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We also have a few DVDs left of war correspondent Don's North's documentary on the lives of former Salvadoran guerrillas, entitled "Yesterday's Enemies."

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As always, thanks for your support.

Robert Parry

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 as the Internet's first investigative magazine. He saw it as a way to combine modern technology and old-fashioned journalism to counter the increasing triviality of the mainstream U.S. news media.**

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# The 1%'s Hand in the Afghan Murders

**Exclusive:** Army Sgt. Robert Bales stands accused of murdering 17 Afghan civilians, a crime that some trace to the financial pressures his family faced back home. However, to the rich financial swindlers, the ruining of Bales's family and many others is just another day's work, writes Mark Ames.

By Mark Ames

This past Thursday, a Modesto, California, man whose house was in foreclosure shot and killed the Sheriff's deputy and the locksmith who came to evict him from his condominium unit. Modesto authorities responded by sending 100 police and SWAT snipers to counter-attack, and it ended Waco-style, with the fourplex structure burning to the ground with the shooter inside.

It's not surprising that this should happen in Modesto: Last year the Central California city's foreclosure rate was the third worst in the country, with one in every 19 properties filing for foreclosure. The entire region is ravaged by unemployment, budget cuts, and blight, the only handouts that Modesto is seeing are the surplus military equipmentstocks being dumped into the Modesto police department's growing arsenal.

The shooter who died was 45 years old and he appears to have lost his condominium over a \$15,000 home equity loan he took out almost a decade ago, owed to Bank of America. The condo was sold at an auction for just \$12,988 to a shady firm, R&T Financial, that doesn't even have a listed contact number. Too much for the former security guard, who barricaded himself in the condo which had been in the family for decades. He refused to walk out alive.

These "death by foreclosure" killings have been going on, quietly, around the country ever since the housing swindle first unraveled. Like the story of the 64-year-old Phoenix man whose daughter and grandson were preparing to move in with him after losing their home to foreclosure, only to get a knock on his door surprising him with an eviction notice on the house he'd owned for over 30 years. Bank of America foreclosed on him despite his attempts to work out a fair plan.

We now know that the same banks that had been bailed out over their subprime fraud disaster were, by the time this happened, headlong into another criminal scheme, this time foreclosure fraud. The fraud was effected both illegally and in bad faith on a scale so vast it's hard not to think that it was carried out by some marauding foreign army.

Anyway, the old man grabbed a .357 and a beer, walked outside into a sea of Phoenix cops and snipers, and fired his gun off until they cut him down in a hail of bullets.

Sometimes the “losers” in this class war make it easier on everyone else by killing themselves and setting themselves on fire as they’re being evicted, as one Ohio couple recently did. Others class war “losers” aren’t as cooperative, like a Florida man who was gunned down by police after he set his foreclosed townhouse on fire last year.

It’s exactly the sort of lopsided class war that Warren Buffett first officially acknowledged in 2006: “There’s a class war, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.”

Buffett is right to call it a one-way war, in both a metaphorical sense and in a literal sense, given the endless wars being waged for over a decade now, wars that are tied to the class wars at home.

### **Murdering Afghan Civilians**

Nothing illustrates the interlinking between the class war at home and the imperial wars abroad more starkly than the example of Staff Sgt. Roger Bales, the Army sniper accused last month of killing 17 Afghan civilians, mostly women and children.

The Army is trying to pin it all on Sgt. Bales’s supposedly deranged mental state, but their version of events contradicts what the victims and eyewitnesses in the village have been telling the few reporters who have had a chance to actually interview them. They’re saying that they saw several American soldiers participating in the massacre, as well as a helicopter.

Whatever the case, whether alone or with others, most people familiar with the case agree that for some reason, Sgt. Bales “snapped.” Invariably they’re over-psychologizing why he “snapped”, the military has blamed it on everything from his supposedly troubled marriage, to strain or stress, to an alleged alcohol bender.

Less well-known or discussed is what happened to Sgt. Bales on the other front: the class war front. Three days before his shooting rampage, the house where Bales’s wife and two children lived in Tacoma, Washington, put up for a short sale, \$50,000 underwater. This was exactly what Sgt. Bales and his wife feared might happen if the Army forced him into a fourth battlefield deployment.

The last time Sgt. Bales deployed, to Iraq in August 2009, Bank of America foreclosed on the family’s rental property, a duplex that his wife had bought in

1999 that was also underwater. Within months of BofA taking their duplex, Sgt. Bales's Humvee hit an IED and flipped over, causing brain and head injuries. On a previous deployment to Iraq, Sgt. Bales had one of his feet partially blown off by a bomb.

Before being deployed to Afghanistan last year, he and his wife had been assured that the Army wouldn't force Sgt. Bales, a highly-decorated hero who'd already sacrificed his physical wellbeing and his family's financial health, back into combat.

Bales and his wife were planning their future as a career military family, on bases far from any combat zone, working up the Army's pay scale year by year. But then in March 2011, a year before Sgt. Bales's massacre, they were shocked and hurt by the Army's decision to deny him his standard promotion to Sgt. First Class, which came with a much-needed pay hike.

(Last year, President Barack Obama's Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, Adm. Michael Mullen, said many of the austerity cuts would fall on soldiers' pay and benefits rather than slashing weapons programs and force levels, which he called the "relatively easy" thing to do.)

When Sgt. Bales learned he wouldn't get his promotion, his wife wrote on her blog: "It is very disappointing after all of the work Bob has done and all the sacrifices he had made for his love of his country, family and friends."

Kathilyn Bales comforted herself with the assurances they'd been given that at least her husband wouldn't be sent back into combat again, at least the family would be going together to one of the many non-warzone bases around the world. She wrote: "Who knows where we will end up. I just hope that we are able to rent out the house so we can keep it. I think we are both still in shock."

Then came the real shock: the Army sent Sgt. Bales back into the war zone, into Afghanistan. His wife would have to deal with the more than \$500,000 in mortgage debts on her own.

It was all timed perfectly: Last December, the month Sgt. Bales was deployed to Afghanistan, one of the subprime loans worth \$178,000, taken out in 2006, was timed to "reset" to as high as 10.8 percent interest, and call in its first full payment.

Joe Krumbach, former president of the Seattle Mortgage Bankers Association, reviewed this loan and the others sold to Sgt. Bales's wife while he was in Iraq, and denounced them as "unconscionable."

He told the Seattle Times, "The margins on these loans are disaster waiting to

happen” and admitted that mortgage lenders deliberately targeted military families like the Bales family, swindling them into signing onto far pricier refinancing loans “that benefited lenders and mortgage brokers” at the expense of vulnerable military families, as well as minorities and low-income borrowers.

Another local real estate businessman who specializes in short sales agreed, telling *Businessweek* that “we set them up.”

“It’s not an unfamiliar story, but it’s sad,” said Richard Eastern, a co-founder of Bellevue, Washington-based Washington Property Solutions, which negotiates short sales. “We’re going to send you off to war but we’re going to foreclose on your home.” He said many lenders offered loans they knew borrowers couldn’t repay. “And it’s not just soldiers, it’s everybody. *We set them up.*”

The extent to which mortgage lenders and banks deliberately preyed on American military families is made clear by this little-known fact: the Tacoma region, home to Fort Lewis-McChord, the largest base in the Western United States and home to 100,000 military personnel and family, suffered one of the worst predatory subprime loan epidemics in the country, an anomaly in the state of Washington. According to Richard Eastern’s firm, roughly half of all home sales in that region are either foreclosures or short sales. As early as 2007, the *Wall Street Journal* singled out Tacoma as one of the nation’s worst affected regions from subprime plunder.

### **Who’s at Fault?**

So who did this? Who, in the class war equation, waged and “won” this class war on Sgt. Bales’s family, and so many other military families? What are their names? Where are they now?

As a matter of fact, there is a name: Paramount Equity Mortgage. And there is a name: Hayes Barnard, the CEO and co-founder of Paramount Equity. He lives in Roseville, California. In many ways, the story of the “winner” in this class war story is the most revealing, and enraging part of all.

Paramount Equity was founded in 2004, and quickly spread across the Western states, issuing some \$8 billion in loans. Paramount Equity’s subprime predation really took off in 2006, right after the Bush Administration’s Department of Housing (HUD) and the FHA qualified Paramount Equity government insurance on its mortgages.

Almost immediately, Paramount Equity flooded the Tacoma region’s radio airwaves with deceptive ads hard-selling refinancing loans, featuring the voice of CEO Hayes Barnard promising the lowest rates, the most honest dealing, giving his personal guarantee.

However, a raft of fraud and deception charges followed. In 2008, the Washington State Department of Financial Institutions announced it was charging Paramount Equity Mortgage with deceptive lending practices and revoking its license.

Paramount stood accused of charging and collecting unearned fees, charging consumers to buy down interest rates without actually reducing the rate, failing to make required disclosures and making state and federally-required disclosures in a deceptive manner.

