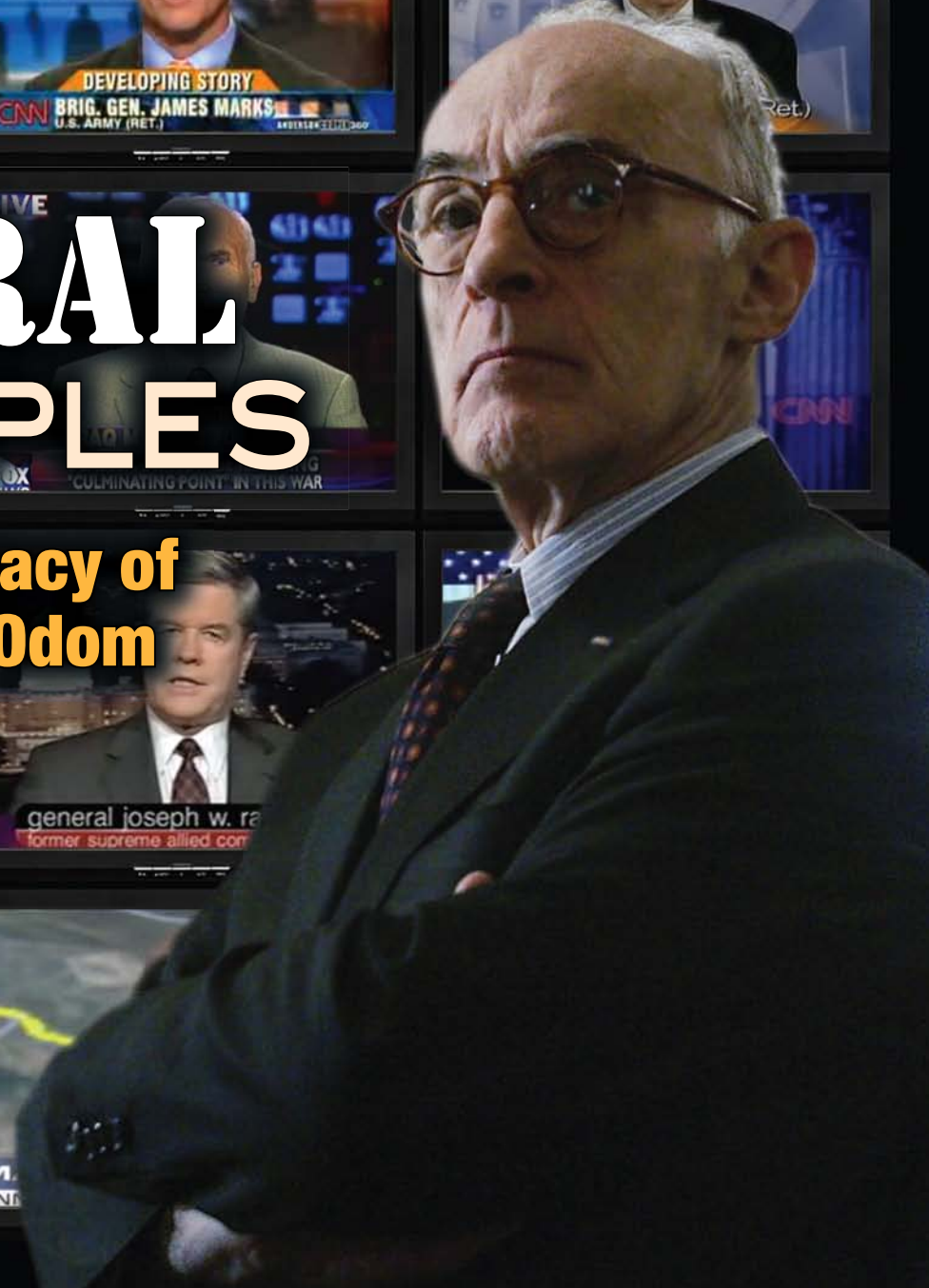
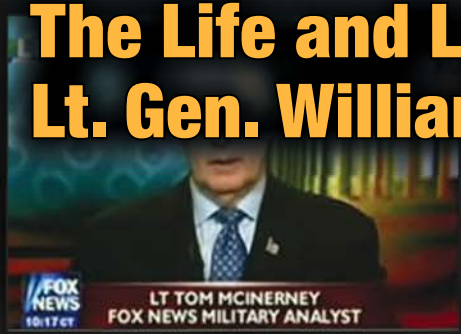


