

# Blaming Obama for Syrian Mess

**Exclusive:** As the Syrian civil war drags on, al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremists are emerging as the fiercest fighters in the rebel coalition and complicating how the conflict can be resolved. So, U.S. neocons are trying to pin the blame on President Obama, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The neocons, who provided the propaganda framework for the disastrous Iraq War, are creating a new and dangerous conventional wisdom on Syria, blaming the emerging hardline jihadist dominance of the anti-government opposition on President Barack Obama's failure to intervene militarily much earlier.

Official Washington is now awash in the message that Obama's grudging agreement to deliver some light weapons to non-Islamist rebels is a case of "too little, too late." A corollary of this neocon analysis is that only a much more aggressive U.S. military policy, including air strikes against Syrian government targets, can now salvage the situation by forcing President Bashar al-Assad into negotiations preconditioned on his surrender.

In other words, the neocons, who survived the Iraq War debacle with amazingly little harm to their standing within the Establishment, are offering their usual response to every political crisis in the Muslim world: U.S. military intervention and forced "regime change" of a leader deemed hostile to Israel.

However, the neocons are again living in their own reality. The truth is that it has been the Syrian opposition that has been the chief obstacle to peace negotiations, not Assad's government. Earlier this year, talks scheduled for Geneva were blocked not by Assad, who agreed to participate, but by the opposition, which insisted on a fresh supply of weapons and a delay until rebel forces had reversed their recent string of military defeats.

Even earlier, however, when the rebels seemed to have the upper hand in the conflict, they showed little interest in a negotiated, power-sharing agreement. Then, the rebels were set on an outright defeat of Assad's government and rebuffed Assad's overtures of constitutional and political reforms.

That is not to say that Assad's military did not respond to the civil unrest in 2011 with excessive force or that the Assad dynasty has not been among the most unsavory Arab dictatorships over the decades. The Assads, like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, have represented some of the worst examples of repression in a region that has been long known for repression.

However, as with Iraq's Hussein, the U.S. news media has painted the Syrian situation in blacks and whites. The opposition is noble and the government is evil. Every extreme claim about Assad, as with Hussein, is accepted as fact with almost no skepticism allowed. That pattern of journalistic malpractice contributed to the unprovoked U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 when little credence was given to Iraq's denials that it possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Hussein also received little credit for maintaining a secular government that cracked down on Islamic extremism. Instead, President George W. Bush's administration sold to the U.S. news media the myth that Hussein was ready to share WMDs with al-Qaeda. It was only after Bush's invasion and the failure to find the WMDs that Iraq did become a home for al-Qaeda extremists and the U.S. press corps came to understand how the neocons had sold a false bill of goods.

But that awareness has slipped away as neocon commentators still dominate the op-ed pages and the think tanks, enabling them now to define the parameters of the debate over Syria.

### **The Neocon Strategy**

It has long been central to the neocons' geopolitical strategy to seek "regime change" in Muslim countries that are considered hostile to Israel and by doing so to undermine Israel's close-in enemies, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestine's Hamas. The neocon thinking was that if pro-U.S. governments could be installed in Iraq, Syria and Iran, then Israel would have a freer hand to dictate a final "peace" to the isolated Palestinians, who would have little choice but to accept the final borders demanded by Israel. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

However, the neocons have operated with a cartoonish view of the Muslim world. They have shown no sophistication about how the geopolitics of their schemes might actually play out.

For instance, their dreams about the Iraqis welcoming U.S. invaders as "liberators" didn't exactly go that way. Ultimately, a Sunni autocrat (Hussein) was replaced by a Shiite autocrat (Nouri al-Maliki) with Iran gaining more influence than the United States, the erstwhile occupying power. Similarly, the overthrow-murder of Libya's secular dictator Muammar Gaddafi a bloody demise cheered by the neocons has created new space for Islamic militants to expand their influence in northern Africa.

The neocons' only real argument for "success" is that their mischief-making over the last decade has inflicted so much violence and destruction in the Muslim world that the region's wealth and unity has been sapped, thus limiting how much

support can be provided to the embattled Palestinians.

