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Retired U.S. Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who served as Secretary of State Colin Powell’s chief of staff from 2002 to 2005, says the escalation of tensions between the U.S. and Iran today is a continuation of two decades of U.S. policy disasters in the Middle East, starting with the 2003 run-up to war with Iraq under the Bush administration. “America exists today to make war. How else do we interpret 19 straight years of war and no end in sight? It’s part of who we are. It’s part of what the American Empire is,” says Wilkerson. “We are going to cheat and steal to do whatever it is we have to do to continue this war complex. That’s the truth of it. And that’s the agony of it.”

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!* I’m Amy Goodman, as we continue to look at U.S. policy in the Middle East with retired United States Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who served as chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell from 2002 to 2005. Wilkerson witnessed and participated in the effort by President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and others to promote lies to justify the disastrous illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Colonel Wilkerson helped Secretary of State Powell prepare his infamous February 5th, 2003, speech before the United Nations Security Council, where Powell falsely claimed Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. Wilkerson and Powell would later say the CIA lied to them.

I talked to Colonel Wilkerson last week and asked him about the parallels between the escalation between the U.S. and Iran today and the 2003 run-up to war with Iraq.

LAWRENCE WILKERSON: Ever since 9/11, the beast of the national security state, the beast of endless wars, the beast of the alligator that came out of the swamp, for example, and bit

Donald Trump just a few days ago, is alive and well. America exists today to make war. How else do we interpret 19 straight years of war and no end in sight? It's part of who we are. It's part of what the American Empire is. We are going to lie, cheat and steal, as Pompeo is doing right now, as Trump is doing right now, as Esper is doing right now, as Lindsey Graham is doing right now, as Tom Cotton is doing right now, and a host of other members of my political party, the Republicans, are doing right now. We are going to cheat and steal to do whatever it is we have to do to continue this war complex. That's the truth of it. And that's the agony of it.

What we saw President Trump do was not in President Trump's character, really. Those boys and girls who were getting on those planes at Fort Bragg to augment forces in Iraq, if you looked at their faces and, even more importantly, if you looked at the faces of the families assembled along the line that they were traversing to get onto the airplanes, you saw a lot of Donald Trump's base. That base voted for Donald Trump because he promised to end these endless wars. He promised to drain the swamp. Well, as I said, an alligator from that swamp jumped out and bit him. And when he ordered the killing of Qassem Soleimani, he was a member of the national security state in good standing. And all that state knows how to do is make war.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn to President Trump.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: We took action last night to stop a war; we did not take action to start a war.

AMY GOODMAN: George W. Bush had the opportunity to assassinate Soleimani. President Obama had the opportunity to assassinate Soleimani. They didn't. Trump did. And you had dealings with Soleimani. You were just explaining, in [Part 1](#) of our discussion, what he did in Afghanistan and how Vice President Pence was lying when he talked about him being involved in the 9/11 attacks.

LAWRENCE WILKERSON: Here you have one of the most egregious things of what we did

and one of the biggest reasons that neither the two previous presidents decided to do what Donald Trump did. We have just, as we did with torture from 2002 to 2007, 2008, as we substantiated for the world that torture was OK, we have now OK'd the killing of recognized members of other states' government. That's what Soleimani was, no matter how heinous we may paint him. He was a member of an established state's government, and we assassinated him. That is a very dangerous precedent to have set. You may have heard the members of the Russian Duma, Vladimir Putin himself and others in Russia talking about this dangerous precedent. Had it been the Israelis who do this, Amy, they would have done it and sent flowers to Tehran. It would have been completely covert. There would have been no boasting, no public thumping of the chest and so forth. That's the narcissist in the White House that caused that to happen. But even if you were doing it that way, you would have to think about this consideration that eventually it would become public that you had done it. And you, by doing it, had sanctioned the killing of other state actors.

Now, what we're looking at here, for example, let's just put the shoe on the other foot. We're looking at someone coming in to Washington and assassinating one of our leaders, whether it be a congressman or a member of the executive branch or someone else. We have just sanctioned that. We have become the law of the jungle, rather than, as we have been since 1945, the greatest supporter of international law and the rule of law in general across the face of the globe. With torture and with killing other state recognized individuals of their government, we have become the tiger, the lion, the bear, the alligator in that jungle. It's not a very, very good precedent to have set, as the Russians indicated. The Chinese have said similar things. It's a terrible precedent to have set.