# The American Conservative



## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

### The Life and Legacy of Lt. Gen. William Odom



[pulling rank]

# General Principles

While other top brass played press agents for the administration's war, William Odom told the truth about Iraq—though few listened.

By Ron Unz

MUCH AS THE CAPITAL loves ceremony, Washington won't pause on Sept. 8 when Lt. Gen. William Odom is laid to rest at Arlington Cemetery. While he is worthy of his laurels, he did not court the favor of the Beltway political class. Instead, he disdained their blindness to history, their partisan fixations, their herd mentality. Brave men often stand alone.

Those with knowledge of military affairs recognize different types of courage. There is combat courage—the resolve to storm a position or hold a trench against heavy odds. There is command courage—the willingness of officers to take decisive action and sustain losses to secure victory. And there is a third variety, crucial at the topmost ranks of America's officer corps but increasingly rare—political courage, the willingness to speak truth to political power. Bill Odom, whom I greatly admired and respected, exemplified this last, most elusive kind of courage, which is why his death of a heart attack on May 30 leaves such a void in America's foreign-policy debate.

He passed away too soon, but in some ways Odom had already lived past his time, the era of Cold War liberal internationalism. After graduating from West Point in 1954, he served in Germany and Vietnam and was later posted to the

Moscow embassy. Following several years of teaching at West Point, he came to Washington as an aide to Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser. There, he gained a reputation as "Zbig's superhawk" for his staunch opposition to détente and his prescient speculations about the possible break-up of the Soviet Union before the end of the century. He went on to serve as assistant chief of staff of the Army for Intelligence and director of the National Security Agency under President Reagan.

In the wake of Sept. 11, this retired three-star general, long a pillar of the foreign-policy establishment, seemed uniquely qualified to be heard. Indeed, he was one of the earliest senior military figures to issue public warnings as the hysterical drive to invade Iraq eventually became a calamitous occupation, an outcome that he later described as "the greatest strategic disaster in U.S. history."

But since Odom first arrived in D.C.—and especially after the fall of the Soviet Union—the town has become more and more an Imperial City, whose Imperial Court rules a global empire, albeit an increasingly beleaguered and bankrupt one. Competence is far less important to advancement than glibness, media intrigue, and the flattery of wealthy

patrons. Sober views of military and geopolitical limits have little place in an administration whose courtiers deride their opponents as members of the "reality-based community." Therefore, after 9/11, America's most prestigious newspapers—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*—virtually closed their pages to Odom's discordant views.

Reduced to publishing on small websites like NiemanWatchdog.org, he refused to blunt his critique. Odom's web columns had titles like "Six brutal truths about Iraq," "Iraq through the prism of Vietnam," and "What's wrong with cutting and running?" Other national columnists said similar things—if more cautiously—but most were liberal pundits with negligible military credentials. Odom had served as one of Ronald Reagan's highest-ranking national security officials, and his words should have carried enormous weight.

Yet who did the mainstream media select to inform the American public? An endless stream of youthful neocons, almost none of whom had ever worn an American uniform, but who had instead chosen to make their careers in the gilded cocoon of "conservative" think tanks and punditry. Ironically, some of the loudest might have had their closest encounter with military service when

they took Odom's courses in strategy at Yale, though they obviously learned nothing.

There lies another telling contrast. Odom was a career military man. His ancestor Col. George Waller had served with George Washington at Yorktown; two of his great-grandfathers fought for the Confederacy. His only son, Mark, led dangerous field operations in Iraq before being injured last year in an insurgent bombing. Odom was also a serious scholar, with a Columbia Ph.D. in political science, a long list of academic books and journal articles, and an adjunct professorship at Yale.