“Paramount failed to make proper disclosures in almost every loan we reviewed,” said Deb Bortner, director of DFI’s Division of Consumer Services. “Washington [state] has many licensed mortgage brokers who comply with the law. In today’s market, we simply do not need a mortgage broker engaged in deceptive conduct doing business in this state.”

The state’s charges also singled out Hayes Barnard for “engaging in a deceptive advertising campaign.”

As is so often the case, there’s far too little reported specifics on the actual nature of the fraud and deception. Sometimes you have to look in the comments sections on real estate or legal blogs from the affected region. Like this comment left on a marketing blog posting calling out Paramount Equity’s “lies”:

“I apologize if this is maybe a little off topic. I refinanced with Paramount back in 2004. Come 2009, my loan adjusted and I was left with no choice but to walk away with my 3 kids and stay at home wife. I had to rely on credit cards the last couple of years, even charging a couple mortgage payments.

“We ended up filing ch. 7 and we are now renting and have ZERO (if not worse) credit. Today (Sept. 27, 2011) an auditor came to my door and gave me some info and verified other info regarding B-of-A filing a PMI [private mortgage insurance] claim. Sorry so long winded.

“One of the docs he showed me was of my stated income which was double DOUBLE my income at the time. I NEVER would put myself into such a situation and lied. I honestly believe the number was changed and it was burried [sic] in an inch of docs I had to sign and I just didn’t see it.

“I’m not claiming complete innocence, because after all, I DID sign everything and agreed to the loan (which I didn’t know was a negative amortization loan. Hell, I didn’t even know what that meant). Now, we’re stable, but my financial future and creditworthiness is screwed. I barely got a \$500 limit credit card at 17%.

“Do I have any type of recourse here? I’m not frivolous, but I am at a loss. In fact I LOST everything. Thanks in advance.”

These sorts of stories can be found everywhere, and they repeat themselves over and over. And what’s most galling of all is that these plundering crooks preyed on those most vulnerable, military families suffering from the chaos of war, minorities, low-income people, to generate their fast riches, backed with government guarantees.

### **Getting Off Easy**

For all the swindling and destruction, including the “unconscionable” exploding loans Paramount Equity foisted on Sgt. Bales’s wife while he was off fighting in Iraq, the state of Washington settled in 2009 with what can only be described as a wrist-massage: A fine of a mere \$392,000, no admission of guilt.

Paramount even got to keep its license to operate. This, despite the incredible admission in the signed consent that “Paramount admits that during the relevant time period, Paramount did not maintain books and records.”

This is what a lopsided class war looks like: The financial fraudsters, the One Percenters, fleece the unsophisticated locals like 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans plundering far-away aborigines.

One victim of Paramount commented bitterly on the settlement:

“We have not one, but TWO ugly loans which are breaking us from good ol’ Paramount Equity Mortgage. .... The citizens who signed these toxic documents are suffering EVERY DAY and losing their homes because Matt and Hayes need to make their yacht payment.

“Our financial lives, that took 30 years to build, have been crushed because of the deception that occurred in their office (where no employee appeared to be over 40 years of age) I remember asking at the closing table, ‘Does anyone have gray hair in this building??!’ It was unnerving. The parking lot looked like a BMW Sales Lot.

“Soon, I intend to stop crying about our mortgages, as I have been doing over the last THREE YEARS And Washington State Department of Financial Institutions: SHAME ON YOU. Shame on you.”

Two “ugly loans” from Paramount Equity are what broke Kathilyn and Roger Bales.

The end result: Hayes Barnard and Paramount Equity Capital are doing better than ever. In 2009, Hayes Barnard was named “Entrepreneur of the Year” by the Roseville Chamber of Commerce, the wealthy Sacramento suburb where Paramount

Equity Mortgage is headquartered. In 2010, the Sacramento Business Journal honored him as one of Sacramento's "40 under 40" leaders.

The big payoff came last year, when one of the world's largest infomercial firms, Guthy-Renker, bought a "significant equity position" in Hayes Barnard's company. You might know Guthy-Renker as the company that makes all those annoying Tony Robbins infomercials and Susan Lucci skincare infomercials.

Guthy-Renker's also owns an equity stake in RealtyTrac, the leading foreclosure intelligence source. That's good news for Hayes Barnard, because it means he'll be able to wet his beak on the aftermath of the subprime plunder by getting first dibs on the best foreclosure deals. It's a win-win.

In this degenerate 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of America, Hayes Barnard exemplifies everything that the current system rewards. In the anti-meritocracy we live in, the sociopaths and crooks are the "winners." Being a "winner" means you get quoted adoringly in a Sacramento Business Journal Q&A, spouting out the blackest of unintentional black humor:

**"As a younger professional, what is the biggest challenge you face?"**

"As a young professional, the biggest challenge I face is finding the right balance between raising my three children all under 3 years old, being a supporting husband and leading my team as a CEO of three companies. ... Achieving true success is to give, give, give and help as many people as you can while leading for your family, employees and community."

That's how the class war "winners" rub it in on the rest of us, especially their victims. How can you function after reading such self-serving drivel, particularly if you're one of the victims?

As for the "losers" in this class war: Sgt. Roger Bales's wife and children are ruined. They have no home; they only own debts to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars, debts owed for life to the Hayes Barnards of this country. The "winner", the swindler, is a community hero.

As for Sgt. Bales whom the Army accuses of "snapping" for no good reason, accusing him of being a drunk, or of mental weakness, incapable of handling his marriage or the stress of combat he might even be put to death. He now sits in Fort Leavenworth military prison, charged with the murder of 17 Afghan civilians.

The way the One Percenter "winners" see this story, it's all proof that the system is working perfectly.



As the National Journal reported, “Nearly all of *National Journal’s* National Security Insiders agree that the military justice system can conduct a fair trial for Staff Sgt. Robert Bales.”

Mark Ames is editor of The eXiled Online and author of the book *Going Postal: Rage, Murder and Rebellion from Reagan’s Workplaces to Clinton’s Columbine* and co-author with Matt Taibbi of *The eXile: Sex, Drugs and Libel in the New Russia*.

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## America’s Founding Pragmatism

**Exclusive:** America’s Founders were not marble statues, but rather real people facing tough challenges. To make ends meet, the esteemed Abigail Adams dabbled in black-market goods, and that kind of tough-minded pragmatism not starry-eyed idealism imbued the Constitution and guided the early nation, Robert Parry writes.

By Robert Parry

Perhaps it was inevitable that the American Right with its bottomless pot of money would pour some of it into the pockets of clever propagandists who would rewrite the nation’s founding narrative and transform the Constitution’s Framers into anti-government zealots.

After all, the founding narrative has a powerful appeal to many Americans as the Bible does to Christians and can be selectively cited by unscrupulous politicians to justify pretty much whatever they want. The Right also has invested in a giant megaphone that can amplify messages so loudly that lies and myths become history and truth.

So, it shouldn’t be surprising that we now see ill-informed right-wingers dress up in Revolutionary War costumes and declare themselves Tea Partiers, while the people who actually pulled off or supported the real Tea Party have been recreated as the Ayn Rands of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, extreme free-market ideologues who despised “guv-mint.”

The actual Tea Party and the “Don’t Tread on Me” flags, which were both directed at the British imperialists in support of American independence, are today repackaged as attacks on the U.S. government, the same institution that the Founders created so they could start building a strong and independent nation. Up has become down.

The real historic counterpoints to the anti-British Tea Party and “Don’t Tread on Me” flags were the “Join, or Die” banner demanding American unity and the Constitutional Convention in 1787, which repudiated the states-rights-dominated Articles of Confederation in favor of a vibrant central government in the U.S. Constitution.

But that isn’t history that helps the Right’s propagandists because it reveals the key Founders to be dedicated to a constructive national unity seeking pragmatic solutions to the country’s problems, not to free-market extremism at any cost.

Because the real history doesn’t work for the Right, it has spent much time and money turning the history inside-out. Bright young ideologues scour the historical record to cherry-pick a few out-of-context quotes to bend the founding narrative rightward. [For instance, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Madison: Father of the Commerce Clause.”](#)]

This historical revisionism is a testament both to how much money the Right has dedicated to propaganda and to its appreciation of the power derived from national mythology. Even as the American Left largely dismisses the importance of history wishing to focus on the needs of today the Right has embraced Orwell’s insight that “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.”

So, the Right continues to shape-shift the Framers of the Constitution (and more broadly the nation’s Founders) into ideologues who despised government and cared only about individual liberty. But the actual history reveals them to be pragmatic individuals who viewed government as a crucial force for organizing the new society and building a strong nation.

Yes, the Founders cared about liberty (at least for white men) but most of them viewed a constitutional government as a means for restraining the excesses of democracy, then a fairly untested system of governing. That explains the Constitution’s intricate system of checks and balances and the six-year terms for senators, originally appointed by state legislatures.

