



Episode 910: Col. Lawrence Wilkerson on the American Empire

Guest: Col. Lawrence Wilkerson

WOODS: As I was telling you before, I'm interested both in what you have to say these days about some current events and in some interesting developments in your own life professionally and your own opinions over the years. But let's get started with current events. I'd like to know first of all what you think of the foreign policy team around Donald Trump, and in particular, this H.R. McMaster. Do you feel like you can speak candidly about that?

WILKERSON: Yes, I do. I've known H.R. since I sat at the National Defense University amongst a group of general officers, admirals, and others on the faculty who were interested and listened to him present his dissertation, which would – he was a major at the time, which would of course later become *Dereliction of Duty*, the book about the joint chiefs of staff, the secretary of defense, Lyndon Johnson, and the lies that led to Vietnam. I don't know him intimately. It just so happens that I was at TRADOC headquarters in his outer office dealing with one of his subordinates in preparation for perhaps talking to him about getting a speaker for our All-Volunteer Force symposium, which we conducted at William and Mary on the 27th of April. And I was somewhat stunned that the person could not be very forthcoming with me, and I understood immediately later when I found out the very next day he apparently had accepted the job as National Security Advisor.

I know John Kelly a little bit, of Homeland Security. I know Jim Madison a little bit because I happened to be the Deputy Director and Director of the Marine Corps War College at times that they passed through the Command and General Staff College for other places. But I don't know them very well. I do know that all three of them are more or less exponents of the imperial writ of this empire that we are today. At the same time, I know that they're probably more strategically oriented and wiser thinkers with regard to that writ, certainly more so than their ultimate boss, Donald Trump. So I don't know what it means, what it signifies that we have militarized the decision-making process for security and foreign policy so grossly in the context of these three men. I would want to say that they bring some wisdom to what is otherwise a very bizarre administration, but I'm not sure that that wisdom is the kind of wisdom I'd want.

WOODS: There was a column not long ago, maybe just a few days ago, by Pat Buchanan where he was surveying the American presence in the world and contrasting it to the years of the Cold War and arguing that at least during the Cold War, you more or less knew what the goal was, and maybe you disagreed on this or that particular

confrontation, but you know exactly what we were up to. Whereas Buchanan says, these days, I can't even figure out what the goal is. What is the point of all this? What exactly is it that we're after in the world? He said I'm not sure anybody can give me a straight answer to that question. What would you say?

WILKERSON: I think you have to take it from the perspective of what particular group of power and decision-making and influence you're talking about before you can describe correctly their objective or objectives, plural. You have one group that I would call the plutocracy. Some have called it the deep state. I don't think that's an apt title, because the plutocracy is not really what many refer to when they talk about the deep state. The deep state is more or less the merit-based, we would hope, bureaucracy that runs the empire and runs the country, for that matter – a bureaucracy, I might point out, right now that is under a direct attack by President Trump and his minions, particularly people like Steve Bannon and Miller and others.

But plutocracy is that group of financial and banking interests that stands behind and finances much of the machinations of the empire. It finances those things when it's in their interests, and it doesn't finance them when it's not. But you have such a polyglot plutocracy that many times, let's say on one side, a group of oligarchs will be opposed to the other side group of oligarchs – equally wealthy, billions of dollars we're talking about here, perhaps even trillions in the long run. And if you're going to identify who's doing what at any given time, it's very complex, but you have to go – I think, as the old Willy Sutton said, the money's in the banks. You have to follow the money. You have to see what's happening with regard to the money in order to determine what the objectives might be at any given time.

That's a horrible way to run a country of 330 million people that fancies itself as a republic, federal, and a democracy, or at least with trappings of democracy. It's a hell of a way to run a country, but it's basically the way we have run the country since the end of the Cold War, not to say that it didn't have a lot of influence during the Cold War, but now it has inordinate influence because there is no strategic flagpole. There's nothing that we orient ourselves on. There's no great monolithic and ideological Soviet Union. There's just – we've tried to replace it with terrorism. We've tried to replace it with China. We're now trying to replace it with Russia. That's a real stretch, but we seem to be doing it.

So to answer your question, it almost has to be a specific instance of policy or objectives, and you have to identify the specific individuals who are pursuing them. I think that's one reason why a lot of my colleagues overseas in Northeast Asia as well as Europe, and even for that matter in Latin America, think we've lost our way. They don't see where we're going or who's leading us to whatever they do see that we're going.