But to the editors of the major dailies, the proper experts were neocon word-mongers, whose only books were shallow diatribes on subjects ranging from abortion to tax policy to defense, all written with equally zestful ignorance. They knew little about the Mideast or the military, but held advanced degrees in networking, doctorates in self-promotion, and had paid their dues by courting every editor on the cocktail-party circuit. After all, if reality doesn't exist, why not hire your friends to analyze it?

Yet with America at war, pasty-faced, 30-something Heritage alumni writing endless newspaper columns on grand strategy—and gay marriage—would inspire no confidence on television. The public needed to see high-ranking veterans, solemn and stern-faced, validating the actions of the Bush administration.

That's exactly what they got. From the moment the planes hit the World Trade Center, the networks, and the cable news channels in particular, developed an insatiable hunger for military commentators, graying former generals heavy on brass and ribbons. Their judgments could not easily be dismissed, given their professional expertise and lifetimes of service, and almost invariably, they supported the views of the

White House. The public trusted them and followed where they led—into Afghanistan and then Iraq.

We discovered how much their credibility was worth on April 20, when the *New York Times*—at long last—published an exposé, based on 8,000 pages of Pentagon e-mail and transcripts, about the business activities and financial ties of these supposedly dispassionate experts. CNN paid them as much as \$1,000 per appearance, but most were simultaneously receiving vastly greater sums from their military procurement and government contracting work. For example, Gen. James Marks appeared regularly on cable news throughout 2006, even as he was involved in bidding, through his work with McNeil Technologies, for a \$4.6 billion contract to provide translators in Iraq.

One might crudely say that the government owned 99 percent of these men while the news channels rented 1 percent—and then asked them their opinion of the government. Their financial futures were in the hands of the administration officials they were evaluating on television.

**THERE IS A WORD FOR MILITARY OFFICERS WHO TRADE AWAY THEIR OWN COUNTRY'S NATIONAL-SECURITY INTERESTS FOR LARGE FINANCIAL PAYMENTS, AND IT IS NOT A PLEASANT ONE.**

The White House played this relationship to full advantage. Bush officials routinely organized briefings to provide inside information to these pundits and to tailor their commentary. The *New York Times* uncovered Pentagon documents describing the talking-head generals as “message force multipliers” or “surrogates,” who could be counted on to propagate the administration's message “in the form of their opinions.” The Pentagon even hired Omnitec Solutions,

a consulting company, to watch the television appearances and grade the performances of these purportedly neutral commentators. The reviews were then passed on to Bush appointees at the Pentagon who controlled the flow of procurement funding.

There are documented examples of retired generals believing that the situation in Iraq was an absolute disaster, but providing only the requested Happy News to millions of Americans seeking their wisdom on television. After returning from a government-sponsored trip to Iraq, Gen. Paul E. Vallely, a Fox News analyst, told Alan Colmes, “You can't believe the progress,” predicting that the insurgency would be reduced “to a few numbers” within months. But he later told the *New York Times*, “I saw immediately that things were going south in 2003.”

Many of these former high-ranking American military officers should have every right to request membership in the Screen Actors Guild, and in some cases their theatrical pay might place them near the upper end of the Hollywood wage scale. There is a particular word for military officers who trade away

their own country's national security interests for large financial payments, and it is not a pleasant one.

Bill Odom instead held to the code of traditional military honor. He had not entered the Armed Forces in hopes of acquiring a huge Loudoun County mansion. When he left his home in rural Appalachia to enroll at West Point, his reasons were patriotism and public service—as was almost universally true among members of his generation.

These selfless motives persist in today's military—but perhaps to a lesser degree. Social and financial corruption frequently start at the top, and when American generals leverage their military careers to become multi-millionaires, many colonels, majors, and captains may begin thinking along similar lines.