To the Constitution’s architects, government also was the means to focus the nation’s resources on building a nation to withstand the economic and political challenges from the far more powerful European states. These Founders saw the disorder from the Articles of Confederation as a threat to the hard-won independence.

In other words, if there was a dominant “originalist” notion of how the nation’s governance should work, it was pragmatism; it was pulling together to get done

what needed to be done. The key Founders were not wedded to some fixed economic ideology or some extreme vision of liberty.

### **Abigail Adams's Black Market**

These were real people with real problems. As the Revolution dragged on, many of its leading figures faced not only physical danger but financial ruin. They looked for ways to make ends meet even if they had to cut ethical corners.

For example, one of the couples most widely revered for their contributions to the Revolution, John and Abigail Adams, resorted to a black-market scheme to raise enough money to avoid losing their home and property in Massachusetts.

Many of Abigail Adams's famous letters to her husband, as he served the revolutionary cause in Philadelphia and Europe, amounted to requisitions of supplies that could be sent back to Boston, along with his official correspondence, via the fastest and safest means of American transportation.

Abigail Adams then marked up the prices on the precious goods and sold them through a relative, Cotton Tufts Jr., so her involvement and that of her husband would not be revealed and provoke a possible scandal. [See Woody Holton's *Abigail Adams*.]

In retrospect, none of this should reflect badly on John and Abigail Adams, who sacrificed greatly for the revolutionary cause. They were simply doing what they had to do to make it through dangerous and difficult times.

Similarly, General George Washington had a mix of personal and patriotic reasons for hating the Articles of Confederation, which had allowed the 13 "independent" states to renege on their financial commitments to the Continental Army and, after the war, had undermined economic reconstruction.

Washington, like other Founders, had invested in undeveloped land to the west and thus recognized the necessity to build canals and roads for reaching this territory and making it more valuable.

In 1785, Washington established the Potowmack Company, which began digging canals to extend navigable waterways westward along the Potomac River. But these efforts were hampered by the national disorganization under the Articles of Confederation.

So, in 1787, Washington and Madison engineered the most significant shift of governing power from the states to the central government in American history. In secret meetings in Philadelphia, a convention, which had been assigned the limited task of proposing amendments to the Articles, instead scrapped that

states-rights structure and drafted the U.S. Constitution.

The Constitution eliminated key wording of the Articles, which had granted the states “sovereignty” and “independence.” Instead, the federal government was given legal supremacy. Madison even wanted to give Congress the authority to veto any state law, though a compromise was struck, giving that power ultimately to the federal courts.

In one of its most important decisions, the Constitutional Convention approved Madison’s plan to give Congress an unlimited power to regulate interstate commerce. Madison touted this Commerce Clause as a way to promote the construction of roads and canals and to take other steps to strengthen the American economy.

Thus, the idea of public-private collaboration to enhance U.S. commerce along with federal regulatory power was there at the beginning, contrary to the Right’s current propaganda portraying the Founders as free-market extremists caring only about individual liberty. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Did the Founders Hate Government?”](#)]

Famously, the Constitutional Convention reached other compromises that revealed the uglier side of the founding pragmatism. To avert a splintering of the young country, the Framers accepted the continuation of slavery, which was a major industry in the agricultural South and which touched on the personal wealth of key figures, including slave owners Washington and Madison.

### **Romney’s NRA Speech**

So, it is hard to argue as Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney did before the National Rifle Association on Friday that the Framers were libertarians committed to the high-minded principle in the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal.”

Still, there is much to admire about the Founders and their courage battling for independence against a tyrannical monarchy. Nothing in history or today is a case of black hats versus white hats. Usually it’s gray hats or at least mud-splattered hats.

America’s founding narrative also can be a powerful force in modern American politics and mostly for the good. It can be applied honestly with the nation’s finest of First Principles providing inspiration and guidance to the present. But the narrative also can be twisted dishonestly to promote destructive or self-serving ends.

That is where the nation finds itself now, as the Right has distorted the

founding narrative and sold the false version to millions of gullible Americans, who think they are standing with the Founders in opposing practical solutions to the nation's problems.

Most likely, Founders like Washington and Madison would be shocked by the ideological extremism that has been superimposed on their practical attempts to find a way forward for the nation and to make it more competitive in the world.

It is way past time for honest historians to get off the sidelines and join this battle for a truthful recounting of the nation's early years. The American people are in desperate need of some lessons from the pragmatic Founders.

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.**

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## Romney's Upside-Down Constitution

**Exclusive:** Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney wowed a convention of gun enthusiasts with a flowery talk about the Constitution and his fears about what a re-elected President Obama would do to it. But Romney's speech reflected an American history that never was, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Mitt Romney's "liberty speech" to the National Rifle Association on Friday demonstrates how central the Right's false narrative of the nation's founding will be in the November elections, as Republicans depict Barack Obama as alien to the nation's First Principles.

Essentially, the Right's narrative holds that the Framers of the Constitution were hostile to a strong central government (for anything but national defense), rejected a federal role in addressing the nation's economic problems (leaving that to the private sector), and supported a system in which the states were very powerful.

None of these points are true, of course, at least not for the Constitution. They were true for the Articles of Confederation, which governed the original 13

states from 1777 to 1787. But the Framers, especially James Madison and George Washington, came to view the Articles as ineffectual and dangerous.

Madison, Washington and most other Founders recognized that a system of 13 “sovereign” and “independent” states within a weak confederation was a threat to the young nation’s success and even survival. The lack of federal coordination of the nation’s commerce, for instance, was viewed as an invitation for rich European countries to lure away a state or even a region by offering commercial advantages.

Thus, contrary to the Right’s notion that the Framers were government-hating ideologues akin to today’s Tea Partiers the reality was that most of the Framers were pragmatic individuals dedicated to the nation’s political independence and economic success.

For that, they realized that the Articles with their weak central government had to be jettisoned in favor of an entirely new system that granted the central government broad powers to tax, to issue currency, to make treaties, to build a military, and to pass laws to “promote the general Welfare.” One of the most important new powers was an unlimited one, authorizing the federal government to regulate interstate commerce.

In some ways, the drafting of the Constitution resembled a *coup d’etat* against the Articles of Confederation. The Constitutional Convention, conducted in secret in Philadelphia, was supposed to simply propose some amendments to the Articles, but instead threw the old system out entirely.

The audacious scheme, orchestrated by Madison and Washington, prompted a fierce backlash from Anti-Federalists who favored the old system and correctly perceived the new Constitution for what it was, a historic transfer of power from the states to the central government.

But what the Constitution revealed most was the hard-headed realism of America’s dominant Founders. They recognized that the Articles weren’t working that the old system had become a hazard to the nation’s future so they reversed course.

It is true that the Framers took pains to prevent a concentration of too much power in any one person’s or one faction’s hands. As members of the young country’s elite, they also distrusted the volatility of democracy, explaining why they constructed such an intricate system of checks and balances.

However, the Framers were not hostile to a vibrant central government that could grapple with the nation’s problems. That was what they sought to create. Indeed, the capacity to address the commercial and economic challenges of a new and sprawling country was one of the principal reasons for the Constitution. The

Articles of Confederation simply didn't allow for the necessary coordination among the states.

### **Birth of the Commerce Clause**

Madison's Commerce Clause idea predated the Constitution. He initially proposed giving the federal government temporary control over national commerce when the Articles of Confederation were still in effect after the Revolution.

General Washington, who hated the Articles because the voluntary payments from the states had left his troops unpaid and unfed, backed Madison's commerce plan when it was before the Virginia Legislature. In a letter, Washington expressed the need for greater national unity.

"The [commerce] proposition in my opinion is so self evident that I confess I am at a loss to discover wherein lies the weight of the objection to the measure," Washington wrote. "We are either a united people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of a general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support. If we are not, let us no longer act a farce by pretending it to be."

Madison failed to attach his commerce amendment to the Articles, but he revived the idea when the Constitutional Convention convened in Philadelphia in 1787. On the first day of substantive debate May 29, 1787 the Commerce Clause was there as fellow Virginian Edmund Randolph presented Madison's constitutional framework.

Madison's convention notes recount Randolph saying that "there were many advantages, which the U. S. might acquire, which were not attainable under the confederation such as a productive impost [or tax] counteraction of the commercial regulations of other nations pushing of commerce ad libitum &c &c."

In other words, the Founders at their most "originalist" moment understood the value of the federal government taking action to negate the commercial advantages of other countries and to take steps for "pushing of [American] commerce." The "ad libitum &c &c" notation suggests that Randolph provided other examples off the top of his head.

So, Madison and other key Framers recognized that a legitimate role of Congress was to ensure that the nation could match up against other countries commercially and could address problems impeding the nation's economic success.

After the Convention, when the proposed Constitution was under fire from Anti-Federalists who favored retaining the states-rights orientation of the Articles of Confederation, Madison returned, in the Federalist Papers, to arguing the

value of the Commerce Clause.