And now we have to steel ourselves for what the reaction might be. And as I said earlier, the strategic initiative is now in Tehran's hands. They can decide now whether or not it's a major escalation that they perpetrate or just something that sort of fritters away over time and doesn't cause the U.S. to execute a bombing package against the targets, for example, that Donald Trump has suggested. I don't want to be in that world, but that's where we are.

Al-Sistani said it best in Iraq. Al-Sistani, by the way, was a big help to us in 2003 and 2004, when the insurgency was developing, that Donald Rumsfeld, of course, said wasn't there. Al-Sistani helped. And his statement the other day that he did not want Iraq to be the battleground of settling scores was a perfect description of what is happening. Donald Trump is trying to settle a score, and it's everything from he doesn't want to do what Obama did to he thinks his maximum-tension campaign is working when it's not. That's all it's about.

And incidentally, we have another failure in diplomacy perpetrated by Donald Trump developing right now in the Korean Peninsula. So, wait until you see what the strategic results are of Kim Jong-un's posturing on the peninsula and Iran's at the same time. We used to have a saying in the Pentagon when we were doing war planning. We hoped that the North Koreans and the Iraqis, at that time, now the Iranians, don't decide to collude and attack at the same time. Well, Donald Trump has set that kind of strategic situation up now with two major diplomatic failures, mostly because of the narcissism and the lack of competence that he himself has exhibited, but also because of the national security state and its desire to keep these wars going.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you elaborate on what Soleimani did back when you were in the Bush administration? You were working with him.

LAWRENCE WILKERSON: Well, what we had in the first days of our reaction on Afghanistan was not really a military action. It was a CIA action. Donald Rumsfeld actually got furious with the Army because it couldn't get into Afghanistan fast enough. If you look at a map, you will see why it couldn't get into Afghanistan fast enough. Of course, we had to go over to Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and ask them for overflight rights and for logistics rights and so forth in order to even get into Afghanistan.

But what you had was you had essentially a war between the Taliban, Mullah Omar and his group, what was left of al-Qaeda, and the Northern Alliance, which the CIA had been supporting all along. They had killed Massoud, the "Lion of Panjshir," the guy who was really leading the Northern Alliance, too. Al-Qaeda had killed him about the same time they did the 9/11 attacks. So it was really chaotic.

When we did get some special operators in, and we got a lot of aircraft in with, of course, precision-guided munitions, then we began to turn the tide. And we began to get to a situation where — I can tell you, we were almost apoplectic at the time — we didn't know who was going to invest Kabul. We didn't know that we hadn't just turned Kabul over to the Northern Alliance, and thus to a continuation of the last 30 years of warfare. So, we were very anxious to

make sure everything worked the way we wanted it to after that so-called victory.

And one of the people — one of the groups that helped us the most, as you might imagine, were the Iranians, because the Iranians looked at the Taliban as their enemy, too. You may recall that the Taliban had killed some Iranian diplomats and others in the months prior. So the Iranians were all for our eliminating the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, and so pitched in to help.

As I said, once President Bush had given his speech about the “axis of evil” and included Iran in that, their desire to help was not quite as ardent as it was before. But they, nonetheless, realizing, as Iran almost always does — I hate these people who say they’re irrational. They’re far more rational than we are. Let me say that again: The leadership in Tehran is far more rational than the leadership in Washington. So, they decided they would continue to help us, because, after all, the enemy of my enemy — you know, all that old, good business about the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And they did in fact continue to help us, all the way through the Bonn conference. And Soleimani was part of that at the time.

AMY GOODMAN: You just said Esper, Pence, Pompeo, Trump. Explain what they’re lying about right now as we hear them talk about he was just about to engage in another attack on U.S. personnel.

LAWRENCE WILKERSON: Well, the first thing they’re lying about, as a military professional, I know cold. No general, especially not one at the level that Soleimani was operating — no general reaches out and kills someone. Nor does he reach out to a team and say, “Kill someone.” Nor does he reach out to a squad or a platoon or a company and say, “Kill someone.” He gives orders at the top, sets strategic purposes and principles and general guidelines, and he boosts morale, and he travels around, and he talks to the teams and so on — exactly what Soleimani was so good at.