Likewise, the shattered nation of Syria is now preoccupied with its own devastating civil war, leaving little time and money to bolster the Palestinians. But the neocon strategy to press for a military victory over Assad also carries grave risks. The Sunni-led rebellion against Assad, an Alawite representing a branch of Shiite Islam, has been an invitation for al-Qaeda militants to cross the border from Iraq into Syria, a move that was inevitable whether Assad surrendered or resisted.

Perhaps the best hope for Syria would have been for the opposition to have entered into serious power-sharing negotiations in 2011, but then the scent of outright victory was too strong. The opposition's hubris urged on by American neocons who smelled Assad's blood overwhelmed any thoughts of reconciliation. The view was that the only viable solution required ousting Assad and eradicating any remnants of the Assad dynasty.

But that uncompromising position spread fear among many of Iraq's Alawites, Shiites and Christians who foresaw possible revenge from Sunni extremists. The hardline rebel stance also forced the Assad regime to stiffen its spine and push back against the gains of the rebels. The prospect of another "Western-engineered" ouster of an Arab leader following the violent "regime change" in Iraq and Libya also raised alarms in Iran and Russia as well as inside Lebanon's Hezbollah Shiite militias.

### **An Internationalized Conflict**

Iran and Russia stepped up military supplies and Hezbollah dispatched reinforcements, enabling Assad's forces to gain the upper hand. That, in turn, drew in even more al-Qaeda and other Sunni militants. Journalists from the region are now reporting that these extremists have emerged as the dominant military force among the rebels.

Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt reported for the New York Times that "As foreign fighters pour into Syria at an increasing clip, extremist groups are carving out pockets of territory that are becoming havens for Islamist militants, posing what United States and Western intelligence officials say may be developing into one of the biggest terrorist threats in the world today."

Similarly, Liz Sly reported for the Washington Post that "A rebranded version of Iraq's al-Qaeda affiliate is surging onto the front lines of the war in neighboring Syria, expanding into territory seized by other rebel groups and carving out the kind of sanctuaries that the U.S. military spent more than a decade fighting to prevent in Iraq and Afghanistan."

So, like a case of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, the neocons have helped whip up another new flood of trouble in the Middle East. But the neocons are not about to accept blame for the mess that is now sloshing around Syria. Thus, an alternative narrative is necessary: that it's all President Obama's fault for not committing the U.S. military to another invasion of a Muslim nation.

That is indeed the new conventional wisdom spreading across Official Washington: If only Obama had dispatched the U.S. Air Force to shoot down Syrian planes and bomb government troop positions while also arming the anti-Assad rebels with modern weapons all would be well. The opposition would have prevailed and a pro-Western (and pro-Israeli) democracy would be governing Syria.

Instead, according to this conventional wisdom, Obama dithered, dragging his heels on committing U.S. warplanes and weapons, even now only approving some light weapons if they can be channeled to carefully vetted moderate elements of the opposition.

But the neocon narrative ignores how messy and how dangerous a violent overthrow of another Arab government would have been. There would have been no assurance that the Sunni-led rebels would not have taken bloody revenge on the Alawites, Shiites and Christian sects that have been the backbone of Assad's regime.

There likely would have been Libyan-style chaos with Islamic militants still swarming into Syria to fill the political void. Indeed, the outcome might well have been the establishment of an Islamist regime representing the country's Sunni majority, replacing the relatively secular Assad government backed by the various Muslim and Christian minorities.

If indeed such an expectation would have been more realistic than the neocons' rosy scenario, Obama could be criticized more for his failure to press the Syrian rebels into accepting some power-sharing compromise with Assad's forces in 2011 or 2012 when the opposition's prospects were brighter.

However, Obama was involved in a bitter reelection battle with Republican Mitt Romney, who was assiduously courting the Israelis and portraying Obama as lacking sufficient ardor for the Jewish state. By the time Obama was sworn in for a second term in 2013, the battlefield had begun to swing toward Assad's advantage.

When the Obama administration did begin a push for a negotiated settlement this year, Assad was quick to agree but the splintered rebel coalition balked, demanding instead an escalation of military support from the West so the war could be tilted again into the rebels' favor.