Indeed, America's explicit doctrine of substituting payment for public spirit and personal integrity has reached new levels of absurdity in our Iraq policies. One-fifth—some \$100 billion—of our military spending in Iraq has gone to private contractors. This category includes the many tens of thousands of “security contractors”—private mercenaries—who constitute an important fraction of the occupation forces.

Many of these are South Africans, Brazilians, or French, the traditional “wild geese” who have long traveled the world in search of lucrative wars to fight. But a disturbingly high number are American. When experienced soldiers can quit the Army and immediately return to Iraq as hired guns, making five or six times their previous salaries, they might easily conclude that national military service is merely for the gullible. Thus some fraction of today's bloated Pentagon budget is actually spent to lure America's best troops into abandoning their military careers, thereby hollowing out our ground forces.

Some adventuresome neocon pundits have even suggested opening the American Armed Forces to any foreigners willing to join. In return for high pay and automatic citizenship, they need only march wherever their officers tell them to march and shoot whomever their officers tell them to shoot. There is a long record of ugly precedents for countries that choose to replace their national militaries with foreign mercenaries, but history experts who have never read a history book might remain unaware of this.

Although such massive corruption is without modern American precedent, the Iraq War's parallels to Vietnam are obvious. Liberal pundits are reluctant to note the similarities, lest they be denounced as “unpatriotic” by their bellicose conservative colleagues. But Bill Odom suffered no such qualms. When he saw Vietnam recurring, he said so—and dared anyone to contradict him.

As a staff officer in Saigon, he witnessed firsthand the utter futility and disastrous consequences of that war, both for that country and for the cohesion of the American military. Years later, he pointed out that since the strategic rationale had been to contain China, our war with Hanoi made no sense, given that the Vietnamese were traditionally the strongest local adversaries of the Chinese and indeed fought a bloody border war with China almost immediately after America's departure. Also, Soviet Russia was America's great antagonist during that period, and containing China was a key Russian objective, so our war was actually fought on behalf of our leading international adversary. The true reason we spent so many years sacrificing vast quantities of American blood, money, and credibility in the jungles of Southeast Asia was that ending the war would be an admission that American leaders had made a horrible mistake in beginning it.

Following 9/11, our Mideast strategy became similarly irrational. Odom noted that Saddam Hussein, a secular Arab nationalist, had for decades been the greatest regional enemy of both the Iranians and radical Islamists such as Osama bin Laden. Therefore, our Iraq War was serving the interests of these hostile, anti-American powers. And for several years now, it has been obvious that the single greatest reason America does not withdraw from Iraq is the fear of acknowledging our blunder.

When I first met Bill Odom in the early 1990s, shortly after the Cold War ended and he had become director of the National Security Program at the Hudson Institute, he was hopeful that America would become more of a “normal country.” His last book, begun at the end of the 1990s with Robert Dujarric, one of my college roommates, was entitled *America's Inadvertent Empire*. It analyzed the United States' enormous military, economic, technological, and cultural power but never considered that those assets might be turned to wars of imperial conquest and occupation.

Of course, Sept. 11 changed everything. Since that date America has begun behaving as an exceptionally abnormal country, and Odom's disappearance means our leaders' dangerous course is even less likely to receive honest analysis. Days before his death, Odom had co-authored a *Washington Post* piece with Brzezinski, urging an immediate strategic rapprochement with Iran as a means of stabilizing Iraq pursuant to an American withdrawal. The *Post* had finally become willing to publish Odom's views, but his counsel seemed to fall on deaf ears. The danger of an American attack on Iran may have since faded—presumably being embroiled in two wars makes the Pentagon cautious about starting another—but belligerent rhetoric continues to issue from all major political candidates. America has 200,000 troops occupying Iraq on the other side of the world and has already caused the deaths of over 1 million Iraqi civilians, but American leaders still regularly denounce Iran for its “interference” in its next-door neighbor. Bill Odom smiled at politicians who demonstrate such political blindness.