In Federalist Paper No. 14, Madison explained how the Commerce Clause could help the young nation overcome some of its problems with communications and access to interior lands.

"[T]he union will be daily facilitated by new improvements," Madison wrote. "Roads will everywhere be shortened, and kept in better order; accommodations for travelers will be multiplied and meliorated; an interior navigation on our eastern side will be opened throughout, or nearly throughout the whole extent of the Thirteen States.

"The communication between the western and Atlantic districts, and between different parts of each, will be rendered more and more easy by those numerous canals with which the beneficence of nature has intersected our country, and which art finds it so little difficult to connect and complete."

The building of canals, as an argument in support of the Commerce Clause and the Constitution, further reflects the pragmatic and commercial attitudes of key Founders. In 1785, two years before the Constitutional Convention, George Washington established the Potowmack Company, which began digging canals to extend navigable waterways westward where he and other Founders had invested in Ohio and other undeveloped lands.

Thus, the idea of involving the central government in major economic projects a government-business partnership to create jobs and profits was there from the beginning. Madison, Washington and other early American leaders saw the Constitution as creating a dynamic system so the young country could grow and compete with rival economies around the world.

Ironically, given today's furor over the Commerce Clause and the Affordable Care Act, Madison considered the grant of power to Congress to regulate interstate commerce one of the Constitution's least controversial elements.

In Federalist Paper No. 45, Madison referred to the Commerce Clause as "a new power; but an addition which few oppose, and from which no apprehensions are entertained." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did the Founders Hate Government?](#)"]

### **The Musket Mandate**

The pragmatic Founders also saw no problem in mandating Americans to buy private products, despite the insistence of today's Republicans that such a mandate has never been enacted in U.S. history, before the Affordable Care Act's mandate on uninsured Americans to buy health insurance (with financial help from the government).



In 1792, just four years after ratification of the U.S. Constitution, Madison and Washington supported the Militia Acts, which mandated that all white men of fighting age obtain their own muskets and related equipment so they could participate in armed militias. Madison was a member of the Second Congress, which passed the law, and Washington was the First President, who signed it.

Though the law was passed under Article Two powers of the Executive, which makes the President the Commander in Chief of the military, not Article One's Commerce Clause, the principle is the same, that the government can order Americans to buy something that Congress deems necessary for the country's good.

The fact that a mandate was included in a law enacted by key Framers of the Constitution also reflects their "originalist" thinking on the question of mandates. The idea didn't seem to bother them in the slightest. It was just a practical way to achieve a goal, rather than having the government use tax money to buy and distribute muskets.

Indeed, if there was one core "originalist" attitude among the Framers, it was their pragmatism. They created a powerful and dynamic federal government so it could address national problems. They weren't hung up on whether some individual might be upset that his personal "liberty" was facing some slight infringement.

After all, the Founders had just fought a long war for independence and, as Washington explained in his letter on Madison's commerce plan, "we are either a united people, or we are not. If the former, let us, in all matters of a general concern act as a nation, which have national objects to promote, and a national character to support."

In other words, Washington wanted the new nation to set aside its squabbles over such issues as state sovereignty and go-it-alone individualism and to do what was necessary to make the country succeed. "If we are not" this unified nation, he added, "let us no longer act a farce by pretending it to be."

Washington's view on the need for a vibrant central government was not universally held by the Founders, but it clearly represented their dominant sentiment since Madison's Commerce Clause did become part of the Constitution, which was ratified by the states.

Ratification consigned the Articles of Confederation, with their "independent" states and weak central government, to the dustbin of history.

But Mitt Romney and today's American Right would have you believe that a different history occurred, that somehow the Articles of Confederation are the Constitution and that the Founders were not the practical men that history shows us they were but rather anti-government zealots.

Romney's NRA speech showed how the Right's false narrative will be repeated again and again, making it the equivalent of truth for the ill-informed and weak-minded.

"The principles of our Constitution are enduring and universal," Romney declared in his didactic speech. "They were not designed to bend to the will of presidents and justices who come and go."

Then, in reference to the Affordable Care Act and the Dodd-Frank regulations of Wall Street, Romney added, "This President is moving us away from our Founders' vision. Instead of limited government, he is leading us toward limited freedom and limited opportunity.

"My course restores and protects our freedoms. As President, the Constitution would be my guide, and the Declaration of Independence my compass."

But Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, appears to know very little about the real Constitution and the real Founders. After all, they were the ones who chose to place no limiting principle in the Constitution's Commerce Clause, because they knew that for it and the other powers to be effective both then and in the future that those powers required flexibility.

Despite their shortcomings in tolerating slavery and granting liberties primarily to white men, the Founders still trusted the democratic impulse of the people, expressed through Congress, to use government to "promote the general Welfare" much more so than today's conservatives do.

Instead of faith in the democratic decisions of the people, Romney argues that the Constitution restricts the federal government's actions to address America's commercial and economic problems like the cost of health care or access to a doctor.

In adopting this cramped view of the Constitution, Romney harks back to a history that never existed and to a self-serving narrative invented by right-wingers who have used this bogus version of the past to mislead the American people into a dreary future.

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.**

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# When Religion Dominates Politics

Religion in politics is a touchy topic in the United States, but Americans have a legitimate right to know how a candidate's religious views may affect public policy on issues like population growth, anti-gay discrimination and Christian supremacy says Rev. Howard Bess.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

When voters step into the voting booth, many feel the pull of both politics and religion, even though most politicians and the news media seem to prefer ignoring the latter. Three important religion-in-politics issues come to my mind immediately.

The first is Christian nationalism. Most Christians accept that America is a secular nation in which religion is to be practiced without government interference. But there are a significant number of Christians who believe the United States was formed to be a Christian nation.

They believe it is their destiny and the will of God that Christians should rule over non-Christians. The aim of these Christian nationalists is control. They reject the principle of the separation of church and state. In that sense, they are not benign.

To achieve their goal of Christian nationalism, they promote sympathetic candidates and barter with votes. To win elections, many moderate candidates curry their favor. Thus, the reality of this Christian nationalism is a rightful topic in our political debate. It's fair to ask where politicians stand on this religious/political issue.

The second is the onslaught against the rights of homosexual, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons by religious organizations. The recent Proposition 8 controversy in California is a case in point.

The two largest donors to the campaign to defeat Proposition 8 were Roman Catholics (through the Knights of Columbus) and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons). Neither broke any law in providing funding for the anti-Prop 8 campaign, but religion was a central factor in their motivation. Both religious bodies opposed the granting of marriage rights to gay people because of church doctrine.

Catholics and Mormons can believe whatever they like, but when they propose that their doctrinal beliefs be made the law of the land, their beliefs become proper

subjects of discussion in the political arena.

The third issue has arisen in the very recent struggle over insurance coverage of contraceptives for women. While a number of religious groups have protested a federal requirement that insurance programs paid for by employers include coverage for contraceptives, the loudest voice of protest has come from the Roman Catholic Church.

Roman Catholics have long-held canon regarding human sexuality. According to Catholic teaching, sexual activity has only one purpose, procreation. Sexual intercourse without the intent of procreation is sinful. Sexual activity for simple enjoyment is not acceptable.

Thus, the use of any kind of contraceptive by either a male or a female is forbidden. Further, sex-related sin is a serious matter. It is a primary expression of lust, which is one of the Catholic Church's seven deadly sins.

In Catholic thinking, contraceptives promote sexual activities that have no positive purpose. So, in the name of religious freedom, the Catholic hierarchy argues against any participation in the distribution of contraceptives in any way. They are probably raising a valid constitutional issue (though one that is not as clear-cut as Church defenders insist, since religious institutions in the United States must operate under civil laws).

Yet, if we understand Catholic theology, we understand the Church's stance: the Vatican instructs Roman Catholics that sexual activity is for procreation only; when that purpose is thwarted, the will of God has been violated.

One notable result of this teaching, whether intentional or not, is the large Catholic family, raising another issue where politics addressing the common good conflict with religious edicts fulfilling a theological purpose.

In the past, large families offered both social and economic benefits, but we live in a changing world where population is exploding. Six billion people on the Earth quickly become seven billion and eight billion, putting stress on the planet's survivability.

We talk about pollution of air, land and water. We note the impact of burning of fossil fuels. However, we sidestep the number one problem of the world, the exploding human population which is often driven by religious conviction. In other words, the Roman Catholic Church is an important factor in the pollution of the planet through the promotion of population growth.

Roman Catholics are not alone. One of the marks of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is the large family, which is promoted by church teachings.

Thus, Mormons are the fastest growing religion in America, though with little growth beyond birthrate. In the world today, the birthrate in Muslim nations also is unsustainable.

In part because of these religious teachings, population growth in India, Africa and Central and South America is pushing life beyond the resources to sustain the people. Only China has shown any willingness to address the problem of unsustainable population growth.

Can religious practices that actively promote rapid population growth be ignored in the name of religious freedom? Religious beliefs and practices that threaten the earth as a place for human habitation cannot be left out of the political dialogue.