That wishful thinking, however, has expanded the opening for al-Qaeda and other

Sunni extremists, a development that was always predictable but one that the neocons don't want blamed on them. Thus, the new conventional wisdom pinning the evolving Syrian disaster on Obama.

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](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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## '42' and 44

**From the Archive:** American rightists and many Republicans continue to treat President Obama with a personal disrespect that reeks of racism: hoisting signs about his "Kenyan birth," laughing at him as a rodeo clown, wishing for his impeachment hostility that recalls the reaction to other African-American "firsts," Robert Parry wrote last May.

By Robert Parry (Published on May 29, 2013)

In telling the story of Jackie Robinson's personal challenge breaking baseball's color barrier in 1947, the movie "42" does not air-brush the ugliness of how the United States reacted to the integration of its "national pastime." But one has to wonder if there will be "44," a movie recognizing how racism has surrounded Barack Obama's breaking of an even bigger color barrier as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

What was impressive about "42" was that the movie took you back in time a not-all-that-distant past, certainly a recognizable America when hurling racial epithets at a black man was considered acceptable behavior by many baseball fans. The behavior is jarring to today's audience but surely not unbelievable.

Many of us lived through the days when our black-and-white TVs showed white protesters heckling black children integrating all-white schools; when Southern states still had their "white only" toilets and water fountains; when using the "n-word" was common even among many white Northerners.

So, seeing fans and other players baiting Jackie Robinson with various slurs in "42" fit with what we knew about those times. But it wasn't just the audible

taunts from overt racists that were troubling but the collective booing that Robinson endured when he came up to bat. It was disturbing how otherwise normal people could be pulled into such expressions of hatred toward a visiting ballplayer with dark skin.

There were, of course, other storylines in "42": the courageous stand taken by Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey in defying the white-only traditions of Major League Baseball and the supportive behavior of some of Robinson's teammates who stood by him in defiance of the verbal abuse.

The movie also has a satisfying ending in which Robinson emerges as a genuine American hero honored today as entire teams celebrate the anniversary of his entrance into the league by all wearing "42" jerseys. Robinson's racist detractors are viewed historically as disgraced figures.

Yet, what has been remarkable about the Barack Obama story is that not only have right-wingers subjected him to racially coded slights questioning his birthplace, calling him "Muslim" and challenging his legitimacy as president but even some progressives and centrists feel free to insult him.

Though most of these detractors would insist that they are not disparaging Obama because he's black and some would claim that their ease in disparaging him is somehow proof that they are not racist he has undeniably been treated with extraordinary disrespect, far out of line from his performance as president, especially one who was left with the burden of two unfinished wars and a broken economy.

### **Birther Slurs**

And the insults haven't stopped. Some Republican leaders, who winked and nodded at the "birther" slurs, are now suggesting that Obama should be impeached or at least ignored for the next three years because of a few petty "scandals" that the Republicans have ginned up all the better to prove to their "base" that he was never fit to be president in the first place.

"I think he's really losing the moral authority to lead this nation," declared Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky.

And it's not just the Right. Some on the Left and in the Center are ruder toward Obama presumably because he has failed to meet some especially high standard than they were even to catastrophic presidents like George W. Bush.

Though many of these progressives, liberals and centrists won't admit it now, they were somewhat intimidated by the nastiness of the right-wing machine that demanded respect for Bush's "legitimacy" even though he lost Election 2000 and

had to be installed by his brother's friends in Florida and his father's friends on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Newspapers, including the New York Times and the Washington Post, fell over themselves in pretending that Bush really did prevail in Florida although their own unofficial recount determined that Al Gore would have won if all ballots considered legal under Florida law were counted. [For details on the recount, see Neck Deep.]

Even as President Bush stumbled over his words and gave speeches that bordered on incoherence, he still got more respect than Obama, whose oratorical skills are as impressive as the baseball talents that Jackie Robinson displayed on the field.

Still, some columnists, such as the New York Times Maureen Dowd, have found endless numbers of contradictory reasons to fault Obama's performance. In one column, Obama will be blamed for not schmoozing enough with Republicans (he's "President Standoffish"); in another, he's not enough of a bully; in yet another, he's not connecting with the important people of Washington, presumably including Dowd.

