

Leslie Gelb dies at 82: The revolving door between the New York Times and the State Department

By Patrick Martin
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Leslie Gelb, who died August 31 at the age of 82, was a high-ranking strategist for American imperialism and a diplomatic correspondent and foreign policy columnist for the *New York Times*, moving back and forth between Washington and New York without the slightest sign of friction. He exemplified the role of the *Times* as the semi-official voice of the Democratic wing of the national-security apparatus.

When the Democratic Party controlled the White House, Gelb worked at the Department of Defense from 1967 to 1969, where he edited the Pentagon Papers. He was a top State Department official in the Carter administration, from 1977 to 1979. In between stints in government, he served as an advocate for American imperialism at the *Times*, from 1973 to 1977, and from 1981 to 1993. The final 10 years of his career were spent as president of the Council on Foreign Relations, the think tank on national security policy that publishes the magazine *Foreign Affairs*.

The son of impoverished Hungarian Jewish immigrants, Gelb worked his way through college in the 1950s and was talent-spotted by Professor Henry Kissinger after he enrolled at Harvard's graduate school as a student of international affairs. This association with the man who was to become a byword for cynical and murderous *realpolitik* in the service of American imperialism set the course for Gelb's own subsequent career.

He went to work as an executive assistant for Senator Jacob Javits of New York, a liberal Republican, before joining the Pentagon under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara at the height of the Vietnam War, in 1967. Gelb was put in charge of the team of researchers and writers who produced the Pentagon Papers, a secret 18-volume history of US relations with Vietnam, which documented both the cynicism and the duplicity of American policy.

By the time the Pentagon Papers were leaked to the *Times* and the *Washington Post* by one of the analysts Gelb had supervised, Daniel Ellsberg, he had left the government, following Republican Richard Nixon's victory in the 1968 presidential election. He took a position at the Brookings Institution, long a place of refuge for policy bureaucrats affiliated to the Democratic Party. Gelb, a supporter of the Vietnam War, opposed publication of the Pentagon Papers by his future employer, but there were apparently no hard feelings when he joined the *Times* as a diplomatic correspondent in 1973.

In 1977, with the Democrats back in power under Jimmy Carter, Gelb took a high-ranking position in the State Department, as assistant secretary of state and director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs—essentially, overseeing and coordinating the combined use of military force, political subversion, and intelligence provocations against countries targeted by Washington.

These included the US response to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and to the mass popular revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran, both in 1979. This was also the period when the US government, at

the instigation of Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, sponsored radical Islamist counterrevolutionary forces in Afghanistan, directed at the Soviet-backed government in Kabul—forces that gave rise to both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Gelb, in his top State Department position, played an instrumental role in all these operations, and many others.

In January 1981, Republican Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as president. The changing of the guard at the White House was accompanied by a similar rotation at the Department of State. Richard Burt, the national security correspondent of the *New York Times*, was named assistant secretary of state and Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs. Gelb, who had held that position at the State Department until 1979, when he left for a post at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, another Washington imperialist think tank, was hired to replace Burt as national security correspondent for the *Times*.

The *Bulletin*, newspaper of the Workers League, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, took note of the rotation under the headline, "State Department, *New York Times* Men Switch Jobs." We wrote, "The two men are exchanging positions the way top State Department and CIA men rotate every few years. Or perhaps Gelb is the Democratic State Department man at the *Times*, while Burt is the Republican. In any case, the completion of this circle demonstrates the intimate relations between the top ruling class newspaper and the intelligence and foreign policy establishment."

As both a policy maker and a *Times* correspondent—and later columnist and op-ed page editor—Gelb espoused the same standpoint, invariably described in his respectful media obituaries as "realist" and "centrist." In other words, he eschewed much more than a pretense of democratic sentiments in favor of the application of coercion, both political and military, to gain the ends demanded by various US administrations.

By the early 1990s, he occupied the position in the *Times* constellation of opinion writers now held by Thomas Friedman, although Gelb was perhaps less crudely ignorant—the columnist who would always opt for the foreign policy move that expressed "toughness" or who openly embraced the predatory motives for US actions that other writers (think: Nicholas Kristof) would attempt to dress up in "human rights" finery.