WOODS: Well, along those lines, I wonder if you could say something about the strike on Syria, because there we got all kinds of explanations by the pundits as to why this might have happened. Maybe Donald Trump really was morally outraged by the news of the gassing of these people. Maybe it was the influence of his daughter, we've sometimes heard. Or maybe he just felt like he had no choice but to bomb. The pressure was too great, so he just did this one bombing just for show. Then there are the 4D chess people who say this was actually meant to send a message to North

Korea. Same with the bombing in Afghanistan. Who the heck knows? But what was your response to it, and what do you think was behind it?

WILKERSON: Well, this is a field I teach, and I have spent the last 12 years – actually, 18 total, because I taught at the Naval War College and the Marine Corps College in a similar vein. But in the last 12 years, on two civilian campuses, I've taught what I call fateful decision-making since World War II, and that is decisions that send young men and young women to die for state purposes and to kill others for state purposes, war or covert operations. And in studying all of these – and mind you, there are many of them. Most Americans would fall over dead if they knew how many times their government had acted in their name clandestinely in the last 70 years. And for that matter, how many wars we've conducted or conflicts we've conducted when you sit down and count them up, where we've actually dropped bombs, we've actually killed people. It's stunning. One would have to pronounce us one of the most violent nations in the history of the world. There's no other conclusion you can come to.

That said, as you go through these decisions, as you go through these presidents, as you go through these teams – and my most recent one and my most up-close and personal one was the Obama team for eight years. I actually had the chance to meet with President Obama and Secretary Kerry in the Roosevelt Room and talk with them for a little over an hour about this. And here was a president, unlike President Trump, who was intellectually equipped to I think, at least after seven years – and this was November 2015 – begin to intellectualize what it was he'd been up against in those seven years, in terms of what Jeffrey Goldberg and even the president called the playbook.

And the president started off his remarks with John Kerry sitting immediately – who was his secretary of state at the time – sitting immediately on his left across the table from me and General Egan [00:10:01], who was with me, and he said there is a bias in this town towards war. And frankly, I thought to myself, my God, I never thought I'd hear an American president, even seven years into two terms, who would tell me what I have known to be true since I started this research and this teaching.

And then he went on to say why he thought the bias exists, and I wanted to – I didn't, of course. It was his spiel. I wanted to intersperse from time to time: "And Mr. President, you don't realize this and you don't realize this and here's this and here's this." Everything from the weight of the military-industrial-congressional-university-think-tank complex, which Dwight Eisenhower only began to briefly explain, to the fact that every time we fire 59 cruise missiles at \$1.2 million a piece, Raytheon's stock goes off the charts, to the fact that the Lockheed Martin is not just a defense contractor; heck, it's number one or number two or number three for almost everybody in the cabinet of U.S. government. Even recently was responsible for the subcontracting of the census that the U.S. conducted. Now think about that for a moment: a defense contractor responsible for the census of the United States. That's how insidious this whole playbook, this machinery of the playbook is now, and why the president would say something like this contrary to his bias towards war.

But the other thing I've come to understand is how much these other characters around the president influence his decision-making, or her decision-making hopefully some day, and how much the president often is unaware of this or is complicit in it

only because of his gross inexperience, which is what really troubled me about George W. Bush and troubles me about Donald Trump. I think my students would verify and say that if there were one thing that was the most dangerous in any president any time post-World War II, it was inexperience. That is to say, they simply don't have the bona fides to be where they are, and it's painful and agonizing and difficult and challenging to gain those bona fides, particularly in the first four years. I think of John Kennedy immediately and the Bay of Pigs operation, confronted with Allen Dulles and others who were far more powerful and experienced than the president was at that time.

So it really is a study in personalities and team sociology, in experience and so forth, when you look at any one of these teams. But when you look at them, regardless of their composition, regardless of the chemistry of the team, whether it's a Hillary Clinton or a John Kerry or a Colin Powell at State, for example – regardless of that, there are some things that are constant. And the constants are basically, as I said before, the writ of empire, maintaining the empire, almost in a fashion that one would say, historically looking over the broad sweep of human history, reminds one of every empire in the past in one way or another.

And then one has to conclude: empires don't last forever. And there are certain signs when empires are decaying and when empires are falling apart. And one would have to conclude that this empire is showing many of those signs right now, and that is in part a manifestation of the decision-making teams in the White House, and in part their decisions are making that manifest. So it's a non-virtuous circle, if you will, as these things happen. And you can plot the progression of the decay of empire all the way from 1947 – I would use that as the start year because of the National Security Act of that year in July – all the way up to the present time. And it's not a very encouraging picture, frankly.

