

**Interview: *The Untold History of the United States***

Peter Kuznick

Peter Kuznick co-wrote the ten-part documentary *The Untold History of the United States* with Oliver Stone, broadcast in the United States and worldwide (followed by a book of the same name) which looked at hitherto neglected aspects of American history as well as showing how the past influenced the present. In this interview, conducted in March 2013 in Washington DC, he reflects on how the book and the series came about and what its potential significance might be:

**Q:** Can you briefly summarize what the purpose of making the series and writing the book actually was?

**PK:** Oliver [Stone] and I were very concerned about the direction of American history and politics, especially concerning America's role in the world. We wanted to show how the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were not an aberration; they were consistent with American foreign policy for over a century. We wanted to tell the story of the American Empire and the national security state and their origins in the nineteenth century, beginning with the Spanish-American War and the invasion of the Philippines. These marked turning-points in the national history; before then, America had been regarded as a progressive nation and a friend of reform and revolution. But after these wars, it transformed itself into the world's leading counter-revolutionary force; one of the leading generals described parts of the Philippines as a "howling wilderness" that needed to be civilized. It was during that war that water-boarding was first used as a means of punishing those involved in the insurrection.

Basically we wanted to provide an alternative understanding of history that challenged the notion of American exceptionalism; that the country represents a force for democracy and justice in the world, and that it is somehow different ideologically from other countries in its emphasis

on benevolence, altruism and freedom. The other side of American history is particularly dangerous in our view, as it is the world's only superpower, and still finds it necessary to be armed to the teeth to 'protect' itself as well as its allies. Last year 78% of all weapon sales globally were made by the United States.

**Q:** Where did funding for the series come from?

**PK:** That's the wonderful thing about working with Oliver Stone! He is a force to be reckoned with in American popular culture, and has plenty of connections. He obtained funds from colleagues in Latin America, and made sure we kept to a tight budget. This was no Ken Burns-style Hollywood historical documentary. Initially we thought we could complete it in two years; it took us five. Eventually we concluded a deal with Showtime.

**Q:** I understand that you were part of the anti-war movement, and that Stone fought in Vietnam. To what extent was the series shaped by these experiences?

**PK:** We wanted to make sense of our own intellectual and political evolution. As Oliver's movies have moved in terms of their content over the last two or three decades, so my own thinking has changed. We worked through our Vietnam demons a long time ago, but we saw that the country had not learned anything from the experience. On the contrary, they'd deliberately forgotten things: there was a deliberate attempt by neo-conservatives to vanquish the Vietnam syndrome, and Presidents Carter and Clinton initially fumed at this strategy but ended up contributing to the whitewash. Young people today don't really know much about it: one of my colleagues at the University of Minnesota told me that her students thought that the United States had won the war. In a recent survey, 51 percent of Americans aged 18-29 said they believed the U.S. invasion of Vietnam was "not a mistake." By telling the whole history of the American Empire, we tried to put Vietnam into its historical context; it's just one of a series of campaigns to overthrow governments, including Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Indonesia. This kind of strategy doesn't end with Vietnam; in subsequent years the American army intervened in Chile, Nicaragua, and Iraq. So what we're doing is showing how the same strategies prevail throughout the last hundred years of American history.

**Q:** What is your view of the Korean War, in which the Republic of Turkey participated on the American side?

**PK:** I think it is a somewhat more ambiguous conflict, because North Korea initiated the invasion. What you had there were two corrupt dictatorships in the north and the south, both of which wanted to unify the Korean nation under their own political banners. The Soviets backed North Korea, while the United States signaled that Korea was outside of its defense perimeter; it wasn't going to get involved. American leaders only decided to get involved because they were worried about what non-intervention would signal to the rest of their allies. They were concerned about what was happening in Indo-China, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia; if those countries fell to the communists, then Japan would also be lost. Remember that the communists had already triumphed in China and the Soviets had just tested their atomic bomb.

**Q:** But don't you think the United States was responsible for the conflict in the first place, given their opposition towards communism that had prevailed since the mid-1940s?

**PK:** Maybe the origins of that viewpoint go back to 1918, when America, Britain and Japan sent tens of thousands of troops into Russia to try to support the counter-revolution against the recently triumphant Bolsheviks, or maybe it starts in the 1930s with the rise of fascism. But you have to remember that as late as 1945 Franklin D. Roosevelt thought that America and Russia were going to get along during peace-time; that they were going to be two of the world's police officers. Henry Wallace, the Vice-President at the time, was a leading opponent of the Cold War. Had he become president in 1945 instead of Harry S. Truman, we believe that the Cold War might not have happened. It's one of the ironies of history that Truman was elected and pursued an explicitly militarist policy.

**Q:** So you believe that American history has a series of turning points like this; and because of a series of decisions taken by certain heads of state, the country has continued to pursue self-interested policies in the world?

**PK:** History has been full of turning points at which different courses were possible. But I don't think policy decisions were often made in America's self-interest. Some of these policy changes might have been done in the interest of American corporations, but they were not necessarily based on the American people's views. Imagine if there had not been a Cold War or a so-called "War on Terror" – think of the money and the lives that would have been saved? The cost of the "War on Terror" will amount to over four trillion dollars; this is perhaps good for the military corporations but not for the people.

**Q:** Why do you think that the "War on Terror" has become such a dominant trope, especially when no one has taken the trouble to define it properly?

