

# Pushing for War with Syria

**Exclusive:** The dam holding back pressure for U.S. war in Syria is giving way with President Obama like the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike seeming unable to stop the inevitable. Cheering on the impending flood are many of the same big-name pundits from the Iraq War, Robert Parry notes.

By Robert Parry

Israel's bombing raids into Syria appear to have shattered whatever restraint remained in Official Washington toward the United States entering the civil war on the side of rebel forces that include radical jihadist elements. On Monday, the Washington Post's neocon editors weighed in for U.S. intervention as did former New York Times executive editor Bill Keller.

Both the Post's editors and Keller also were key advocates for invading Iraq in 2003 and their continued influence reflects the danger of not imposing any accountability on prominent journalists who were wrong on Iraq. Those tough-guy pundits now want much the same interventionism toward Syria and Iran, which always were on the neocon hit list as follow-ons to Iraq.

The Post's lead editorial on Monday urged U.S. intervention in Syria as part of a response to a growing regional crisis that one could argue was touched off or made far worse by President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

However, rather than trace the crisis back to Bush's invasion of Iraq which the Post eagerly supported the editors lament the removal of U.S. troops from Iraq and President Barack Obama's hesitancy to intervene in Syria. Noting the renewed sectarian violence in Iraq, the Post's editors write "it also makes intervention aimed at ending the war in Syria that much more urgent."

Meanwhile, across the top half of Monday's Op-Ed page in the New York Times, Keller urged any pundit chastened by the disastrous Iraq War to shake off those doubts and get behind U.S. military intervention in Syria. His article, entitled "Syria Is Not Iraq," is presented in the same "reluctantly hawkish" tone as his influential endorsement of aggressive war against Iraq in 2003.

Keller's special twist now is that he is citing his misjudgment on Iraq as part of his qualifications for urging President Obama to cast aside doubts about the use of military force in Syria's chaotic civil war and to jump into the campaign for regime change by helping the rebels overthrow Bashar al-Assad.

"Frankly I've shared his [Obama's] hesitation about Syria, in part because, during an earlier column-writing interlude at the outset of the Iraq invasion, I

found myself a reluctant hawk. That turned out to be a humbling error of judgment, and it left me gun-shy," Keller wrote. "But in Syria, I fear prudence has become fatalism, and our caution has been the father of missed opportunities, diminished credibility and enlarged tragedy."

For the rest of the lengthy article, Keller baited Obama by presenting him as something of a terrified deer frozen in mindless inaction because of the Iraq experience. Keller quoted hawkish former State Department official Vali Nasr as declaring that "We're paralyzed like a deer in the headlights, and everybody keeps relitigating the Iraq war."

Keller then added: "Whatever we decide, getting Syria right starts with getting over Iraq."

### **No Lessons Learned**

But Keller doesn't seem to have learned anything significant from the Iraq catastrophe. Much as he and other pundits did on Iraq, they are putting themselves into the minds of Syria's leaders and assuming that every dastardly deed is carefully calibrated when the reality is that Assad, like Saddam Hussein, has often behaved in a reactive manner to perceived threats.

Assad and many other Alawites (a branch of Shiite Islam) along with many Christian Armenians who remain loyal to Assad are terrified of what might follow a military victory by the Sunni majority, whose fighting forces are now dominated by Islamic extremists, many with close ties to al-Qaeda.

As the New York Times reported in its news page last month, the black flags of Islamist rule are spreading across "liberated" sectors of Syria.

"Across Syria, rebel-held areas are dotted with Islamic courts staffed by lawyers and clerics, and by fighting brigades led by extremists," wrote Times correspondent Ben Hubbard. "Even the Supreme Military Council, the umbrella rebel organization whose formation the West had hoped would sideline radical groups, is stocked with commanders who want to infuse Islamic law into a future Syrian government.

"Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of."

So, it might not be surprising that the Alawite (or Shiite) minority not to mention Armenians whose ancestors fled south a century ago to escape a Turkish genocide might be acting, to some degree, out of fear and panic. But to Keller and likeminded pundits, the "enemy" is always cruel, cunning and calculating while the American side is committed to peace and slow to take up the military

option.