WOODS: I have to ask, because of some of the language that you use that I also use – empire or plutocracy or speaking about the military industrial complex – is there a difference between the Larry Wilkerson of, say, 2002 to 2003 and the one of 2017?

WILKERSON: Oh, I think unquestionably, and I would even start earlier than that. When I attended the Naval War College in 1982, it had been transformed mostly by the admiral who had been the president for a time there, but it had also been transformed by a remarkable combination of civilian professors, because Stansfield Turner had in essence said to the Naval War College, We're going to bring real quality to this institution. So when I got there, about half, maybe a little more than half of the faculty were civilians. They were civilians from Princeton, from Harvard, from Dartmouth, from Cornell, from Northwestern, from Cal Tech, from Berkeley. They were from all over the country. And frankly, they were absolutely first class, and I got an eye-opening education for nine months. I got the equivalent of an master's in national security studies. Indeed, now the New England Accreditation Association has allowed the Naval War College to present a master's for it.

But mostly what I got was an ability to look at things unlike before, tactically and operationally, strategically. And in that look, I also got a wide open idea of how policy and strategy ought to link up. And so I brought a much more analytical, if you will, critically analytical eye to what was happening in the military and in my country. And

between 1982 and my joining Colin Powell in 1989, I developed that in terms of our military structure at its highest levels in the Pacific, in the Pacific Command, working for First Admiral Crowe, who would later be Ronald Reagan's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and then working for Ron Hays after him, a brilliant Navy admiral who taught me a lot about war fighting at that level, because we were constantly exercising the War Plan 5001 that was war with Russia in the Pacific – global war plan, in other words.

And then I joined Powell. And when I joined Powell, I was joining the former National Security Advisor for Ronald Reagan in his second term and a man who was absolutely bent on defying the establishment at that time. In fact, I started writing speeches for him and he essentially said to me, I'm going to really rock some boats. Because I was there. I was there when Gorbachev looked at me and said, What do you do when the devil dies, general? Because Gorbachev knew that underneath the mufti, he was a three-star Army general. He said it's over. The Cold War is over and Gorbachev has ended it. Well, we got calls from people like Bob Gates and others who told us to shut up, to quit talking like we were talking, because the bear would be back and so forth. So Powell was challenging the establishment majorly, and I was writing the words that were doing it.

From that moment through his chairmanship and then through the secretariat, I'd have to say – I left in January 2005 when he left. I'd have to say I got another education, and that education was using the prism, if you will, that I gained at the Naval War College and refined and honed in my time with Pacific Command looking at the very highest levels of military decision-making. What I got from Powell was the ability to look into and see up close and personal how incompetent, how mediocre, how average, how absolutely ill-equipped many of these people were whom we were, either through the electoral process or through appointments, putting into the positions of power in this country to deal with people who behind them were much more powerful, much smarter, much more creative, much better educated, and much more capable than they were.

Almost like, for example, what we've done in the last 25, 30 years was sending ivy league graduates to Wall Street, sending mediocre people into the federal establishment, and then thinking that the SEC, for example, was going to compete with Wall Street. No way. You've got all the brilliance on Wall Street and all the mediocrity at the SEC – and not only mediocrity, but mediocrity that recognizes that if it's going to make anything out of its life, it's going to become corrupt and it's going to take whatever influence it can from the people it's supposed to regulate.

So we've created a real mess for ourselves, and I got to see it up close and personal, and at the end, at the very highest level in the land.

WOODS: I'm looking at an article written I guess about an interview you did right about the time Dick Cheney's memoir came out. And you apparently said that that book was – these are your words – "written out of fear, fear that one day someone will Pinochet Dick Cheney." And you said – you know, Pinochet was arrested for war crimes. And you went on to say, "I'd be willing to testify and I'd be willing to take any punishment I'm due." What crimes do you have in mind that somebody would testify about with regard to Cheney or Bush?

WILKERSON: Well, the ultimate one of course is torture. The United States was the leading force in the world in bringing about the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. We were the force in the world that saw it no doubt in our self-interest, but also somewhat altruistically – I know there were some people arrayed around this process who were doing it basically for humanitarian reasons. We were the ones who led the world into the Convention against Torture. We were the ones who insisted that no national emergency, no matter how profound, would ever justify torture. We said that. We argued that. And when we ratified the treaty, we had a couple reservations, but they were detail reservations. They were not reservations on the fundamental concept of the treaty. And we made domestic – we forget about this. I mean, the press doesn't even know this, they're so inept. We actually created domestic law, as we were forced to do – not forced to do, but as the convention made us do – to adapt our domestic law to the law of the convention.