In the United States, there is no religious test for running for public office. The Bill of Rights keeps government out of the religion business, but it does not keep voters from taking into account religious considerations.

When people run for public office, the voting population has a right to know how the candidate's religion will potentially affect public policy. In that sense, the Bill of Rights does not ban religion from the public square.

When a candidate enters the public square, his/her personal religion is not left behind. Voters have valid reasons to ask religious questions.

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## Is Occupy's 'Purity' Under Assault?

Hardliners in the Occupy movement have begun equating police infiltrators and other enemies with Occupy supporters who favor some practical electoral and legislative goals. There is alarmist talk about the need to protect Occupy's revolutionary purity from these reformers, as Danny Schechter explains.

By Danny Schechter

Perhaps my problem is that I live in too many worlds at once, while many political eras live in me. That may be why I responded so negatively to a recent polemic wrapped up in a poetic communiqué from [Adbusters](#), the culture jammers in Canada who do so much good work (and often so creatively) battling the consumption virus promoted by big corporations many of us have grown to despise.

I respect their magazine and marvel at the impact they have had in helping to stir Occupy Wall Street into existence. They clearly feel a sense of ownership in the movement and act not just as the midwife that promoted the Occupy idea, but as the guardians of their version of the movement's essence, as if they own the copyright and have to defend it aggressively in the court of public opinion.

Their latest communiqué, directed to "jammers, occupiers and Springtime dreamers," is offered up almost like a new commandment from the mountaintop of political purity, warning one and all "that a new enemy is in their midst that is threatening to neutralize our insurgency with an insidious campaign of donor money and co-optation."

Batten down the hatches! Defend the ramparts! Fly the flag! They then call for a "fight to the finish" to defend the "soul of Occupy" that they claim is menaced by a "THEY" that is out to get us like some boogie man that acts like a virus and can't be resisted. Will "Black Bloc" militants become their enforcers?

Who is the THEY? Nefarious bankers on Wall Street? The CIA and Blackwater-type mercenaries? Karl Rove and the Koch Brothers? No, their new enemy is not an external threat but an internal one that the Adbusters have no use for, alleged operatives of the Obama campaign urging Occupy activists to take part in the electoral process and to seek concrete legislative reforms.

But read on: "First **they** silenced our uprising with a media blackout then **they** smashed our encampments with midnight paramilitary raids And now? **They** are planning to destroy all that that we built."

The brutal police raids on Occupy and the initial media indifference are conflated with these alleged Obama operatives on a stealth mission of co-optation. There's no real evidence cited, but that's not the point of this appeal to fear. Political paranoia is always driven by what COULD happen, not necessarily what is happening,

The political theory behind all this is that Occupy is not just the vanguard of the revolution but the revolution itself, and it is in danger of being stifled by reformers who fear its imminent success in toppling capitalism. How realistic is that?

This worst-case scenario is projected as a coordinated and calculated strategy by groups that Adbusters put down in terms reminiscent of the way the Chinese cultural revolution demonized and stigmatized millions of people as counter-revolutionaries, a process that tore the Chinese Revolution apart using strident ideology to silence a "class enemy."

Were there class enemies? Sure, there always are. But thousands of innocent

people were accused and abused by ultra-leftists on a mission from Mao. Today's self-appointed and unelected commissars of new consciousness say they see a new set of counter-revolutionaries out to snuff Occupy.

They ask: "Will you allow Occupy to become a project of the old left, the same cabal of old world thinkers who have blunted the possibility of revolution for decades? Will you allow MoveOn, The Nation and Ben & Jerry to put the brakes on our Spring Offensive and turn our struggle into a '99% Spring' reelection campaign for President Obama?"

Is this really what is happening or is it more like a conspiratorial fabrication? Is this type of insulting language really appropriate for a movement that claims to be democratic and inclusive?

MoveOn and Van Jones have denied they are trying to control the movement, refuse to speak in its name, and couldn't steal its thunder if they wanted to. The Nation is just one magazine of many that has been sympathetic to Occupy, but also supports the more structured but very democratic resistance in Wisconsin that Adbusters ignores.

Ben & Jerry are individuals, former business partners, who want to help by raising money for Occupy after consulting with many activists on how they could be helpful. They seem sincere to me.

Why is all this so threatening? Why the fearful and purist denunciation? Can't they respect people who unlike Occupy's core activists don't make decisions at General Assemblies?

Occupy has in the past sought coalitions with labor unions and black community groups that often have more traditional leadership structures. They haven't tried to dictate politically correct processes that allies and supporters must accept. Why this intolerance now?

By the way, I have been pouring my heart out in books, blogs and films and opinion pieces on about the failures of Barack Obama's administration in combating the financial crimes that enabled the depression we are coping with. My latest exposes his campaign's pandering on terrorism and threatening Iran.

MoveOn would not help me promote my work, neither has the Nation, really, or, for that matter, Ben & Jerry, whose work I admired more before they sold their company to a mainstream corporation (although they have been engaged in admirable campaigns challenging military spending for years.)

That doesn't make them all sell-outs. Even if in the eyes of some, **they** are the "enemy" because **they** aren't "horizontal" enough, or anti-capitalist enough, or

anarchistic enough and may act more like reformers than Adbusters-approved revolutionaries.

On Friday, NYU hosted a tribute to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Port Huron Statement, the founding document of SDS that sparked activism in the 1960s. Former SDS leader Tom Hayden was on hand to tell his some stories about that era.

He noted that the central idea of Port Huron, “participatory democracy,” also appears in Occupy’s first declaration, suggesting continuity with the so-called “old thinkers” whom Adbusters gratuitously deride.

Hayden also recounted how liberals with whom SDS were aligned at first demanded that their movement become more outspokenly anti-communist, even as the movement rejected the cold war.

When SDS wouldn’t go along with this arrogant old-left thinking, (funded in part by the CIA), there was an internal “trial” and interrogation that led to SDS’s defunding and ouster from its offices. According to Hayden, it was a scene right out of Kafka, not unlike the tone of this recent communiqué.

SDS stood true to its principles and politics and refused to work with the people who tried to control them. The result: SDS grew more influential.

The organization successfully resisted co-optation and fought for racial justice and against the war in Vietnam. It supported organizing on campuses and in communities. It challenged the Democratic Party, which later also fragmented over the war, with Richard Nixon the ultimate beneficiary of all the discord.

But SDS couldn’t find a way of bridging its own ideological divides and the movement broke into warring factions that led to an organizational implosion. There also was plenty of paranoia and repression, with the government covertly pitting one group against another, using the FBI, racism and phony appeals to patriotism.

There was plenty of blame to go around. Today, there may be parallels here with this call to “save the soul” of Occupy. Can we learn from SDS’s destructive history of acrimony and sectarianism or are we doomed to repeat it?

**News Dissector Danny Schechter wrote *Occupy: Dissecting Occupy Wall Street* (Cosimo Books) based on his coverage for his NewsDissector.net blog, Al Jazeera.com and other outlets and also directed a TV film on the organization of Zuccotti Park. Earliest, he was an activist in the civil rights, anti-war and anti-apartheid movements. Comments to [dissector@mediachannel.org](mailto:dissector@mediachannel.org)**

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# US Politics Threaten Iran Nuke Talks

The rigidity of Official Washington more than intransigence from Iran is threatening negotiations beginning in Istanbul this weekend. President Obama's flexibility to ease sanctions on Iran in exchange for Iranian safeguards against building a nuclear weapon is limited by political pressures, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Much commentary about the impending talks with Iran on its nuclear program brings to mind Pogo Possum's comment that we have met the enemy and he is us. Among the impediments to success on both sides of this negotiation, some of the most prominent ones are on our side.

Remarkably, this has been noted by some who could never be accused of being soft on Iran. But the impediments are simply treated as a given, and as a reason to resign ourselves in advance to pessimism about negotiations. It is as if something were preventing us from changing what is actually in our power to change.

And it is as if when we tie ourselves in political knots in ways that make it difficult, though not impossible, to change, this is somehow the Iranians' fault. This self-crippling approach toward dealing with Iran starts with the de facto surrendering of U.S. freedom of action to the Israeli government, but it does not end there.

Consider a [recent piece by Patrick Clawson](#) of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, on what attraction a deal with the P5+1 would or would not have for the Iranian leadership. Clawson's analysis is quite perceptive regarding the unattractiveness to the Iranians of the prospect that concession on their part would be met not by the lifting of any current sanctions but only by a suspension of movement toward still more sanctions.

As Clawson correctly observes, "avoiding prospective sanctions is not a particularly tangible incentive for Iranian leaders, that is, they would have trouble justifying an agreement to their constituents by simply saying, 'It's a bad deal, but if we did not take it, life would be even worse.'"

But Clawson says nothing about the obvious inference that more flexibility is needed on the P5+1 side, instead simply taking the inflexibility as a given. He notes, for example, that "Congress has been particularly reluctant to end sanctions it has enacted into law," without also noting that it is in Congress's

power to change by law whatever Congress has enacted into law.

