However, in a Sept. 10 media briefing on President Obama’s plan for a new war in Iraq, Syria, and who-knows-where-else, a “senior administration official” failed this elemental lesson of WAR 101. The expert was briefing reporters about the coalition of nations that Obama was assembling to “degrade and destroy” the barbaric band of terrorists that exploded out of Syria this summer (who’ve grandiosely labeled themselves the “Islamic State”). Especially important, noted the official, was Saudi Arabia’s decision to join the coalition—after all, he explained, the Saudi monarchy views the bloodthirsty sect as an imminent threat to it, for “Saudi Arabia has an extensive border with Syria.” Uh… no. Far from “extensive,” the two share no border. In fact they are miles from each other, separated by Iraq, Jordan, and Israel. Perhaps that’s one senior advisor who could be replaced by a good Rand McNally.

Nevertheless—Hi ho, hi ho—it’s off to war we go! Obama, egged on by the usual flock of squawking hawks, is committing us to another Middle-East misadventure—and figuring out the map will be the least of America’s problems. The warmongers are pushing our nation into the sticky web of a centuries-old religious conflagration that (1) we don’t understand, (2) we cannot resolve, (3) presents no clear threat to our national security, (4) involves us with a motley crew of “allies,” (5) offers no moral high ground, (6) positions us as destroyers (or worse, crusaders), (7) is creating a whole new generation of young Muslim enemies for us, (8) has no timetable or definition of “victory,” (9) has not been explained, publicly debated, or congressionally authorized, and (10) will further drain our treasury, strain our military, and divert our people and resources from achieving America’s own, long-delayed, democratic potential.

Other than that, the launching of what officials tell us will be a “long war” against the fanatic Islamic State (IS) makes perfectly good sense. If the decision to fling our weary soldiers, depleted coffers, and tarnished international reputation into the Middle East’s religious inferno had been made by Bush-Cheney (or, let’s say, a Trump-Cruz administration), progressives and other voices of sanity would howl with rage. Well, we should not be any less enraged merely because a Democrat is at the front of such a fool’s errand. Nor can we suspend rational thought just because we are rightly repulsed by the raw, utterly incomprehensible evil being committed by the IS, a theocratic horde that revels in the gore of beheadings, crucifixions, and massacres.

What are we getting into? FIRST, it is a war—not a “conflict” or a “military action,” but a real war that will require enormous commitments of American money, time, weaponry, and lives. “Rooting out a cancer like this won’t be easy, and it won’t be quick,” Obama conceded in August as he committed us to this vague, open-ended, half-baked escapade. Again the stated goal is not merely to contain the mobile, internet-savvy, highly capable pack of some 31,000 murderous ideologues, but to “destroy” it. That includes, as Obama has indicated, not just military assaults, but also addressing the entrenched poverty, lack of education, kleptocratic governments, and sense of hopelessness that created the furious rise of this terrorist army and constantly feeds angry young recruits into it.

Is all this our job? If so, be prepared to pay. Gordon Adams, a military spending...
expert at American University, says that his “back-of-the-envelope”
calculation of dollars that will be spent to sustain our military in just
Year One of this Islamic State war is about $15 billion. That does not
count such subsequent multipliers of military expenditures as long-
term veterans’ health care and interest payments on the debt (yes,
debt—once again, as in Afghanistan and Bush’s previous Iraq war,
this one will be charged on the nation’s credit card and billed to our
grandchildren).

SECOND, this is a Mideastern religious war, not one of national
aggression, nor one that poses any imminent threat to the USA. It is a
“jihad,” (a holy war that calls Muslims to join as a sacred duty), and
it stems from a puritanical revivalist movement of Sunni Muslim
extremists who believe they are in a death struggle “over the soul
of Islam.”

The so-called Islamic State is not a state, but more of a state of
mind, with the IS laying claim to all Muslims of the ancient “Levant,”
weeping from Israel into Southern Turkey. And it is “Islamic” in
name only, dishonoring most of the positive religious and civic
ideals set forth by Muhammad, the seventh-century Arab prophet
who founded Islam. Also known by the acronyms ISIS (Islamic
State of Iraq and Syria) and ISIL (Islamic State in Levant), the group
claims to be a holy movement of the pure Islam, but it functions
as a cult of pure sadism, using brutal wholesale violence not as
a means to some spiritual end, but as an end in itself.

The IS is led by Abu Bakr al-
Baghdadi, a megalomaniac Iraqi Sunni
who surprised everyone in June by
anointing himself ruler of all Muslims
everywhere. For us Westerners, he
and the IS seem to have come out of
nowhere, but, both have evolved from
previous Sunni terrorist groups that arose after the
2003 US invasion of Iraq, and both trace their ruthless
creed directly to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an
18th century radical proselytizer of a severe form of
Sunni Islam. Today’s IS is taking Wahhab’s extreme
fundamentalism to an ultra-extremist, belligerent ideology that one
Islamic scholar calls “untamed Wahhabism.”

