

WPost Pushes for Syrian War

The neoconservative Washington Post wants people to forget about how it and other Iraq War boosters got pretty much everything wrong about that disaster. Amnesia is especially important now as the Post and the neocons begin a new push for U.S. military intervention in Syria, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Just when it seemed we could move beyond the anniversary-related armchair refighting of the Iraq War, we get from Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post* editorial staff another mis-aimed salvo from a proponent of that war. Diehl's more immediate subject is the current Syrian civil war, into which a U.S.-armed intervention has been a favorite cause of the *Post's* editorial page for many months.

Diehl's declared objectives in his signed column are to absolve himself and other Iraq War proponents from any credibility gap when they advocate U.S. immersion in yet another Middle Eastern war, and to warn of how any Iraq War syndrome might unwisely dissuade the United States from conducting worthwhile military interventions, such as in Syria. If the Iraq War is to be used to make such a case on an issue of current importance, then we had better wallow a little longer in issues involving the old war.

Diehl begins his comparison to Iraq with the thundering understatement that the situation there "hasn't turned out, so far, as we war supporters hoped." ("So far"? That has to be one of the choicest examples of hope springing eternal.) He then addresses his topic from a humanitarian angle, giving us some figures to try to make a case that "the larger humanitarian price of Syria has been far greater" than that of war in Iraq.

His methodology of comparing current rates of casualties in Syria with averages for the entire period of the U.S. presence in Iraq is deeply flawed by the fact that the period of intense, high-casualty civil warfare in Iraq, which was comparable to what we have seen in Syria over the past couple of years, was only one portion of the longer period of U.S. occupation. A more fundamental flaw is that he gives us no reason to believe that adding more flames to an existing fire through military intervention would lead the humanitarian problem in Syria to lessen rather than worsen. Nor does he make any moral, as well as policy, distinction made between a war that one starts oneself and one that is already under way.

The next topic in the column is al-Qaeda, with Diehl repeating the flypaper

theory of counterterrorism by saying that “in Iraq, the United States faced down al-Qaeda and eventually dealt it a decisive defeat.” The fallacy with this theory is that it assumes there is a fixed number of terrorists, with the task simply being one of attracting them to where we can kill them. In fact, by its invasion and occupation of Iraq, the United States generated far more terrorists, including those of the al-Qaeda ilk, than it killed.

There was no al-Qaeda in Iraq until after the U.S. invasion and the ensuing civil war created it. Moreover, the entire war was a propaganda bonanza for Osama bin Laden, lending credibility in many eyes to his accusations about the United States being out to kill Muslims, occupy their lands, and plunder their resources. The war unquestionably gave a major boost to jihadist terrorism.

Diehl asserts that “the Iraq war prompted low-level meddling by Iran, Syria and other neighbors but otherwise left the surrounding region unscathed, thanks to the U.S. presence.” Actually, the “low-level meddling” by Iran amid the U.S.-triggered disorder brought Iran the payoff of now being the dominant foreign influence in Iraq. And far from leaving the surrounding region unscathed, the U.S.-unleashed turmoil in Iraq stimulated a wider regional sectarian conflict, with the civil war in Syria being itself the bloodiest current manifestation of that conflict.

Of course, advocates of entering the Syrian war have to deal with public resistance to anything like the long and costly Iraqi expedition. So Diehl assures us that he is only talking about “limited use of U.S. airpower and collaboration with forces on the ground,” which, he says, “could have quickly put an end to the Assad regime 18 months ago, preventing 60,000 deaths and rise of al-Qaeda.”

He offers no explanation of how, given all the ingredients (especially the sectarian hatred) of the current civil war, dispatching the Assad regime would have had anything like the salutary effects he postulates, or would have those effects if the regime collapsed this week. What, for example, happens to the Alawites if the regime goes, and what happens to all the desire for vengeance on the Sunni side when that happens?

Note especially the remarkable parallel (which Diehl himself does not highlight) between what is being promised (or hoped for) here and what was promised and hoped for with the invasion of Iraq: that toppling the incumbent regime would be quick and cheap and could be done without any messy, resource-devouring turmoil to follow. The column has other remarkable echoes of the selling of the Iraq War. There is even a line about how if we don't intervene in Syria, al-Qaeda will gain control over chemical and biological weapons.

Diehl says, "The problem here is not that advocates of the Iraq invasion have failed to learn its lessons." If his column is any indication, that is very much a problem.

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