“As for UN sanctions,” says Clawson, “the United States is reluctant to let Security Council resolutions expire because reintroducing them would be very difficult.” The United States, of course, just as it has pushed hard and successfully for the Security Council to impose harsh sanctions, can push just as hard for the expiration, lifting or reimposition of sanctions.

Clawson attempts to portray some of the lack of economic attractiveness for Iran of striking a deal with the West as being outside the influence of Western governments. But it isn't. He says that “a number of major international companies that withdrew from Iran in recent years did so at least in part because of the poor business climate,” and that “Iran has a poor record of attracting international investment.”

Well, imposing economic sanctions on a country has a way of doing that. And the sanctions, as well as more direct governmental discouragement of investment in Iran, have been around for a long time. Have we forgotten how the Clinton administration, while it was working hard to discourage European economic relations with Iran, killed a deal that Conoco had reached to develop offshore Iranian oil fields?

Taking U.S. inflexibility as a given is a backdrop to another prominent theme in pre-Istanbul commentary, much of which is clearly designed to lay the groundwork for making a later judgment that “diplomacy has failed.” The Washington Post's lead editorial on Thursday is an example.

The editorial writers express a pro forma belief that “military action is neither necessary nor wise in the coming months,” thereby being able to portray any later endorsement of a war as a reluctantly arrived at last resort. They make no secret of where they are going, though, stating up front that the negotiations in Istanbul may be the “last chance for a peaceful settlement” in the “negative sense” that “hardly anyone thinks” that a deal will be struck.

The pessimism is based on what has been reported of the Obama administration's position toward the talks, but even that position is not obdurate enough for the *Post's* editorialists. They express concern that any near-term deal that would trade restrictions on Iran's enrichment activity for a freezing of further sanctions and maybe some easing of existing ones, which in fact would be a decidedly beneficial stepping back from the brink of a senseless war, would “allow the regime breathing space,” and according to the *Post*, that would be bad.

Following the *Post's* advice of no Western concessions at all short of complete

stoppage of enrichment would be the perfect formula for making “failure” of diplomacy a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One should bear in mind, amid such advance spinning of the talks, three important points. One is that for diplomacy to succeed requires at least as much attention to inducing flexibility on the U.S. side as in inducing it on the Iranian side.

Fareed Zakaria starts to get to this problem when he says, “The administration has handled its allies, Russia, China, the United Nations and even Tehran with skill. To succeed, however, it has to tackle its most formidable foe, with whom it has not had much negotiating success: Republicans.”

The problem, however, goes beyond Republicans, who have tried to exploit politically an attitude of inflexibility that extends beyond their own ranks.

Second, policymakers can change policies, tactics and even attitudes, no matter how deeply engrained those attitudes seem to be. This is what political leadership is about. If policymakers want a politically attractive argument that can help to sell a deal with Tehran that involves easing of sanctions in return for restrictions on, but not ending of, enrichment, they can start by pointing out how much the sanctions have increased gasoline prices in the United States.

Third, the absence of a deal after Istanbul or later rounds of talks is likely to say no more about Iranian obduracy, although that will be the focus of countless commentaries, than about our own.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)**

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## Some Ultra-Rich Abandon Obama

Some of the ultra-rich who backed Barack Obama in 2008 are switching to Mitt Romney in 2012 because the President has called for closing tax loopholes that allow hedge-fund and private-equity billionaires to pay lower tax rates than working stiffs, Bill Moyers and Michael Winship write.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Benjamin Franklin, who used his many talents to become a wealthy man, famously

said that the only things certain in life are death and taxes. But if you're a corporate CEO in America today, even they can be put on the back burner death held at bay by the best medical care money can buy and the latest in surgical and life extension techniques, taxes conveniently shunted aside courtesy of loopholes, overseas investment and governments that conveniently look the other way.

In a story headlined, "For Big Companies, Life Is Good," *The Wall Street Journal* reports that big American companies have emerged from the deepest recession since World War II more profitable than ever: flush with cash, less burdened by debt, and with a greater share of the country's income. But, the paper notes, "Many of the 1.1 million jobs the big companies added since 2007 were outside the U.S. So, too, was much of the \$1.2 trillion added to corporate treasuries."

To add to this embarrassment of riches, the consumer group Citizens for Tax Justice reports that more than two dozen major corporations including GE, Boeing, Mattel and Verizon paid no federal taxes between 2008 and 2011. They got a corporate tax break that was broadly supported by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Corporate taxes today are at a 40-year-low even as the executive suites at big corporations have become throne rooms where the crown jewels wind up in the personal vault of the CEO.

Then look at this report in *The New York Times*: Last year, among the 100 best-paid CEOs, the median income was more than \$14 million, compared with the average annual American salary of \$45,230. Combined, this happy hundred executives pulled down more than \$2 billion.

What's more, according to the *Times*, "these CEO's might seem like pikers. Top hedge fund managers collectively earned \$14.4 billion last year." No wonder some of them are fighting to kill a provision in the recent Dodd-Frank reform law that would require disclosing the ratio of CEO pay to the median pay of their employees. One never wishes to upset the help, you know. It can lead to unrest.

That's Wall Street the metaphorical bestiary of the financial universe. But there's nothing metaphorical about the earnings of hedge fund tigers, private equity lions, and the top dogs at those big banks that were bailed out by tax dollars after they helped chase our economy off a cliff.

So what do these big moneyed nabobs have to complain about? Why are they whining about reform? And why are they funneling cash to super PACs aimed at bringing down Barack Obama, who many of them supported four years ago?

Because, writes Alec MacGillis in *The New Republic* the President wants to raise their taxes. That's right while ordinary Americans are taxed at a top rate of 35 percent on their income, Congress allows hedge fund and private equity tycoons to pay only pay 15 percent of their compensation.

The President wants them to pay more; still at a rate below what you might pay, and for that he's being accused of hold onto your combat helmets "class warfare." One Wall Street Midas, once an Obama fan, now his foe, told MacGillis that by making the rich a primary target, Obama is "[expletive deleted] on people who are successful."

And can you believe this? Two years ago, when President Obama first tried to close that gaping loophole in our tax code, Stephen Schwarzman, who runs the Blackstone Group, the world's largest private equity fund, compared the President's action to Hitler's invasion of Poland.

That's the same Stephen Schwarzman whose agents in 2006 launched a predatory raid on a travel company in Colorado. His fund bought it, laid off 841 employees, and recouped its entire investment in just seven months one of the quickest returns on capital ever for such a deal.

To celebrate his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday Mr. Schwarzman rented the Park Avenue Armory here in New York at a cost of \$3 million, including a gospel choir led by Patti LaBelle that serenaded him with "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Does he ever his net worth is estimated at nearly \$5 billion.

Last year alone Schwarzman took home over \$213 million in pay and dividends, a third more than 2010. Now he's fundraising for Mitt Romney, who, like him, made his bundle on leveraged buyouts that left many American workers up the creek.

To add insult to injury, average taxpayers even help subsidize the private jet travel of the rich. On the *Times'* DealBook blog, mergers and acquisitions expert Steven Davidoff writes, "If an outside security consultant determines that executives need a private jet and other services for their safety, the Internal Revenue Service cuts corporate chieftains a break. In such cases, the chief executive will pay a reduced tax bill or sometimes no tax at all."

Are the CEOs really in danger? No, says Davidoff, "It's a common corporate tax trick."

Talk about your friendly skies. No wonder the people with money and influence don't feel connected to the rest of the population. It's as if they live in a foreign country at the top of the world, like their own private Switzerland, at heights so rarified they can't imagine life down below.

Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship, senior writing fellow at Demos, is senior writer of the weekly public affairs program, Moyers & Company, airing on public television. Check local airtimes or comment at [www.BillMoyers.com](http://www.BillMoyers.com).

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## Iran Talks Hinge on Israeli Demand

As international talks begin over Iran's nuclear program, President Obama has put forward an Israeli demand for the dismantling of a well-protected uranium processing plant, but it's less clear whether Obama will press the point if it means killing hopes for a peaceful settlement, Gareth Porter reports for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

The Obama administration has adopted a demand in the negotiations with Iran beginning Saturday that its Fordow enrichment facility must be shut down and eventually dismantled based on an understanding with Israel that risks the collapse of the negotiations.

It is unclear, however, whether the administration intends to press that demand regardless of Iran's rejection or will withdraw it later in the talks. Washington is believed to be interested in obtaining at least an agreement that would keep the talks going through the electoral campaign and beyond.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on the other hand, has been extremely anxious about the possibility of an agreement that would allow the Iranian enrichment program to continue. So it hopes the demand for closure and dismantling of Fordow will be a "poison pill" whose introduction could cause the breakdown of the talks with Iran.

In an interview with IPS, Reza Marashi, who worked in the State Department's Office of Iranian Affairs from 2006 to 2010, said, "If the demand for Fordow's closure is non-negotiable, the talks will likely fail."