So, to say that Soleimani, himself personally, was an imminent threat is, as I said before, laughable. And the fact that Esper and Pompeo, who have some manner of expertise in military

affairs, are saying these things makes them even more egregious liars than otherwise. If John Kerry got up there and said something like that, or if Warren Christopher got up there and said something of that, Kerry even with his Vietnam experience, you could give them a little bit of leeway. But these guys are supposed to be experts in the very fields that they're talking about. They're anything but experts. They are warmongers. They are warmongers *par excellence*.

Mike Pompeo and Vice President Pence, they both long for the rapture, for the end times, for Jesus coming down to the Earth and killing all the unbelievers with his flaming sword. This is what they are all about. This is why they allowed the embassy to move to Jerusalem. Go back and check the remarks that were made at that time, the prayers that were given and so forth. This is, in a word, a very different U.S. administration, but in the same hands of the military-industrial complex, of the national security state, of all the people who want warfare to be the *raison d'être* of this empire at the same time.

So, you're looking at an incompetent leadership, coupled with a leadership that's ruthless and brutal and knows where it wants to go. And with Iran, it's regime change, period. And if they have to go to war, that's what they want. And now they've got it to the point where it's going to be extremely difficult — I'd put the chances at 50-50 — for us to extricate ourselves from this march to war. And this war will put Iraq to shame in terms of its consequences in blood and treasure.

AMY GOODMAN: So, I want to go to the reasons for it. And I know you have to leave, so we'll do this quickly. 2020 presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren was speaking on CNN's *State of the Union* with Jake Tapper.

SEN. ELIZABETH WARREN: Next week, the president of United States could be facing an impeachment trial in the Senate. We know he's deeply upset about that. And I think people are reasonably asking: Why this moment? Why does he pick now to take this highly inflammatory, highly dangerous action that moves us closer to war? We've been at war for 20 years in the Middle East. We need to stop the war in the Middle East, not expand it.

JAKE TAPPER: Senator, are you suggesting that President Trump pulled the trigger and had Qassem Suleimani killed as a distraction from impeachment?

SEN. ELIZABETH WARREN: Look, I think people are reasonably asking about the timing and why it is that the administration seems to have all kinds of different answers.

AMY GOODMAN: So, that's presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren. Last week, right after the assassination, the Oscar-winning filmmaker Michael Moore tweeted *The New York Times* front page from December 17th, 1998. The front-page banner headline read, “Impeachment Vote in House Delayed as Clinton Launches Iraq Air Strike, Citing Military Need to Move Swiftly.” Colonel Wilkerson, can you respond?

LAWRENCE WILKERSON: For 15 years, Amy, I've taught this to over 400 students on two campuses. National security decision-making is what it's called. One of the influences I emphasize is domestic politics. I would be a traitor to the academic curriculum which I teach, I would be a traitor to the truth, if I didn't say, “Of course that had something to do with it.” And watch out, because there will be more, because there will be more impeachment.

AMY GOODMAN: Any final words, Colonel Wilkerson, as we move into this very critical period, with President Trump saying if Iran responds to the U.S. assassination of one of their leaders, that the U.S. will hit 52 sites, including cultural institutions, which is, by the way, considered a war crime — 52 for the 52 hostages Iran took more than 40 years ago?

LAWRENCE WILKERSON: If that were the case and we actually executed such a package, we would solidify 80 million people in a way that for the next 30 years would cost the lives of countless Americans, businesspeople, tourists and so forth throughout the region and perhaps throughout the world.

I know what the packages look like for bombing Iran. I worked, to work on the Soviets as they invaded Afghanistan, and we thought they were going to drive south to Chabahar or Bandar Abbas, to warm water ports in Iran. So I did some of the battle planning for fighting the Soviets in Iran. I know the territory. I know the strategic depth. I know the mountains and so forth.

I can tell you right now that the bombing packages that we have, that will call on Al Udeid and multicarrier operations in the northern Sea of Oman, and Khalid in Saudi Arabia, Incirlik, perhaps, in Turkey, and so forth, are not designed to do that. So, if they are designed to do that, in other words, modified, and if they do that, we will have started a catastrophe in the Middle East that will make, as I said, Iraq look like child's play.

AMY GOODMAN: Retired United States Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who served as chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell during the invasion of Iraq.

To see [Part 1](#) of the interview, go to democracynow.org.