The most chilling of his public pronouncements has received little attention, though it might be regarded as his

last will and testament to the country he loved. In early April, he and a number of other prominent military critics of the Iraq War were called to give Congressional testimony. All criticized the occupation and urged a rapid American withdrawal, but Odom went farther. He said that without prompt action, Baghdad could become America's Dien Bien Phu, where superior French forces were surrounded, trapped, cut off from supplies, and ultimately destroyed by Vietnamese guerrillas.

The comparison is not as absurd as it might seem. America possesses a powerful force in Iraq, but, as military analyst William Lind has repeatedly emphasized, that force is almost entirely dependent on a long and slender supply line from Kuwait, which runs through territory controlled by Shi'ite forces friendly to Iran. Some 500 tanker trucks of fuel must reach the American Army each day for it to maintain operational mobility. If widespread guerrilla action were to reduce substantially the number or transit speed of those convoys, America's advantage in advanced hardware—our primary strength—would become increasingly irrelevant.

Under such a scenario, any American president who finally issued a command to withdraw would be forced to abandon vast amounts of military hardware, thereby publicly formalizing the greatest defeat in American history. But any president who did not issue such a humiliating withdrawal order would risk the total loss of America's huge expeditionary force. That result would rank with the greatest military disasters in all history—enormously worse than Dien Bien Phu, and comparable in scale to the doomed Sicilian Expedition of the Athenians.

As a serious scholar, Bill Odom knew his Thucydides. But the country he leaves behind does not. ■

The fighting between Georgia and Russia is yet another U.S. foreign-policy disaster in which Washington might have encouraged a war where there was no conceivable American interest. It is also, by all accounts, the latest major intelligence failure. When Tbilisi staged its surprise attack into South Ossetia, the United States had no less than 130 soldiers and Defense Department contractors training the Georgian forces through the embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation. Some were actually U.S. Army intelligence officers educating the Georgian army in their craft. There was also a CIA station and an embassy political section tasked with developing confidential relationships with Georgia's political leadership. U.S. Ambassador John Tefft reportedly could drop in on President Mikheil Saakashvili any time he wished to do so.

In addition to the American contingent, the Israelis had a very large presence providing \$500 million worth of equipment and training to the Georgians, funded through two U.S. assistance programs. The Israeli media has been reporting that there were hundreds of former military officers working as trainers in Georgia.

This version of a greater Caucasus co-prosperity sphere was greased by an estimated \$2 billion in U.S. assistance used to maintain and upgrade the Georgian military, partially to enable it to serve in Iraq but also to protect the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and confront nonexistent al-Qaeda elements in the Pankisi Gorge. The assistance program involved frequent interaction with all levels of the Georgian military, but the Americans and Israelis did not know what Tbilisi was up to, though invading a country even on a small scale is no turnkey operation. Planning and preparation involving thousands of Georgians went apparently unnoticed by the many foreign observers in the country.

The U.S. advisers were withdrawn to Tbilisi, and the Israelis were evacuated back to their own country after fighting broke out, leaving so quickly that they abandoned their classified training materials. When Moscow counterattacked, the United States found itself equally blind in spite of a large CIA station and diplomatic presence in Russia. Are there any spies here? Apparently not.

A rough after-action assessment of the intelligence failure both in Russia and in Georgia reveals the usual problems. Spy satellites, which might have detected the movement of troops, were instead watching Iraq and Afghanistan. Lacking language and cultural skills, the U.S. intelligence community relied on its Georgian counterparts to provide the information that it needed. When the friendly liaison service has something to conceal, such information becomes disinformation. Diplomats and military officers, meanwhile, uncritically accepted what their Georgian interlocutors were telling them. The Israelis were also apparently too busy turning a buck to notice what was going on. One Israeli officer returned from Georgia noting that the training had been perfunctory because turning trainees over rapidly provided opportunities to make more money. Both Israeli and American instructors agreed that the frequently illiterate Georgian conscripts were poor soldiers, led by mediocre officers and unfit for any military action, but they were reluctant to report their observations because they would not have been well received in Washington and Tel Aviv.

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