Iran has already rejected the demand. Responding to the reported demands for halting of 20 percent enrichment and the closure of the Fordow facility, Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, said, "We see no justification for such a request from the P5+1."

The Obama administration apparently accepted Israel's demand for inclusion of

the closure of Fordow in the U.S.-European position in return for Israel going along with a focus in the first stage of the talks only on Iran's 20 percent enrichment.

It is widely believed that a limited agreement could be reached to end Iran's 20 percent enrichment and to replace existing Iranian stocks of 20 percent enriched uranium with foreign-fabricated fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor if Iran believed it would get some additional substantive benefit from the deal.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak revealed on April 4 that he had held talks with U.S. and European officials in late March with the aim of getting them to accept Israeli demands for the closure of Fordow, transfer of all 20 percent enrichment out of Iran, and transfer of most of the low enrichment uranium out of country as well.

Barak did not reveal the results of those talks, but three days later, the New York Times reported U.S. and European officials as saying they would demand the "immediate closure and ultimate dismantling" of the Fordow facility as an "urgent priority," along with the shipment out of the country of its stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent.

Reuters reported April 8 that a "senior U.S. official" said the suspension of 20 percent enrichment and closing the Fordow facility were "near-term priorities" for the U.S. and its allies. Reuters also reported that same day that Israel had agreed in March to a "staged approach" in the nuclear talks that would focus in the first stage on halting Iran's uranium enrichment to 20 percent.

Nothing has been said by either Israel or Western states about shipping low enrichment uranium out of the country, suggesting that the issue remains unresolved. The high-level talks and obvious linkage between the positions leaked to the media by U.S., European and Israeli officials leaves little doubt that such an understanding had been reached.

Responding to an IPS query, Erin Pelton, assistant press secretary at the National Security Council, said she was not aware of any explicit U.S. agreement with the Israelis on the U.S. position in the nuclear talks. But she added, "We have very close consultations with them on Iran policy. We don't have to have an explicit agreement."

Israel's main leverage over U.S. and European policy was the continuing threat of an attack on Iran. Only the day before Barak revealed his consultation with U.S. and European officials on negotiating strategy, the Jerusalem Post reported that "senior defense officials" had said the possible attack on Iran "may be postponed until 2013," because the "defense establishment" was waiting for the

outcome of the nuclear talks.

Barak has long pointed to Iran's ability to move centrifuges into Fordow, which was constructed in a tunnel facility deep in the side of a mountain, as denying Israel's ability to destroy most of the country's enrichment capabilities in an airstrike. That has been the sole justification offered in recent months for threatening an Israeli military strike.

In a blog post in *The National Interest*, Paul Pillar, former national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia, wrote that the "Western message to Tehran" seems to be, "(W)e might be willing to tolerate some sort of Iranian nuclear program, but only one consisting of facilities that would suffer significant damage if we or the Israelis later decide to bomb it."

Greg Thielmann, senior fellow at the Arms Control Association," said in an interview with IPS, "There are Americans who believe it is important to keep all Iranian facilities at risk in case Tehran decided to build a nuclear weapon."

But Thielmann, former director of the Strategic, Proliferation and Military Affairs Office in the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, said the reported demand for the closure and dismantling of the Fordow site "is more an interest of the Israelis than of the United States".

Reza Marashi, the former State Department specialist on Iran and now research director at the National Iranian-American Council, said U.S. officials have been concerned about Fordow, but that it is the Israelis who have "turned their inability to destroy Fordow into a major issue".

Thielmann said he hopes the administration is "doing this for the Israelis and that it wouldn't push it once it is rejected."

While the demand on Fordow clearly responds to a U.S. need to accommodate Israel, it is also in line with Obama administration efforts to intimidate Iran by emphasizing that it has only a limited time "window" in which to solve the issue diplomatically. The administration has implied in recent weeks that Israel would strike Iran's nuclear facilities in the absence of progress toward an agreement guaranteeing Iran would not go nuclear.

That emphasis on threat corresponds to the approach championed by hardliners since the beginning of the Obama administration. Former Obama adviser Dennis Ross, who is still believed to maintain personal contact with Obama, was quoted in the *New York Times* on March 29 as saying, "For diplomacy to work there has to be a coercive side. If the Iranians think this is a bluff, you can't be as effective."



In a recent article, Ross makes clear that what he calls “coercive diplomacy” would not involve the promise of lifting sanctions, because the U.S. would continue to demand change in Iran’s “behavior toward terrorism, its neighbors and its own citizens.”

If such a “coercive diplomacy” underlies the administration’s negotiating strategy, it would explain the absence of any leaks to the press about what it plans to offer the Iranians in return for the concessions being demanded. Reza Marashi noted that administration officials have been “holding their cards very close to their chest” in regard to what they intend to offer Iran.

The absence of any groundwork for significant incentives leads Marashi to believe the administration plans to rely on threats rather than incentives to get Iran to agree to its demands.

The Obama administration appears to be counting heavily on the one incentive it is prepared to offer in the talks: the recognition of Iran’s right to enrich uranium on Iranian soil. The U.S. and Europeans will certainly demand strict limits on the number of centrifuges and the level of enriched uranium Iran could maintain.

Iranian agreement to such limits would require major changes in U.S. policy toward Iran, including dismantling sanctions and accepting a major Iranian political-diplomatic role in the region as legitimate.

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## How Neocons Sank Iran Nuke Deal

**Exclusive:** Iran is resuming talks over its nuclear program with leading international powers the United States, Britain, Russia, China, France and Germany with the prospect of an agreement to swap some enriched uranium for research isotopes. But a similar plan was torpedoed by U.S. neocons in 2010, recalls Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Two years ago, Washington’s influential neoconservatives both inside and outside

government shot down a possible resolution to the Iranian nuclear dispute because they wanted a confrontation with Tehran that some hoped would lead to their long-held dream of “regime change.”

In the ensuing two years, the cost of that confrontation has been high not just for Iranians, who have faced harsh sanctions, but for the world’s economy. For instance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent escalation of bomb-Iran rhetoric contributed to the spike in gasoline prices that seems to be choking off the U.S. recovery, just as job growth was starting to accelerate.

But the Israelis and their neocon allies have yet to back away from the path toward war. They appear ready to take President Barack Obama to task if he makes any meaningful concessions to Iran in international negotiations that are set to resume in Istanbul, Turkey, on Friday.

A key question in those talks is whether some version of an earlier peace deal can be revived, whether Iran will agree to trade some of its enriched uranium especially the amounts refined to 20 percent for nuclear isotopes needed for medical research. That arrangement might let Iran retain its low-enriched uranium for energy production.

Along with verifiable commitments from Iran not to develop a nuclear bomb, such a deal might be enough for President Obama and the West to begin rolling back some of the toughest economic sanctions imposed on Iran, including restrictions on Iran’s banking and oil sales.

However, it’s also clear that any compromise would provoke fury from the neocons as well as war hawks in Congress and Israel. They all may claim they don’t want a new war with Iran but still insist on a confrontational path that leads in that direction.

On Thursday, the neocon-dominated Washington Post editorialized that a deal might be within Obama’s grasp to avert an immediate conflict with Iran, but “the risk is that it would be counterproductive in the medium term, because it would ease what is now mounting economic pressure on Iran and allow the regime breathing space.”

The Post added: “It could leave the [Iranian] nuclear program in a stronger position than it was when the Obama administration began negotiations in the fall of 2009, with more centrifuges and enough low-enriched uranium to make several nuclear bombs with further processing. If the regime refused a more comprehensive deal, or cheated, it might be difficult to restore sanctions that only now finally appear to be biting.

“With the presidential election looming, President Obama might be happy to trade

those problems for avoiding a major international crisis in the coming months. For us, the call is closer. But most likely the Iranians themselves will settle the matter. For better or for worse, the chances the regime will meet Mr. Obama's terms don't look good."

### **Iranian Flexibility**

In recent comments, key Iranians have signaled flexibility along the lines of the earlier swap arrangement, but the reason why such a deal might leave Tehran "in a stronger position" than in 2009-2010 is that then the Post's editors, along with other neocon pundits and allies inside the Obama administration, sank the earlier plan for Iran to surrender much of its low-enriched uranium for isotopes needed by an Iranian medical research reactor.

Iran had yet to overcome the technical obstacles to refine uranium to the 20 percent level to produce those isotopes. Now, Iran's 20 percent level is only a few steps short of bringing uranium to the 90 percent refinement for a nuclear bomb. So, the earlier deal would have left Iran much further from the threshold of a nuclear-bomb capability.

However, in 2009 and again in 2010 Washington's neocon voices ridiculed the proposed uranium swap on the grounds that Iran would have kept enough low-enriched uranium (at the much lower 3.5 percent level) that it could theoretically, sometime in the future, be able to refine it and build one nuclear bomb.