In her April 20 column entitled "No Bully in the Pulpit," Dowd concluded, after the failure of gun control legislation in the U.S. Senate, that "Unfortunately, he still has not learned how to govern. [H]e doesn't know how to work the system. And it's clear now that he doesn't want to learn, or to even hire some clever people who can tell him how to do it or do it for him."

Obama's "failure" on gun control was explained as a failure to twist arms (as well as his failure to charm the Republicans). Left out of this equation was the obvious reality that the Republicans remain determined to destroy Obama's presidency and that the National Rifle Association won't let anyone pry Congress from the NRA's cold dead hand.

Dowd's sophomoric comparisons to Lyndon Johnson's success in pushing through important social legislation in the 1960s miss the equally obvious facts that the Democrats then had overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate and that the Republicans included many moderates who favored effective governance.

Dowd doesn't seem capable of placing blame on Republican obstructionism or noting how the GOP won't be moved regardless of how nice or how rude Obama is. In my view, one of Obama's biggest mistakes in 2009 was his time-wasting courting of Republican "moderate" Sen. Olympia Snowe on health-care reform. She still voted no.

In the commentaries on Obama, Dowd writes as if she were attending a Brooklyn

Dodgers away-game in 1947 and decided that the fans were booing because Jackie Robinson was batting under .300 in his rookie season. But perhaps most offensive is Dowd's nastiness toward Obama's character. Her tone has the unmistakable attitude of elite racism.

In a May 25 column, Dowd fawningly quotes historian Robert Draper making some clever but facile contrast between Bush-43 and Obama-44. As Dowd and Draper visited Bush's new library together, Draper says: "So 43 grew up entitled but could display a commoner's touch, while 44 grew up hardscrabble yet developed this imperial mien. The former is defined by incuriosity, the latter by self-absorption. They can each make you kind of miss the other."

Apparently, neither historian Draper nor columnist Dowd can put Obama in the historical context of his not only being the first African-American president but his having grown up in societies both the United States and Indonesia where a mixed-race son of a white woman was frowned upon or worse.

People who knew his mother in Indonesia have commented about how the young Obama behaved stoically when he was insulted on the streets of Indonesia and even pelted with stones. The racial discrimination may have been more subtle in the United States but no one can be so dense as to not understand the ingrained racist attitudes in this country as well.

Many youngsters would burn with deep resentment toward such treatment or they would be diminished by it but Obama has always managed to restrain himself and rise above the abuse. Though he is a proud and accomplished man, he has never stooped to the level of his detractors.

When he has shown flashes of anger, such as when he skewered the billionaire bigot Donald Trump at the 2011 White House Correspondents Dinner, he has done so with style and humor. Obama doesn't appear to hold a grudge even when he has every right to, apparently a lesson of a young black man growing up in an America that often puts angry young black men in prison.

### **Recalling Bill Russell**

When I think of Obama, I also recall the resentment that Boston Celtics great Bill Russell still feels toward the city where he won basketball championships year after year. Russell's lingering anger seems directed mostly at the white Boston press and with good reason.

In 1966, after Russell was named the Celtics player-coach the first African-American coach in the National Basketball Association one clueless reporter disproved the old maxim that "there are no stupid questions, only stupid answers." The reporter asked Russell if, as a black man, he could

treat white players fairly or whether he would engage in reverse discrimination.

Russell answered the question politely, assuring the moron that he would have no problem treating black and white players equally. Why this question was truly stupid and indeed racist was that no white reporter would have thought to ask a white coach if he could treat his black players fairly.

There is a similarity in how white commentators, like Maureen Dowd, write about Obama. He is held to some weird standard of perfection that would never be applied to a Ronald Reagan or a George W. Bush plus the racial factor of Obama's detractors is whited-out of the story.

In behaving this way, Dowd may think she is looking beyond the long and dreary history of American racism, but she is really just another white journalist missing the most important part of the Obama narrative: how he is one more in a long line of gifted black Americans the political equivalent of Jackie Robinson and Bill Russell who must not only overcome the challenges of a difficult job but must do so while white people act as if being black in America is no big deal.

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