A few selections from the pages of the *Bulletin* in 1991-93, during and after the Persian Gulf War, give the flavor:

On February 15, 1991, after US cruise missiles destroyed a shelter in Baghdad killing hundreds of civilians, the American media uncritically embraced US government claims that Saddam Hussein had deliberately located a command and control center in the shelter, making it a legitimate target. We wrote:

One “analyst,” Leslie Gelb, who alternates between jobs as a State Department official and *New York Times* correspondent, cynically explained the task of the media. Speaking on the “McNeil-Lehrer Report” Wednesday, he said the purpose of the press commentary on the Baghdad bombing was to convince people not to believe what they could see with their own eyes—i.e., the mass murder of Iraqi civilians by the US military.

On March 22, 1991:

A column by Leslie Gelb in *The New York Times* called for the establishment of a “unified, weak Iraq,” warning that the alternative would be disastrous. Gelb advised Bush to “tell our coalition partners and Iran to butt out of the civil war. Once they taste blood and oil, there will be no containing their ambitions.”

On July 5, 1991, in an article warning of new plans to attack Iraq:

Key media spokesmen for the White House have been activated to give advance notice of the military assault which is being contemplated. *New York Times* columnist Leslie Gelb, a former State Department official, argued openly in his column Sunday for new bombing raids on Iraq. Gelb wrote: “President Bush should move swiftly to orchestrate international support for surgical air strikes against suspected nuclear, chemical and biological weapons sites.”

On August 14, 1992, in a statement “Hands off the Balkans”:

Imperialist spokesmen, from former State Department official and *New York Times* columnist Leslie Gelb to Britain’s Tory ex-prime minister Margaret Thatcher, are advocating the bombing of Belgrade as the solution to the Yugoslav crisis. Such a campaign, just as in Baghdad, would result in massive loss of life and would mean the destruction of the country’s economy and infrastructure.

On February 26, 1993 (in an article on austerity policies proposed by the new Democratic administration of Bill Clinton):

Thus Leslie Gelb, a *New York Times* columnist and former State Department official, after noting the general approval for Clinton’s deficit-cutting plan in most foreign capitals, commented: “Foreign leaders and most Americans discovered a supranational common bond. They agree that the American people should suffer, struggle and endure privations for the next four years to atone for the high living of the 80s.”

As we explained, the “most Americans” who agreed that “people should suffer” were the top 1 percent, who saw their incomes rise phenomenally in the 1980s while workers saw strikes broken, wages cut, and benefits slashed.

Gelb was not called back into active service when the Democrats returned to power in the Clinton administration. Instead, he became president of the Council on Foreign Relations, perhaps the most

influential national-security think tank, which vets both personnel and policy for the military-intelligence apparatus, particularly in the pages of its journal, *Foreign Affairs*.

Like many imperialist strategists who came to “oppose” the Vietnam War only because it was a failure, Gelb fervently supported the Bush administration’s drive to war with Iraq in 2002-2003. Still linked closely to the Democratic Party, Gelb was the intellectual author of the proposal advanced by then-Senator Joe Biden, now a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, for the partition of Iraq into three separate entities, one Kurdish, one Sunni and one Shi’ite. This would facilitate an American military focus on the two parts of the country with sizeable oil resources, southern Iraq, which is largely Shi’ite, and northern Iraq, largely Kurdish, while leaving the oil-poor Sunni region in the center to its own devices.

The WSWS commented:

What is most breathtaking about Gelb’s proposal is its utter indifference to the welfare of the Iraqi population, not to mention international law.

He warns that the Sunni population in central Iraq “might punish the substantial minorities” left out of the ethnic states to be created in the north and south. “These minorities must have the time and the wherewithal to organize and make their deals, or go either north or south,” he writes. “This would be a messy and dangerous enterprise, but the United States would and should pay for the population movements and protect the process with force.”

In the true spirit of Kissinger—architect of the 1973 coup in Chile which installed the Pinochet dictatorship, and friend and sponsor of brutal regimes worldwide, so long as they were Washington stooges—one of Gelb’s last ventures into global politics was a 2013 column in the *Daily Beast* headlined, “It’s Time to Hold Our Nose and Back Egypt’s Military.” Referring to massacres of thousands of protesters in the streets of Cairo by the regime, he wrote, “though it’s not nice to say ... the military is doing what a lot of governments around the world would under the same conditions.” Including, we might add, the government of the United States.

Gelb would have been too old to take a position in a second Clinton administration if Hillary Clinton had won the 2016 election. But his ruthless imperialist foreign policy is exactly what Clinton would have carried out, in Ukraine, Syria, Venezuela and elsewhere. And it is what a Democratic administration would implement should Biden or one of his two dozen rivals defeat Trump in 2020.

The author recommends:

The New York Times: a proposal for ethnic cleansing in Iraq [26 November 2003]

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