

HOMELAND INSECURITY



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Stan Goff On Why U.S. Foreign Policy Endangers Us All

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Stan Goff spent twenty-four years in the U.S. military, much of it in the Special Forces. He fought in Vietnam, was a sniper with the counter-terrorism unit Delta Force, and taught military science at West Point. His career took him to Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Haiti, and other hot spots around the globe. He saw up close how the U.S. government's official statements didn't match up with the actions of its military.

His role in the U.S. invasion of Haiti in 1994 disillusioned him for good. Officially named "Operation Restore Democracy," the invasion, Goff says, was aimed only at eliminating any threat to U.S. domination. In his book *Hideous Dream: A Soldier's Memoir of the U.S. Invasion of Haiti* (Soft Skull Press), he writes, "Haiti taught me what I was and showed me what I must become."

Having spent his adult life in the military, Goff wasn't sure where to turn once he no longer believed in its mission. "I was fortunate," he says, "to have people close to me who were on the other side of the debate." His sister had introduced him to women's-rights and gay-rights activists, and an Internet search put him in touch with a North Carolina group called the Carolina Socialist Forum. Through that connection, he made many friends who helped him make the leap from soldier to activist. Goff retired from the military in 1996 and has been involved in progressive causes ever since.

Today Goff is active in the *Bring Them Home Now* campaign, led by *Military Families Speak Out* and *Veterans for Peace*. The campaign calls for the U.S. government to pull its troops out of Iraq. Its website, www.BringThemHomeNow.org, publishes anonymous statements from GIs, so that they can write freely about what's going on in Iraq. "The more soldiers do it," Goff says, "the more likely others will be to speak up." Goff has a personal interest in seeing an end to the conflict: his son is in the military and was stationed in Iraq earlier this year.

Goff's most recent book is *Full Spectrum Disorder: The Military in the New American Century* (Soft Skull Press). He's currently working on a new book about gender and the military, titled *Sex and War*.

I first encountered Goff at an informal talk he gave in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For more than an hour, he spoke passionately about the current war in Iraq, about class struggle here in the U.S., and about what he considers to be the real motives behind U.S. foreign policy.



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For this interview, we met at his house in Raleigh, North Carolina. A sturdily built man, Goff met me at the door with a firm handshake. On the walls of his small home office hang vibrant paintings from Haiti, a place he refers to as his "second home." Since the 1994 invasion, he has been back to that country ten times as a member of the Haiti Support Network. We sat in his kitchen, surrounded by pictures of his children and his first grandchild.

Elliott: What does the title of your latest book, *Full Spectrum Disorder*, refer to?

Goff: During the Clinton administration, when Hugh Shelton was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he began what Donald Rumsfeld calls the "revolution of military affairs," which is the complete restructuring

of the U.S. military. The shorthand for it is "full spectrum dominance." This refers to dominance in three dimensions: technology, the full spectrum of conflict (from street riots to thermonuclear war), and geography. The belief that we can achieve such dominance is quite likely the most grandiose delusion in human history. It simply is not possible. It's amazing and worrisome to me that people who hold the reins of power would actually believe in something like this.

I have been reading a book by Swedish anthropologist Alf Hornborg, who looks at social development through the lens of entropy: the notion that disorder always increases within a closed system. Hornborg says that, within the closed system of the world economy, energy is transferred from peripheral nations into the high-tech, metropolitan core. What's left behind is immense social disorder. The environmental-justice movement focuses on one aspect of this: the way rich communities make a lot of toxic trash and dump it on poor communities. The rich gain order in the form of resources and export their disorder elsewhere.

Reading Hornborg, it occurred to me that as we increase our dependence on higher and higher orders of technology, we not only increase social disorder elsewhere, we're also increasing the probability that some unexpected event will come along and create an avalanche of disorder here. For instance, twenty-one power plants in the eastern United States shut down on August 14, 2003, leaving millions of people without electricity. And nobody really knows what caused the blackout. Or terrorists fly planes into the World Trade Center, and the whole global geopolitical architecture is transformed.

Elliott: What are your feelings about George W. Bush's "war on terror"?

Goff: Bush is a terrorist. When you engage in massive state-run terrorism, and you support other leaders who conduct state-run terrorism, as Bush has done in Israel, you can expect a terrorist response.

No one — not the Palestinians, nor the Iraqis, nor the

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Afghans, nor anyone else — has the military capacity to confront the U.S. or Israel directly. They are forced by the situation either to lie down and die, or to fight back using asymmetric warfare, which we refer to as terrorism. Of course bulldozing people's houses and bombing civilians are terrorism, too.

There is an implicit nationalism in the phrase "war on terror" because it says the threat is outside of us. But the single biggest cause of terrorist attacks, aside from the policies and actions of the U.S. government, is the size and scope of our military. There is simply no chance of victory if you confront the U.S. military on a conventional battlefield. Terrorism is a tactic, not a free-standing phenomenon.

