

The Quiet Billionaires Behind The Predator Drone That Killed Iran's Soleimani

January third an **MQ-9 Reaper** fired at least two Hellfire missiles at vehicles carrying Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani, Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and their entourage upon arrival at Baghdad International Airport. The convoy was incinerated. Soleimani's remains were only identifiable by a trademark ring with a red stone on his severed hand. These **\$16 million, 2.5-ton drones**, with a range of 1,200 miles and piloted half a world away, are among the most important weapons in America's arsenal.

The de facto father of the drone revolution, **Neal Blue**, 84 (estimated net worth \$4.1 billion), who as chairman and 80% owner of San Diego-based defense contractor **General Atomics** (his brother Linden, 83, owns the other 20%, worth another billion) first introduced the Predator drone into the skies 25 years ago to surveil Serbian forces during the Clinton administration. A Predator was one of the first U.S. aircraft in Afghanistan after 9/11. Since then, the Predator has evolved through deployments in Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

Now loaded with cameras, communications gear and air-to-ground Hellfire missiles, it surveils, tracks and kills. President Obama authorized more than 500 drone strikes, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism; so far President Trump has signed off on at least 259.

64 years ago. Twenty-one-year-old Neal Blue and his 20-year old brother Linden were at 16,000 feet, lost in the vastness between Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro when their radio gave out. They were almost out of fuel, 6,000 miles away from their home in Denver, and had no way of calling for help. The brothers decided they had no choice but to ditch their **Blue Bird**, a borrowed four-passenger Tri-Pacer, somewhere on the remote flatlands of southern Brazil. The **"Flying Blue Brothers"** were famous. The wealthy, good-looking Yale undergrads were on a South American aerial marathon covering 25,000 miles in 110 days while crossing the Andes a dozen times. The Blues had sold the rights to their tale of derring-do to *Life* magazine for \$3,000 and all the film they could carry. The crash-landing was terrifying. The *Blue Bird's* wheels bounced off a dirt road before it smashed into a fence, wrecking the flimsy plane. Unbelievably, the Blue Brothers walked away unscathed. **"Once you have that kind of experience, it does give you confidence that maybe you can do almost anything you want,"** Linden told a reporter years later.

The Blue brothers grew up in one of the wealthiest families in Denver right after the Great Depression. The Blues' business was real estate, and both their mother, Virginia, and father, James, worked in the family firm. During World War II, James Blue was drafted into the military while Virginia Blue joined the Red Cross. In 1967 Virginia ran as a Republican for state treasurer and became the first woman elected to a statewide position in Colorado. (She died in 1970 in the midst of her reelection campaign; the state dedicated a stained-glass window at the Capitol building to her memory.)

After graduating from Yale, the brothers both enlisted in the U.S. Air Force: Neal Blue worked with nuclear weapons; Linden served in the Air Force's police force. After leaving the military, the duo expanded the family fortune in real estate, agriculture, and oil and gas production through their Cordillera Corporation.

They also pursued other interests. In the early 1970s, Neal Blue served as a director on the board of Colorado-based Great Western United Corp., where he and his brother were the biggest shareholders. News reports from the time show that Neal Blue resigned in 1974 when its sugar business was indicted on charges of price fixing by the U.S. government. The case was settled but not before billionaire W. Herbert Hunt and his brother Nelson—later infamous for trying to corner the silver market—stepped in to buy most of the company. In the early 1980s, Linden Blue held executive and director roles at a variety of aircraft and defense companies including LearJet, Raytheon and Beech Aircraft.

In 1986, the brothers landed on a unique opportunity. Chevron had recently acquired Gulf Oil and now wanted to divest excess subsidiaries, one of which was General Atomics. Founded in 1955 by atomic physicists who had worked on the Manhattan Project, GA was for the most part a government-funded research company that performed some of the world's most advanced nuclear experiments.

The initial allure of General Atomics for the Blues was getting a good deal on its real estate, 424 acres of prime land just outside of rapidly developing San Diego. While negotiating with Chevron in 1986, Neal Blue promised 20% of the company to a group of executives, according to former senior vice president David Overskei, but they reneged. In all, the Blues paid a reported \$60 million for the company through a leveraged buyout.

But aviation was in Neal Blue's blood and soon, he started thinking of ways he could reimagine the company. "Neal talked to me about drones and other kinds of technologies at least two or three times a week," says Tom Dillon, who was the senior vice president of defense programs from 1984 to 1988. And that was how "Project Birdie" was born: GA started building a unique and cost-efficient drone that didn't require a human on board because of a built-in GPS system. It was called Birdie, executives joked, because it went "cheap-cheap-cheap."

At first it was hard to find customers for GA's untested drone. When a government agency—the CIA—finally wanted to buy a drone from General Atomics during the Balkan Wars in 1993, Linden Blue couldn't believe his ears, according to Frank Strickland, a managing director at Deloitte who served in the CIA. GA's cheap surveillance drone impressed and in 1994, the U.S. Navy awarded the company a \$31.7 million contract to build a more advanced drone, which eventually became the Predator.