Keller wrote, “our reluctance to arm the rebels or defend the civilians being slaughtered in their homes has convinced the Assad regime (and the world) that we are not serious. Assad has been sly about escalating his savagery by degrees, artillery, then aerial bombardment, then Scud missiles and now, apparently, chemical weapons, while staying just below whatever threshold of horror might shame us into responding.”

But does Keller really know this? Or is he speculating much as U.S. pundits did in their erroneous efforts to divine why Saddam Hussein insisted on hiding his WMD stockpiles and daring President Bush to launch an invasion? (Oh, that’s right, Hussein didn’t have any WMD stockpiles and indeed had truthfully admitted as much.)

### **No White Hats**

The reality is that both sides in the Syrian conflict share the blame for atrocities. The murky moral situation was underscored again this weekend when a United Nations investigation found evidence that rebel forces used the nerve agent sarin on civilian targets but the UN team has not discovered evidence of chemical agents deployed by the government.

Also, though you wouldn’t know it from reading Keller and most other U.S. journalists, Assad has offered electoral and negotiated routes to resolve the conflict. The Russians, who support Assad, also have pushed for peace talks. Yet, given the long history of the dictatorial Assad dynasty, the opposition understandably has doubts about any offer of negotiations and some see no real option except a fight to the death.

However, as happened in Iraq, the U.S. press corps has opted largely for a black-and-white rendition of the Syrian civil war, with virtually all American pundits siding with the rebels and blaming the Assad regime for the tens of thousands of deaths. Much like during the stampede to war with Iraq, objectivity has largely disappeared from the mainstream American news media.

Today’s double standards regarding international law are another striking reminder of the Iraq War. In 2003, the U.S. news media rarely, if ever, mentioned how Bush’s invasion of Iraq was illegal, much as there is now almost no criticism of Israel for mounting a series of aerial attacks against Syrian targets.

One could only imagine the U.S. press reaction if Syria had been the one conducting bombing raids against Israel. Then, suddenly, international law would be picked up from the dustbin of history, dusted off and put on a pedestal.

American pundits would immediately become experts on the universality of international law and how it forbids cross-border bombing raids. Indeed, such attacks might be deemed "terrorism."

### **The Same Guiding Hands**

In another unnerving similarity with the Iraq War, Keller and the Washington Post editors are back serving as the guiding hands to lead the American people to war. While the Post mostly beats the war drums loudly, Keller presents a quieter and more reasonable demeanor only grudgingly concluding that war is necessary.

That, of course, was exactly Keller's role prior to the invasion of Iraq when he wrote an influential article entitled "I-Can't-Believe-I'm-a-Hawk Club," which counted himself among supposedly peace-loving American thinkers and writers who had clambered onto George W. Bush's bandwagon to war.

On the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Keller reflected on his mistaken support of the Iraq War in a handwringing article. In it, he admitted that Iraq "had in the literal sense, almost nothing to do with 9/11" and recognized that the war had resulted in untold death and misery of its own.

The article, "My Unfinished 9/11 Business," was filled with rationalizations about his post-9/11 feelings and those of other pro-Iraq-War pundits. Yet what was perhaps most striking about Keller's article was that it lacked even a single reference to international law, or to the fact that Bush undertook the invasion in defiance of a majority on the UN Security Council and in violation of longstanding U.S.-enunciated principles against aggressive war.

At the Nuremberg Tribunals after World War II, the chief U.S. prosecutor, Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, called a war of aggression "not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

Jackson also vowed that the tribunals, in condemning Nazi officials and their propagandists for engaging in aggressive war and other crimes, were not simply acting out victor's justice but that the same rules would apply to the nations sitting in judgment.

That, however, has turned out not to be the case. Though Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair undertook the invasion of Iraq without UN approval and under false pretenses, there has been no serious attempt to hold the invaders and their subordinates accountable.

Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and other former U.S. officials have even admitted to ordering acts of torture (such as water-boarding prisoners), again in violation of international law, with little or no expectation that they will be punished. Nor presumably do Keller and other pro-invasion pundits foresee any adverse consequences from their own propagandistic support for the war.