While they despise Western culture as the spawn of Satan and
fulminate against the long, sorrowful history of Western subjugation
of Islamic peoples, the West is not the primary target of their
vengeful fury. That honor goes to two particular groups of Muslims:
(1) the Shia (or Shiites), who differ with Sunnis on whose original
leader is the legitimate successor to Muhammad and, therefore,
are considered by the IS as abominable heretics who must be
exterminated for the sake of “purifying the community of the faith-
ful”; and (2) moderate Sunnis, who are viewed as apostates for
having rejected unadulterated Wahhabism to accept such modern
Islamic norms as the education of girls, tolerance of other religions,
and acceptance of non-theocratic Islamic governments.

THIRD, it is not our war. Yes, we are nauseated, maddened,
and frightened to see YouTube videos of fanatics beheading US
journalists and others. But what we have here is a regional Islamic
war, pitting a vicious IS minority against mainstream Islamic people,
governments, and armies.

Those mainstream forces are the ones to unite, stand up, and
lead the battle. Western nations certainly must support such a con-
certed military, economic, and cultural campaign to de-fang IS, but
it is ridiculous (and self-defeating) for the US strut into the chaotic
center of a Muslim war and lead the charge.

**Saudi Wahhabia**

Where the hell is the richest, most powerful force in the region,
Saudi Arabia? Shhhhh... King Abdullah and assorted princes of the
royal Saudi family are hunkered down in their opulent palaces, qui-
ently praying that we American dupes don’t learn that the duty of
leadership in this war (and on the larger need to address the
region’s massive social/economic/political inequities fueling the IS
upsurge) belongs to them—not us.

**DISTRESSING FACTOID #1**

Unmentioned by the war whoopers demanding that
we re-invade Iraq (sheesh—could the third time be the charm?) and other Arab nations, is this: The murderous Islamic State
we’re fighting is the love child of our supposed ally, Saudi Arabia.
This story dates way back to 1744, when the founder of the
Saudi ruling dynasty, Muhammad bin Saud, forged a “mutual sup-
port pact” with an ambitious Sunni cleric, Abdul-Wahhab. Right—
the very guy who established the rigidly repressive Sunni/Wahhabism
that IS bunch has now adapted to its own purposes. The relationship
was even sealed by the marriage of Wahhab’s daughter to bin Saud’s
son.

That 270-year old Saudi-Wahhab mutual protection pact remains in full force today in Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, the current Saudi royals empower
Wahhab’s direct descendants to be the country’s official
religious leaders, and the royals are also the prime funder
of Wahhabist schools and mosques throughout the Muslim
world, thus officially entrenched and spreading Wahhabism’s
puritanical dictates and its culture of dispensing violent punish-
ments to offenders.

In return, the Wahhab clerical establishment bestows its religious
blessing on the Saudi monarchy, including sanctioning, its flagrant
lavish lifestyle and its often gruesome treatment of women, prison-
ers, and others. How gruesome? Ironically, while US politicians and
pundits are goading the American people into war against the IS
by replaying those sickening videos of beheadings, we’re not told
that the IS is merely mimicking our “friend” and close ally, the Saud
regime, which routinely uses decapitation as punishment, even for
such minor violations as drug use.

DISTRESSING FACTOID #2
Although Saudi Arabia is the sire of much of the Islamic
State mess we’re rushing headlong into (including
having to fight an untold number of Saudis who have now become
IS terrorists), the Saud regime has been quite shy about confronting
its spawn and doing its part to defeat them. After all, it has the most
at stake here, for the Saudi monarchy is directly in the path of the
Islamic State’s fury over decades of domineering royal/military rule.
Moreover—with their deep oil reserves, powerful military (largely
trained and armed by our military industrial complex), and regional
prestige—the Saud family has both the responsibility and the
wherewithal to lead this war, including putting a full contingent of
armed forces on the ground and bearing the brunt of the casualties.

But the mighty kingdom has ducked and dodged, providing only
the meekest endorsement and some air support for what it is treat-
ing as our war. Even to get this little bit from Saudi Arabia, Obama
and other Western leaders have had to bow and scrape in King
Abdullah’s court, then pretend to us that Arab leaders are full part-
ners in our coalition.

As New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote in September,
“We can’t want to defeat [the Islamic State] more than the countries
in its path.” But it is obvious that we do. While Obama has flatly
declared that, “This is not and will not be America’s fight alone,” it
especially is—in the sense that the US is the one that pressured
countries to join the coalition (reluctantly and limitedly), has devel-
oped the war strategy, is risking by far the most, and is clearly identi-
fied in the region and elsewhere as the face of this war. Saudi Arabia,
Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and other regional Islamic powers
are hanging way back, slyly using us as their proxy military.

This is a waste and a loser for the USA, and it’s only going to get
worse as the long war steadily lengthens and escalates.

A cluster of consequences
After LBJ’s “Gulf of Tonkin” fabrication and the Bush-Cheney-
Rummy-Condi “WMD” whopper, whooper, you’d think the current Washington
crowd would be ultra-wary about getting hustled into another big
war. But—Yee-haw!—we’re shooting first and asking questions
later, literally after it’s too late.