In the 25 years since the Predator's 1994 maiden flight, competitors have been catching up. There are more players in the market than ever, and their combined sales are expected to



increase from \$4.9 billion in 2018 to \$10.7 billion in 2028. Northrop Grumman, which has the largest share of the drone market (GA is second), makes the \$120 million RQ-4 Global Hawk—a more robust drone that can reach 60,000 feet, one of which Iran shot down last June. The \$30.1 billion (2018 sales) company also makes the RQ-180 stealth drone that can evade radar. In August 2018, Boeing announced a \$805 million award from the U.S. Navy to introduce flying drone tankers.

"[Predator] is not stealth. It's not fast, and it's not cheap," says Josh Sullivan, an aerospace and defense analyst at The Benchmark Co. "It's not to say it won't be used. It will be used. It just won't be the dominant solution that it was in the decade of Iraq and Afghanistan." According to the U.S. Air Force, a Predator system (which includes four drones) costs about \$64 million, but publicly traded defense company Kratos sells jet drones that have stealth characteristics at \$3 million a pop.

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forbes.com

ENDLESS WAR VETS SAY NO NO TO ENDLESS WAR; POLITICIANS SAY YES YES

Worship of military service has become an indispensable cog in every politician's and corporation's endearment strategy. But on the actual subject of war, almost no one in mainstream politics is actually listening to **"the troops."** That's the main takeaway from the Pew Research Center's latest rolling poll of U.S. veterans, in which solid majorities of former troops said the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria were not worth fighting. The gaps between approval and disapproval were not even close to the poll's 3.9 percent margin of error; barely a third of veterans considered any of those conflicts worthwhile:

Among veterans, 64% say the war in Iraq was not worth fighting considering the costs versus the benefits to the United States, while 33% say it was. The general public's views are nearly identical: 62% of Americans overall say the Iraq War wasn't worth it and 32% say it was. Similarly, majorities of both veterans (58%) and the public (59%) say the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting. About four-in-ten or fewer say it was worth fighting.

Veterans who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan are no more supportive of those engagements than those who did not serve in these wars. And views do not differ based on rank or combat experience. The only meaningful variation pollsters found among vets was by party identification: Republican-identifying veterans were likelier to approve of the wars. But even a majority of those GOP vets now say the wars were not worth waging.

There simply is no mainstream bloc among politicians of any party that seems interested in heeding that majority opinion. In a rare bout of consistency between 2011 and 2017, private citizen Trump beat a loud drum for withdrawal from Afghanistan—after President Barack Obama, who had campaigned on ending the Iraq war, approved an Afghanistan troop surge and laid the groundwork for U.S. involvement in Syria against ISIS. But like Obama, Trump as president has ended up deepening the U.S. commitments in Afghanistan, as well as adding troops in Syria.

Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, an Iraq veteran, earned plaudits from doves and isolationists for pushing an antiwar line in Democratic presidential debates, and ended up as the debate's most-searched candidate on Google, a possible reinforcement of the Pew results. Bernie Sanders, of course, is the most mainstream antiwar politician in the U.S., which may help explain his consistently upper-tier showing in presidential preference polls—but neither Gabbard nor Sanders are considered "mainstream" Democrats. In this posited mainstream of American thought, **"the Blob"**—a motley amalgam of pro-engagement, pro-military national security "experts" advising both parties' leaders—always wins the day.

Adam Weinstein
NewRepublic.com



Muir Report: It's Marching time again.

Break out the padded sneakers, dust off the old signs, sleeping in the back of the closet, cross off the **Q** in the **"U.S. OUT OF IRAQ"** sign and replace it with an **N**. You know the drill. Get off transit at the meeting place, be disappointed at the small turnout, know that the news outlets will say there were hundreds rather than thousands of protesters, and interview the five dissidents supporting the war.

Grey hair has been replaced now, by salt and pepper coils. Most of the protesters of the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghani wars are dead or too crippled to walk. Pick up a sign, take their place, repeat the same chants, **one two three four, we don't want your racist war, five six seven eight, we don't want your fucking hate**. Marvel at one or two clever slogans. Gasp at the masked kids carrying signs saying **"DEATH TO AMERIKA."** Walk slowly up and down the streets, herded by undersized, overweight cops in ill fitting military gear and flashing police car lights, complain about the fascists, look for a cheap place to eat after the march breaks up.

There is something different about this march. We laugh at the Winston Churchill observation, that success is measured by your ability to go from failure to failure with equal enthusiasm. The enthusiasm is gone, vanished, like the butterflies and the salmon. We are merely mouthing old

slogans to show people from around the world that everyone in the United States hasn't thrown in the towel yet. We know, if this country can be taken over by a third rate realtor, a game show host, a graceless twit, who attacks the handicapped, the children, and overweight actresses in misspelled tweets, can lead us into another senseless war to benefit the wealthy, there is no hope. As Bob Dylan famously said in the **'Lonesome death of Hattie Carroll,' "Now is the time for your tears."**

The holy trinity of petty thieves: Trump, Guiliani and Barr, *the Beagle boys*, sneak into your house, steal your change jar and costume jewelry and walk right past the priceless paintings on their way out the door. Oops, they discovered the Rembrandt's, in the form of human blood.

Trump has finally figured out, after three years in office, he can have anyone whacked that he desires. He can order a hit on a civilian halfway across the world, who was never indicted or convicted of anything, along with his innocent travel companions, and we rejoice because he hasn't killed more people, YET. He murdered at whim, pre-meditated, cold blooded murder, and all we can talk about is *impeachment?* Have we, as a nation, **gone mad?**

Muirwalker