This is not a war on terrorism, nor on al-Qaeda, which is not a real organization but a loose, decentralized network characterized by spontaneity. The Taliban were real: they were the government of Afghanistan. But there's no group called al-Qaeda, with a list of members and a hierarchy. So the Bush administration has this amorphous entity out there that it can use to frighten people. What's great about having an amorphous enemy is that you can't tell when it's defeated. You can declare a perennial war and use it as an excuse for anything you want to do. All the Bush administration has to say is "We think this might be connected to al-Qaeda," and the public will accept its actions uncritically. That's what the administration did with the Iraq War: suggest a connection to al-Qaeda and terrorism. But this war isn't about terrorism; it's about oil. If the principal export of Iraq were palm dates, we wouldn't be there.

Elliott: So al-Qaeda isn't connected to Iraq. What is it connected to?

Goff: Its clearest connection is to Wahhabi Islam, which is the state religion of Saudi Arabia. This fundamentalist branch of Islam was nurtured by the United States during our long-standing military and political alliance with the Saudis. At our

behest, they exported politicized Islam throughout the region as a weapon to destroy Arab nationalism and socialism. The effort finally culminated in the war between political Islamists and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Former U.S. national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has said we laid a trap for the Soviets in Afghanistan. We funded and trained these fundamentalists, including Osama bin Laden, and maintained a long-standing alliance with them, even after bin Laden broke with the Saudis. The U.S. was funneling money to the Taliban all the way up until 2001, when our strategy came back and bit us.

Since we helped destroy Arab nationalism in places like Afghanistan, the only ideology left that gives voice to the increasingly frustrated masses in the region is politicized Islam. Everything about U.S. foreign policy right now is increasing the power of people who hate us. This doesn't strike me as a very smart thing to do, even if you support U.S. imperial objectives, which I don't. I desperately want to see the U.S. suffer a devastating political defeat in the Middle East, because maybe that would cause our country to pull out of the region.

Elliott: How have the Bush administration's military operations differed from those of past administrations?

Goff: I'd say his success rate is worse, but the history of U.S. military operations is not as glowing as we're led to believe. The U.S. military says it beat the Germans in World War II. In fact, the Soviets beat the Germans in Stalingrad. It was a mathematical certainty after Stalingrad that the Germans would be defeated. The Americans rolled in at the last minute to make sure they had a say in the postwar reconstruction. The Korean War was a debacle. Our use of overwhelming force led to a stalemate. Vietnam was a notorious disaster. And the attempt to impose a U.S. military presence on Lebanon failed miserably.

Our most glorious military victories — the invasions of Grenada and Panama — have been attacks by the world's most well-funded military on nations that have fourth-rate militaries or no militaries at all. The Iraq War is an attack on a nation that has been shattered — militarily, politically, and economically — by warfare, sanctions, and the destruction of its economic infrastructure during the first phase of the Gulf War. To claim that Donald Rumsfeld's military has had a great success in Iraq is like saying it's a great success for Mike Tyson to knock out a ten-year-old in the third round.

The last time the U.S. had a striking military success was probably Sherman's March, during the Civil War, which was the first time that troops deliberately bypassed engagements with enemy troops and went after strategic targets instead.

Elliott: Didn't this policy lead almost immediately — in the case of the burning of Atlanta — to attacks on civilian targets?

Goff: All armies in all places have always attacked "civilian" targets. There are no exceptions to this fact. Yet people persist in believing the notion that civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure are somehow the exception. This is a fantasy to convince citizens to support the state's actions.



Sherman's use of force against strategic targets was simply a recognition that military and civilian resources had become integrated because of the Industrial Revolution. It was a quantum shift in warfare. Supplies were being moved by rail, so he went after the railheads in Atlanta. The principles first put into use by Sherman — what some military theorists call “general war” — would flower into the firebombing of Dresden and Tokyo, and finally Nagasaki and Hiroshima. We are seeing it on a smaller scale today with Rumsfeld's meritless “shock and awe.”

Elliott: Your son recently returned from Iraq. How do you feel about his decision to join the military?

Goff: I didn't want him to, but it didn't surprise me. He was working at McDonald's, and he had an infant son and no healthcare. He grew up on a military installation. What am I going to do, tell him the military is all bad? He knows better. In fact, the years that he lived on a military installation were the best times in his life. It's like living in a park. It's the only thing in this country that even approaches a socialist society. Of course, Rumsfeld's trying to get rid of military schools, and military healthcare has already been turned over to an HMO.

Elliott: What changes would you like to see made within the military? Is it possible to reform it?

Goff: The military cannot be changed, for better or for worse, without a transformation of the state and the socio-

economic system within which it operates. The military is just one facet of a larger system. I would like to see a change in our military mission, however, which right now is to invade other nations to protect our power and the global business regime.

I would welcome the end of U.S. global power, because it has been an essentially destructive and exploitative force in much of the world. Leftists need to be honest and admit that our standard of living, constructed as it is on consumer culture and fossil-fuel energy, is based on draining the wealth of other nations. This was once accomplished through controlling markets, and now is done more through encouraging countries to go into debt to the World Bank or some other global financial institution. We can support our profligate lifestyle only through military intervention.

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