So then what do we do? We get two lawyers, principally Jay Bybee and John Yoo in the Office of Legal Counsel in the Justice Department, but also four or five other lawyers. David Addington was at the head of the entire thing, and who was David? David was Cheney's Rasputin. David was the force behind Cheney, the intellectual force behind Cheney. Much smarter than Cheney, brilliant, even, in terms of legal expertise. Jim Haynes, OSD General Counsel; Douglas Feith, another lawyer, third man in the Pentagon, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy; Alberto Gonzales, who was sort of a mediocre lawyer who flowed into David's orbit and did everything David told him to do, even though he often outranked David. So you get these six lawyers, and they put together this package that essentially said, Hey, look, torture isn't torture. Let's go ahead and do it.

So this is the thing that really irked me and eventually made me violate my own precepts and go public in October 2005 and speak out against Cheney and what he'd done, because I saw him as the motive force. He was the ultimate force. When he said we're going to have to operate on the dark side, he meant it. And I had had many lunches with people who knew Cheney, but one I remember vividly was with a congressman who'd known him for some 35 years. And everyone was speculating at the time on whether or not Cheney's heart problems had changed him, whether or not being vice president had changed him, with a basically inexperienced president. What had changed?

And this congressman looked at me across the table, and I suspect what he said then was as close to the truth as anything I had heard. He said, "Now, I've known Dick Cheney for a long time. Dick Cheney has always been this way. It's just that if you will check his rise through the bureaucracy, whether it was 34-year-old chief of staff to Gerry Ford or whether it was later as Secretary of Defense to H.W. Bush – if you check that rise, Dick Cheney always had adult supervision." I'll never forget that phrase and the look on that congressman's face, because he meant it. He was dead set. He meant it. He said, "He does not have adult supervision now, so he has gone wild."

I think that was probably as fair an assessment of Dick Cheney as I've heard, though I don't have the expertise to comment on what heart problems and the drugs that go along with them might do to a person. I've had a number of physicians who weighed in with me from time to time and told me that the medicine that you have to take and

the shock on your physiognomy of these kinds of problems like Dick Cheney's had, and then the heart transplant and so forth, would probably impact majorly the overall being of that person, including the way they think, the way they act, and so forth. I have no expertise to comment on that, but I do think that congressman's comment was relevant. Dick Cheney was a war criminal.

WOODS: Now, having said that, I guess I have to mention something you're probably tired of talking about at this point, but if you're going to say that about Dick Cheney, then people are going to come back at you and say, for all of Colin Powell's bluster about how he was going to fight against the establishment, he meekly went along with probably the worst catastrophe we can think of militarily over the past – or strategically – the past 20 years, was the war in Iraq. And he made the presentation at the UN that you had a hand in alleging all these crimes on the part of Iraq, and at the time everybody believed it, and then it fell apart later. How did that happen with somebody who was supposed to be dead set against this kind of thing?

WILKERSON: I've written about 2,000 pages trying to explain that, and I'm not sure, nor is my editor, that I've done it. I'm not sure I'll ever publish the book either, because it's difficult. I came to the point where I thought of Colin Powell as a black Eisenhower. Eisenhower had his faults, of course, but all in all, I think Eisenhower was a pretty great man. And I think Powell was a great man too, but all people are flawed. And in the preface to my book, I actually quote Heraclitus where I say, "Man's fate is his character." And if man's fate is his character, then to a certain extent, the character of its great people, a nation's great people, is its fate. And then I try to show in a Shakespearean way, if you will, how the tragedy of Colin Powell measures and demarcates the demise of empire and the collapse of this republic. He's not going to like that at all, so I'm very mixed over whether I'm even going to publish it or not. I may burn it.

But that sort of describes what happened, I think. We both knew that, were he to depart, were he to depart in a huff or just silently, were he to go public or not say a word, it would not have made one iota of difference. Condi Rice would have become Secretary of State as soon as the Congress could have scrambled to confirm her, and we'd have gone to war anyway. And then in the aftermath, there wouldn't have been a Colin Powell at all, and other things that he was maintaining equilibrium on, if not some progress like the U.S.-China relationship, would have maybe not prospered the way they did. So you know, you rationalize: you're not leaving and staying.

WOODS: But it's more than not leaving. It's also giving false testimony.