If the Nuremberg principles were to be fully applied to the United States and Great Britain, the propagandists would share the dock with the political and military leaders. But Keller and his fellow "club" members apparently believe their worst punishment should be writing self-obsessed articles about how distraught they were over the war's unintended consequences.

### **Excuses for War**

For Keller's part, his article on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 offered excuses for his Iraq War support ranging from his desire to protect his daughter who was born "almost exactly nine months after the attacks" on 9/11 to his accompaniment in his pro-war propaganda by "a large and estimable" group of fellow liberal hawks.

His list included "among others, Thomas Friedman of The Times; Fareed Zakaria, of Newsweek; George Packer and Jeffrey Goldberg of The New Yorker; Richard Cohen of The Washington Post; the blogger Andrew Sullivan; Paul Berman of Dissent; Christopher Hitchens of just about everywhere; and Kenneth Pollack, the former C.I.A. analyst whose book, *The Threatening Storm*, became the liberal manual on the Iraqi threat."

These "club" members expressed various caveats and concerns about their hawkishness, but their broad support for invading Iraq provided a powerful argument for the Bush administration which, as Keller noted, "was clearly pleased to cite the liberal hawks as evidence that invading Iraq was not just the impetuous act of cowboy neocons."

Indeed, this "liberal-hawk" consensus further marginalized the few skeptics who tried to warn the American people that the WMD evidence was thin to non-existent and that occupying a hostile Arab nation was a fool's errand that would start a new cycle of violence.

As the Iraq invasion was unleashed in March 2003 with all its "shock and awe" and the killing of young Iraqi soldiers and many civilians, Keller recalled his satisfaction in having taken the side of American military might.

When Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was driven from power three weeks later, Keller said he and nearly all other "club" members were "a little drugged by testosterone. And maybe a little too pleased with ourselves for standing up to

evil and defying the caricature of liberals as, to borrow a phrase from those days, brie-eating surrender monkeys.”

Keller did allow that he and his “club” under-estimated the difficulties of installing “democracy” in Iraq and over-estimated the competence of Bush’s team. In retrospect, given the costs in blood and treasure among Americans and Iraqis, he acknowledged that “Operation Iraqi Freedom was a monumental blunder.”

But Keller behaved as if his engagement in self-aggrandizing self-criticism was punishment enough, not only for him and his fellow “liberal hawks” but apparently for Bush, Cheney, Blair and others who waged this war of aggression.

The fact that Keller didn’t even mention international law suggested that he remains a member in good standing of the “We’re-So-Special-We-Can-Do-Anything Club.” You might note that most of the “estimable” members of Keller’s hawk club remain highly regarded opinion leaders and some like Friedman and Zakaria retain big-dollar perches in the major news media. Keller got promoted to Times executive editor, arguably the top job in American journalism, *after* the case for war in Iraq was debunked.

Given that many worthy journalists have seen their careers ruined simply because they were accused of failing to meet some perfect standard of journalism for instance, the late Gary Webb and his heroic reporting on Nicaraguan Contra drug trafficking it was all the more striking that almost none of Keller’s club members have suffered professionally at all.

Now, Keller is back, afforded the entire top half of the New York Times’ Op-Ed page to tell Americans that they should forget about Iraq when getting in line for another war in neighboring Syria.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).**

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## Ignoring the Whys of Terrorism

For years Americans have been warned that George W. Bush’s brutal “war on terror” and his invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan would spur more anti-U.S. terrorism. But when such events occur as in Boston last month anyone who observes that fact is shouted down, as happened to Richard Falk, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Shortly after the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, Richard Falk, professor emeritus of international law at Princeton University and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Palestinian territories, published an analysis of the episode entitled "A Commentary on the Marathon Murders."

In this analysis Falk pointed out that there are "serious deficiencies in how the U.S. sees itself in the world. We should be worried by the taboo . . . imposed on any type of self-scrutiny [of U.S. foreign policy] by either the political leadership or the mainstream media." This taboo essentially blinds us to the reality of our situation.

Falk continues, "The American global domination project is bound to generate all kinds of resistance in the post-colonial world. . . . Especially if there is no disposition to rethink U.S. relations with others . . . starting with the Middle East."

