against the United States of America, who just so happen to be under the bombs and blockade of American allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. And whose bombing drives Saudi Arabia importing of tens of billions of dollars in American weaponry. In 2017, the expectation is \$17.9 billion in American arms exports to the Kingdom, plus billions more for the UAE.

The American Congress has the power, vested in you by the Constitution, to declare war. Through subsequent legislation, this power has extended to review of foreign military sales by the United States. America must cease supporting the murder and starvation of Yemen for lucrative arms deals and out of a misplaced belief this somehow checks a non-existent Iranian threat to the Horn of Africa and trade routes between Europe and Asia.

Sincerely,

Brian Marks

President, Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice

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