WILKERSON: Well, he didn't know he was doing that at the time. He simply didn't. I mean, you are the Secretary of State and you are sitting in a room with the Director of Central Intelligence, representing at that time 16 intelligence entities, representing, as George Tenet would say from time to time, Israel, France, Germany, Britain, and a host of other intelligence agencies with whom he was collaborating. You're listening to him tell you that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. And every time Powell pushed back majorly, Tenet came up with some kind of, now I know, either partially fabricated or wholly fabricated example that put Powell back on the track where the vice president ultimately wanted him.

The most stunning one was when he had grabbed me and put me down in a seat in the National Intelligence Counsel spaces where we thought no one could hear us and we didn't think was bugged, and he essentially – he'd never been this rough with me before. He essentially grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and put me down in a chair, and he said, "Look, I am sick and tired of this bit on terrorism. There is no evidence of significant contact between al-Qaeda and Baghdad. I want it taken out, because it's junk." And I think he thought I was going to make an argument. I think that's the reason he was irritated and treating me a bit rough. I looked at him and I said, "Boss, I'm all for it. Let's rip it all out, because I think it stinks too." Arguably, that was the most powerful part – with the American people, that was the most powerful part, because it said Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11.

Well, I took it all out – or I started taking it all out. It was quite a task to do that. Within an hour or two of our having met each other that way, Tenet shows up in the conference room where Powell and Rich and others – Condi Rice was there, I think, and several others – were assembled for yet another rehearsal. And Tenet shows up and drops a bombshell on everybody. He essentially says – and these are almost his direct words. I can almost quote him. I can still hear him. "We have just through interrogation of a high-level al-Qaeda operative learned of contacts between the Mukhabarat and the al-Qaeda operatives in Baghdad that included training the al-Qaeda operatives in the use of biological and chemical weapons." And he elaborated on that for a few minutes, and Powell turned to me and said, "Put it back in."

And we wound up sticking all that really, truly, I think, false information back into his presentation, the most powerful element of it. When he looks into that camera and he says, "Not in a post-9/11 world," he's directly connecting Saddam Hussein with the tragedy of 9/11. In Americans' minds, that was probably the most influential part of it. And that was a lie fabricated by George Tenet, but I'm confident, I'm wholly confident that that was a lie put together by Tenet and McLaughlin – John McLaughlin, his deputy, who's now a commentator for CNN – under the guise and direct guidance and direction of the vice president of the United States, because I now know that there was a labyrinth of people who were not only working for George Tenet, but they were also working for the vice president. And they were located in the CIA, they were located in the Pentagon under Douglas Feith, and of course they were located in the vice president's office.

And this group, what I've called a cabal, orchestrated by the vice president and by David Addington, his henchman, and Scooter Libby and John Hannah in the vice president's office, actually orchestrated the intelligence picture that George Tenet and John McLaughlin then presented as a finished product, bought into by all these foreign intelligence entities too, to Colin Powell. And he presented that at the United Nations. Now, you know, you can blame him and blame me too for being trusting of the DCI and trusting of what he told us, but you know, you had two choices there. You either trusted the man who was *the* intelligence head for the United States of America, or you said, "You're lying, George," and you walked out of the administration, because those were the only two choices you had.

WOODS: Larry, I know your time is very precious and limited, so although there's a lot more I'd like to ask, I'm going to let you go. But as I do that, maybe as you're

departing, you could take 30 seconds to share with us what your opinion is about allegations of Russian influence on President Trump and his people.

WILKERSON: I simply don't know. I've heard both sides. In vehemence I've heard both sides. I work with a group of intelligence professionals who are convinced that it's all a tempest in a teapot, an attempt by people like John McCain and others to resurrect the Cold War for ulterior purposes. I've heard on the other side from established intelligence professionals still on active duty that no, there is fire underneath this smoke, that it's more than just what you would expect Russia to be doing or any country to be doing in the way of economic, financial, propaganda warfare and so forth. It's serious and it's connected right to the presidential team to the tune of the team having massive sums of money put into Trump enterprises over the last few years and having oligarchs in Russia, for example, directly connected to Putin and some of his money actually having bailed Trump out in some instances. So I don't know what to believe. I simply don't know what to believe. I've seen nothing definitive that I'd put down on a piece of paper and say, "Ah ha. Now I know what's happening."

WOODS: Okay, I was curious about that. I've had my own thoughts, but you've talked to everybody there is to talk to so I was very interested in what you had to say. Well, I appreciate your candor and your insights on this matter. I also appreciate that you are a board member of the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity. There are not many people in public life who would be willing to take that step and say, "This is where I stand on foreign policy these days." So I'm grateful for that and for your time today. Thanks so much.

WILKERSON: Thanks for having me, Tom.