It seems obvious that if Washington wants to prevent future attacks, it is not enough to pursue alleged terrorists and beef up "homeland security." It seems logical that one needs to also perform a foreign policy review, preferably in a public manner, to determine if any American policies or behaviors are unnecessarily provoking animosity.

For instance, will continued unqualified U.S. support of Israeli oppression of Palestinians increase or decrease future violent anti-American episodes at home or abroad? Yet, this critical aspect of any response to terrorism has apparently never been performed.

As regards the administration of George W. Bush, this comes as no surprise. Bush and his neoconservative supporters were (and still are) ideologically driven and so are incapable of the objectivity necessary for such a self-critical review. That is why Bush came up with a range of cockamamie reasons, including the famous "they hate our values," for the 9/11 attacks.

President Obama, on the other hand, seemed, at least at first, capable of corrective insight. Back in 2009 Obama went to Cairo and made a speech which suggested that a rethinking of American relations with the Muslim world and the Middle East in particular, was in order. Yet the theory represented in the speech was never turned into practice. Why not?

Falk explains that "the strong push-back by Israel" caused Obama to backpedal. As a consequence the "politics of denial" continued. In Falk's opinion, "As long as Tel Aviv has the compliant ear of the American political establishment those who wish for peace and justice in the world should not rest easy."

## Attacking the Messenger

When it comes to policies that might provoke terrorist attack, U.S. complicity in Israeli belligerency, racism and colonial expansion is just the tip of the iceberg. Washington's mistakes go further. They include the unprovoked invasion of Iraq following years of devastating economic sanctions, the ill-conceived stationing of troops on Arabian soil, the unnecessary occupation of Afghanistan, and the collateral-damage-prone-tactic of drone warfare now actively pursued in places like Yemen and Pakistan.

Unbeknownst to the American public, all of these have seriously alienated hundreds of millions of people around the globe. It has driven some of this number to violent actions which, from their perspective, represent counterattacks and revenge.

Thus, looked at *from outside* of the self-justifying perspective of the United States government, everything Richard Falk says is accurate. However, *from the inside* of the official government worldview, Falk is a heretic and his message dangerous verbal poison. Therefore, the reaction of those dedicated to customary policies and alliances has been shrill.

For instance, Washington's ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, said that she was "outraged by Richard Falk's highly offensive Boston comments. Someone who spews such vitriol has no place at the UN. Past time for him to go."

Similar statements came from members of Congress who are collecting signatures on a letter demanding that President Obama "take action" against Falk. The British mission to the UN. released a statement to the effect that "this is the third time we have had cause to express our concerns about Mr. Falk's anti-Semitic remarks."

This is an embarrassingly ignorant statement that confuses criticism of Israel with hostility to Jews in general. By the way, Richard Falk is Jewish. For its part, Israel has long barred Falk from even entering the Palestinian territories for which he has responsibility.

Finally, Zionists have accused Falk of being "an anti-American and pro-radical Islam activist." This is another statement that is both factually incorrect and ignorant, because Falk is a deeply knowledgeable American trying to talk some sense to politicians leading the nation toward a dangerous cliff, and because it confuses criticism of Israel with supporting "radical Islam."

The ugly fact is that most Americans have been kept dangerously ignorant of the wanton damage caused by their government's foreign policies, and those who would prevent them from knowing the truth are, at the very least, indirectly

responsible for terrorist attacks launched in reaction to those policies.

Richard Falk's crime is to be a person of note, an esteemed academic and a respected servant of the United Nations, who is trying to break through with the truth. It is all the more frightening to the U.S. and its allies that, in this effort, Falk has access to an independent platform. He regularly reports to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, where he has the ear of many of the 47 nations that make up this body. Unfortunately, the one group most in need of Falk's wisdom, the American public, remains beyond the range of his voice.

If it could get away with it, the U.S. government would probably cart Richard Falk off to some hellhole prison. However, despite disturbing signs to the contrary, Washington isn't yet ready to take such actions against a man of Falk's stature. Still, do not mistake such forbearance for the mark of a mature and stable society. No. Such societies (just like mature and stable adults) are capable of self-criticism.

At least at the level of leadership and media, the United States is not capable of such self-reflection and so its citizens are likely to be the last to know that much of the terrorism they fear is a product of their own government's continuing barbarism.

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