Obama actually tried to be a voice of calm, resisting a knee-jerk
reaction to the gory taunts of the IS, but his deliberate approach
only caused those who were furiously pounding the war drums to
 pound on the President instead. “He needs to rise to the occasion,”
shrieked GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham, “before we all get killed back
here at home!”

Then came the Hawks of Doom. TV shows, ranging from Fox
News to Charlie Rose, brought forth a parade of ex-generals to pose
as expert analysts of the IS threat, nearly all of whom called for a
go-get-em military response, including sending in American troops.

Never mentioned, however, is that most of this retired brass is tar-
ished by having a direct financial interest in always sinking
America deeper into war.

Take Jack Keane, a former general who appeared more than nine
times on Fox News this summer, demeaning the President for lack-
-ing boldness in dealing with the Islamic State. More air strikes, he
barked, send in special forces, commit 25,000 ground troops.

Who is this guy? As revealed in The Nation magazine by the
excellent investigative digger Lee Fang, Keane is a paid advisor to
the infamous Blackwater corporation (now benignly rebranded as
“Academi”), which gets government contracts to provide privatized
military operatives. He’s also a board member of General Dynamics.
a global weapons peddler that has paid Keane more than six figures annually since 2004 ($258,000 last year). He also set up a right-wing think tank, the Institute for the Study of War, sponsored by such military suppliers as DynCorp, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon (just coincidentally, Raytheon makes the missiles our fighter pilots are now firing at the IS).

War isn’t just hell, it’s a hell of a business! And that plays hell with our real national interests. Consider some of the collateral damage.

The Constitution. The founders felt that rushing into war should never be easy, so the burden of that decision was handed to the slower-moving legislative branch. But, as in Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia, Iraq I, Iraq II, and Afghanistan (as well as in Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan) —we’re already butt-deep in an undeclared and therefore unconstitutional war against IS.

Obama, the one-time constitutional law professor, dovish US Senator, and winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace prize, was an un-equivocating opponent of war by executive fiat—until his White House found such a principled stand inconvenient. Lurching into this war, Obama’s legal heavies asserted that he does not need and would not seek congressional authorization to send Americans to kill and be killed in sovereign countries that pose no threat to us.

Follow the bouncing ball of their logic: (1) Because Congress authorized war on al Qaeda 13 years ago and (2) because IS once had some ties to al Qaeda (even though the two are no longer connected and, indeed, are fighting each other), (3) the White House is free to go after the Islamic State today. Wait, there’s more: The White House also argues that (4) since Iraq has a right to self-defense and is being attacked from Syria (though not by the Syrian government), and (5) since Iraq asked the US to assist in its self-defense, (6) the US has the right to launch offensive attacks in Syria and presumably in Lebanon, Jordan, and anywhere else the IS operates.

Irony. GOP leaders in the House—who angrily voted to sue Obama in federal court earlier this year for usurping congressional authority by unilaterally taking executive actions—have now boisterously demanded that he unilaterally go to war— pronto! Forget Congress, squealed the panicky House Speaker, John Boehner: “These are barbarians. They intend to kill us.”

Boehner not only wimped out on asserting Congress’ war powers, but—pathetically—he said that if the President wanted lawmakers to authorize the war, well gosh, he’d be willing to call the members back from their vacation to consider it: “I’d be happy to,” the gutless leader said, as he fecklessly abdicated Congress’ Constitutional responsibility.

We the People. Congress doesn’t need a president’s permission to vote on war—it can just do it. Indeed, it’s their duty, explicitly stated in Article I of our Constitution. By utterly failing to do its duty, the shameful Republican majority has stiffled you and me, denying us the comprehensive public debate that this fateful venture demands. While polls presently show that a bare majority approves of US airstrikes, an October Pew Research poll reveals that only 34 percent of Americans think the military effort is going well, only 30 percent say the US has a clear goal in this war, only 17 percent say our allies are doing their part, and a strong majority of Democrats and independents oppose putting US soldiers on the ground (leaving only Republicans and tea partiers cheering this deadly escalation).

In other words, the people have very big questions about what the #&%*@! we’re doing, and why, at what cost, how long is “long,” what can be won…. and why us? The White House, the generals, and the hawks in Congress should have to answer in full public view—but Boehner & Company have shielded them from democracy and accountability. They’re letting this handful of power elites rush America to war without even having to justify it to those of us who’ll pay for their folly.

Stop the madness

In 2009 US officials began extricating our nation from the unwarranted Iraq war, but they simultaneously mired us deeper in the hopeless Afghanistan war. In the past year, they’ve finally been withdrawing from that mess, yet we’ve lately learned that, even as they did, they secretly opened a whole new generation of drone wars in an untold number of other nations. And now comes their open-ended Islamic State war.

It is neither hyperbole nor paranoia to say the obvious: Our USA is officially in a state of permanent war—undeclared, unconstitutional, and largely un-discussed. But don’t just throw up your hands. Join hands. A growing number of Americans are steadily building a political majority (including conservatives and military families) to stop our country from tumbling down this dark and destructive rabbit hole. As polls indicate, this coalition for sanity already has established a strong base—including support from roughly a quarter of House and Senate members. To help expand the sanity, check out this month’s Do Something box.