**PK:** The "War on Terror" was hatched in the minds of a group of people who instigated the Project for a New American Century. They wanted to build on the thinking of Henry Wallace and the early Cold Warriors, who said that the twentieth century must be the American century, and they wanted to create another century like it. Their viewpoints actually took shape in the Seventies and Eighties; they were opposed to arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, and they wanted the United States to assert itself more aggressively in the world by increasing defense expenditure. They believed that the country needed a new Pearl Harbor to justify this policy. After 9/11, many of those in support of this campaign had their dreams rewarded. But the irony of course is that many people knew an attack was coming, but couldn't get George W. Bush or Condoleeza Rice to listen. Once the attack happened, there were immediate questions about Saddam Hussein's role in the attack, because the members of the Project for the New American Century believed that if Iraq fell, then all the other countries that might be anti-American in attitude would also fall. It was this factor, plus the experience of 9/11, that stimulated the "War on Terror," which was designed to reconfigure the world according to the neoconservative view, with oil at its center.

**Q:** So what you're implying is that the neocons had a predetermined view of what they wanted the world to be like, even before the attack?

**PK:** Yes. The attack provided the pretext for a specific domestic and international policy based on furthering the interests of American capitalism. They wanted Iraq for its oil; hence the invasion was based on nothing more than a fabrication of evidence.

**Q:** How do members of the State Department go about maintaining good foreign relations, given the terms of such policies? It seems as if they don't want to listen to other people's views.

**PK:** As Woodrow Wilson said after Versailles, now the world will know "America as the savior of the world." That attitude still dominates: Madeleine Albright, when she was Secretary of State, once said that we use force because we're the United States. We stand taller and see farther than other countries, so why do we have to listen to other governments and their advice? We finance them, we train their militias and tell them what to think. Their responsibility lies in defending the investments the Americans make in their economies. In Latin America in particular, many of the mining and agricultural interests belong to American corporations, and they want to see some return on their investments. Thus why would the government permit the governments of Latin America to pursue their own policies? When Allende wanted to nationalize the mines in Chile, the United States moved quickly to overthrow him.

**Q:** Are you personally angry at the fact that the government seems to be acting in its own interests, rather than implementing the American people's will?

**PK:** Of course. But we're also ashamed; the government is acting in our name. The *pax Americana* of the previous century has not made the world a better place, spreading freedom and democracy, but rather eviscerated the planet. If there had not been a Cold War, and the government had followed Henry Wallace's advice instead to spread the wealth amongst all the people, then the monopolies and cartels that dominate today's world would never have acquired so much power. At the Democratic Convention in 1944, Wallace came within five seconds or so of becoming Vice-President once more, which would have made him President in the following year. Had that happened, then the course of American history

might have been totally different. John F. Kennedy wanted to end the Cold War in 1963 before he was assassinated; Jimmy Carter embraced a similar vision when he first got elected.

**Q:** What impact do you think the series might have in changing existing attitudes?

**PK:** We want to encourage viewers and readers to question their assumptions about American history; to reflect on how different history could have been, and how they can embrace more progressive visions of the future. We'd like to help them understand how human beings can behave much better towards one another, with alternative visions of the world. Martin Luther King believed in non-violence as a means of social change; we should try to avoid spiritual destruction by feeding and clothing people rather than spending billions of dollars on defense. We'd like viewers to see the world through the eyes of our enemies, as well as our allies: Henry Wallace could do that, as he strove to make Truman see the world through Soviet eyes. How would any nation feel if they lost 27 million people in the Second World War? John F. Kennedy once said that, if the same thing had happened in the United States, the entire country east of Chicago would have been entirely wiped out. The Soviets wanted American friendship, as well as economic aid, so that they could rebuild, and the Americans responded by ordering more weapons and building new air-bases in Turkey and Iran. We need to understand how our actions in South Korea look to the North Koreans; how our policies in the Middle East look to the Syrians or the Turks. We're a very parochial nation in some respects, and until we expand our field of vision, we cannot expect to resolve conflicts peacefully.

**Q:** One of the stories about America that appears on European television channels is the fact that its citizens no longer think of themselves as members of a global superpower any more, especially in the light of its current economic position. Do you think this is accurate?

**PK:** Most Americans don't really understand where they fit in terms of contemporary world politics. Our education system produces learners who consistently obtain lower grades in science and math as opposed to

other countries. Only 12% of high school seniors were rated proficient in American history, which suggests a considerable level of ignorance. I think your question can't be answered, simply because of the parochialism that dominates our country. The people don't know what others think of them. Other countries don't want American troops occupying their territory: remember what the Turks thought – and still think – of those members of the armed forces at the Incirlik air base near Adana. The Turkish government refused to allow the Bush administration to use Turkish soil to mount its attack against Iraq. The same is true in Japan, where there are frequent protests about the troops in Okinawa. If our series could help people understand how others think about our country—the United States -- then we would consider it successful.

**Q:** If you could influence future American policies, both domestically and overseas, what would you most like to do?

**PK:** I believe that American mythologies are wonderful in many ways. We've got freedom of speech, thought and assembly; and I'd love to see these elements assume more importance in the way the country sees itself in the future. I'd love to see more redistribution of wealth through taxation. I'd like to see more resources spent on education, and less on defense. In foreign policy, we should devote more to development programs – not only in the Middle East, but in every region of the world. In that way America might redefine its image for other people; it might no longer be equated simply with military strength. I'd like to go back to the foreign policy that Henry Wallace embraced in the early Forties, when he pointed out that the twentieth century should not be the American century, but the century of the common man. I'd like to see Jack Kennedy's foreign policy reinstated, based on global development and international disarmament. We need a United States that participates in the international community, embraces other perspectives, and looks for peaceful solutions to conflicts, both military as well as civil.

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