Today, Iran has much more enriched uranium at a much higher level, enough for at least several theoretical nuclear bombs (though Iran says it doesn't want any).

So, one could agree with the Post's assessment that Iran's nuclear position today is stronger than it was in 2009 and 2010. But whose fault was that? It would seem to rest more with the Post editorialists and other neocons who demanded the heightened confrontation with Iran in place of the uranium swap.

For instance, even before the revived swap deal was unveiled on May 17, 2010, the Washington Post's editors were mocking the leaders of Brazil and Turkey who had spearheaded the initiative. The Post called the plan "yet another effort to 'engage' the extremist clique of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad."

After the Iran-Brazil-Turkey deal was announced in Tehran, the rhetorical abuse escalated with Washington pundits and administration hardliners, like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, treating the leaders of Brazil and Turkey as unwelcome interlopers who were intruding on America's diplomatic turf in an effort to grandstand.

On May 26, 2010, the influential New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman weighed in, excoriating the leaders of Brazil and Turkey for negotiating an agreement with Iran to ship about half its low-enriched uranium out of the country.

To Friedman, this deal was “as ugly as it gets,” the title of his column, though others might have had different ideas about what could be uglier, like the carnage in Iraq that Friedman and other neocon pundits had advocated seven years earlier.

But Friedman stuck the “ugly as it gets” label on the peace-seeking actions of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazil’s then-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who had persuaded Iran’s President Ahmadinejad to accept an agreement to send 2,640 pounds of Iran’s low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for higher-enriched uranium that could only be put to peaceful medical uses.

That agreement followed one originally brokered by the Obama administration in fall 2009 before Iran’s internal political tensions caused the deal to collapse.

### **A Perturbed Leader**

After the revived deal encountered a hostile reaction in Official Washington in spring 2010, a perturbed Lula da Silva challenged those Americans who insisted that it was “none of Brazil’s business” to act as an intermediary to resolve the crisis with Iran. “Who said it was a matter for the United States?” he asked.

The Brazilian president continued: “The blunt truth is, Iran is being presented as if it were the devil, that it doesn’t want to sit down” to negotiate, despite the fact “Iran decided to sit down at the negotiating table. It wants to see if the others are going to go along with what (it) has done.”

But Friedman’s column delivered a political *coup de grace* to the swap idea. Instead, he signaled that the neocon bottom line was the ratcheting up of pressures on Iran with the goal of “regime change” or possibly a military assault on Iran’s infrastructure.

Friedman portrayed the leaders of Brazil and Turkey as glory-seeking dupes, writing:

“I confess that when I first saw the May 17 [2010] picture of Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, joining his Brazilian counterpart, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with raised arms, after their signing of a putative deal to defuse the crisis over Iran’s nuclear weapons program, all I could think of was:

“Is there anything uglier than watching democrats sell out other democrats to a Holocaust-denying, vote-stealing Iranian thug just to tweak the U.S. and show that they, too, can play at the big power table? No, that’s about as ugly as it gets.”

This U.S. hostility toward the Iran-Brazil-Turkey accord caught Brazilian and Turkish officials by surprise, in part because Obama had encouraged the initiative.

After Friedman’s column and other derogatory U.S. comments, Brazil released a three-page letter that Obama sent to Lula da Silva in April in which Obama said the proposed uranium swap “would build confidence and reduce regional tensions by substantially reducing Iran’s” stockpile of low-enriched uranium.

The contrast between Obama’s support and the anger from other voices in Washington caused “some puzzlement,” one senior Brazilian official said. After all, this official noted, the supportive “letter came from the highest authority and was very clear.”

But, in 2010, the neocons were still dreaming about “regime change” in Iran, one of the charter members of President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil.” The neocons and much of the U.S. press also had deluded themselves into thinking that Ahmadinejad had “stolen” the June 2009 election from the so-called Green movement and that “regime change” was just around the corner.

“In my view, the ‘Green Revolution’ in Iran is the most important, self-generated, democracy movement to appear in the Middle East in decades,” Friedman wrote. “It has been suppressed, but it is not going away, and, ultimately, its success, not any nuclear deal with the Iranian clerics, is the only sustainable source of security and stability. We have spent far too little time and energy nurturing that democratic trend and far too much chasing a nuclear deal.”

### **‘Regime Change’ Argument**

That argument ran parallel to the neocons’ earlier case for war with Iraq, that “regime change” was the only acceptable outcome to that crisis. Thus, false or dubious claims about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction were justified to get the American public on board for war, just as the exaggerated fears about Iran’s nuclear program became the new excuse for another bid at “regime change.”

However, unlike Iraq which was ruled by dictator Saddam Hussein, the neocon goal of overthrowing Iran’s government faced the unacknowledged reality that Ahmadinejad almost certainly won the June 12, 2009, election and that he thus was a popularly elected leader (at least within the rules of Iran’s Islamic Republic).

Though the U.S. press corps refused to accept that fact and still routinely describes the election as “fraudulent,” “rigged” or “stolen,” the reality was that no serious evidence has been presented to support those claims.

Indeed, the overwhelming evidence is that Ahmadinejad, with strong support from the poor especially in more conservative rural areas, defeated the “Green Revolution” candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi by roughly the 2-to-1 margin of the official results.

For instance, an analysis by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy Attitudes concluded that most Iranians voted for Ahmadinejad and viewed his reelection as legitimate, contrary to claims made by much of the U.S. news media.

Not a single Iranian poll analyzed by PIPA whether before or after the June 2009 election, whether conducted inside or outside Iran showed Ahmadinejad with less than majority support. None showed Mousavi, a former prime minister, ahead or even close.

“These findings do not prove that there were no irregularities in the election process,” said Steven Kull, director of PIPA. “But they do not support the belief that a majority rejected Ahmadinejad.” [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Ahmadinejad Won, Get Over It!”](#)]

If these and other scholarly examinations are correct and there is no counter-evidence that they aren’t what happened after the election was that Mousavi simply refused to accept the voters’ choice and with the enthusiastic backing of the U.S. news media undertook to reverse the results with massive street protests.

During those demonstrations, a few protesters threw Molotov cocktails at police (scenes carried on CNN but quickly forgotten by the U.S. news media) and security forces overreacted with repression and violence.

Though it’s fair to condemn excessive force used by Iran’s police, you can be sure that if the same factors were transplanted to an American ally or, say, the United States itself the U.S. news media’s treatment would be completely different. Suddenly, the security forces would be protecting “democracy” from anti-democratic mobs disgruntled over losing.

But Friedman and other neocon pundits took this false conventional wisdom that Mousavi was the voters’ choice and transformed it into a new *casus belli*, a pattern of turning propaganda into political truth that was eerily reminiscent of the black-and-white portrayals of the crisis with Iraq in 2002-2003.

## **'Tony Blair Democrat'**

In those days, Friedman was enamored of the idea of invading Iraq and was smitten by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's glib oratory about forcibly planting seeds of "democracy." Friedman even dubbed himself a pro-war "Tony Blair Democrat" and made the witty observation that it was time to "give war a chance" in Iraq.

Today, it might seem obvious that anyone foolish enough to call himself "a Tony Blair Democrat" after Blair has gone down in history as "Bush's poodle" or to twist John Lennon's advice to "give peace a chance" into its opposite should have the decency to simply vacate the public stage and let some other aspiring pundit try his or her luck.

But that's not how it works in the world of U.S. punditry. As long as you don't offend the powerful, you keep your job, and when the carousel circles around, you're poised to reach for another brass ring another glorious war, another lucrative book contract.

Friedman also hasn't heard any anti-Iranian propaganda theme that he won't repeat, much like he did in hyping threats from Iraq.

Surely, Ahmadinejad, like Saddam Hussein, has contributed to his and his nations' problems with wrongful actions and stupid rhetoric, making the work of neocon propagandists all the easier. But the truth is that actions of any national leader can be made to appear more outrageous or more reasonable depending on how the media frames these matters.

For example, Ahmadinejad, a little-educated populist from the Tehran's "street," has made obnoxious and ill-informed comments questioning the Holocaust. However, to extrapolate Ahmadinejad's offensive remarks into a readiness to attack Israel, which has hundreds of undeclared nukes, is the kind of illogical overreach that we saw before the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Back then, the Bush administration conjured up nightmare scenarios of Iraq flying unmanned planes over the United States to spray poison gases or secretly building a nuclear bomb that it might give to Islamic radicals (though the secular Saddam Hussein was infamous for his brutal repression of those religious fundamentalists).

It's also should be clearer today that the mercurial Ahmadinejad has been largely sidelined by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, a more predictable figure who has renounced any Iranian interest in developing a nuclear bomb, calling possession of such a weapon a "grave sin."

Still, the neocons are itching for another conflict, this time with Iran, and they are sure to condemn any concessions that Obama makes in the upcoming negotiations. However, if an eventual deal does end up more favorable to Iran than the one available in 2010, the neocons will have themselves to blame.

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.**

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