

Big Media Again Pumps for Mideast Wars

Exclusive: Official Washington's neocons still influence U.S. foreign policy despite their Iraq War disaster. Forever pushing what they view as Israel's strategic needs, the neocons now are stoking fires of war against Iran and Syria by piling on old and new arguments, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Journalistically, there's a problem with [this passage](#) from Monday's New York Times: "Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon of Israel castigated Iran as being dedicated to a nuclear weapon and acting to deceive, and he repeated Israel's warning that it would not allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon." Can you tell what the flaw is?

If the New York Times were acting in a professional and objective manner, the next line would have read something like: "Of course, Israel itself developed a nuclear bomb in secret decades ago and now has possibly the most sophisticated undeclared nuclear arsenal on earth." But the Times chose not to remind its readers of Israel's stunning hypocrisy as a rogue nuclear-armed state condemning Iran for supposedly harboring a desire for a nuke, a weapon that Iran doesn't have and says it doesn't want.

That sort of double standard is common in the mainstream U.S. news media when reporting on Israel and its Muslim adversaries. But to let an Israeli official get away with castigating Iran for contemplating something that Israel has already done without mentioning the hypocrisy is a clear violation of journalistic standards. Indeed, it is evidence of bias.

Meanwhile, the neocon editors of the Washington Post are continuing their new campaign to pressure President Barack Obama into issuing more military ultimatums to Syria, another Israeli "enemy." The logic seems to be that if Obama keeps issuing ultimatums eventually Syria won't comply or won't be able to comply, thus creating a *casus belli*, much as when President George W. Bush demanded that Iraq surrender WMD that it didn't have.

In a double-barreled blast on Tuesday, the Post published [a lead editorial](#) and then [a separate op-ed](#) by its editorial-page editor Fred Hiatt making essentially the same argument that Obama's diplomacy over Syria has failed and that it's time for more military threats or even a military intervention in Syria's civil war. That "theme" was quickly picked up by other U.S. news outlets, including "liberal" MSNBC.

Yet, the real problem with Obama's Syria strategy is that it is still based on

his blustering pronouncements during Campaign 2012 when he was trying to sound tough in order to fend off the more hawkish, neocon rhetoric of Republican Mitt Romney.

During that period, Obama was drawing “red lines” regarding Syria and declaring that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad “must go.” Obama insisted that the purpose of any peace talks must be to dissolve Assad’s government and replace it with one organized by Assad’s opponents, in other words, Assad’s negotiated surrender.

But that was never realistic, however unsavory Assad and his regime might be. He still represents major segments of Syrian society, including blocs of Alawites (an offshoot of Shiite Islam) and Christians. Plus, the strongest part of the rebel movement, seeking Assad’s ouster, is the contingent of radical jihadists representing extreme Sunni groups, including some affiliated with al-Qaeda and some even more extreme who are vowing to exterminate the Alawites and other “heretics.”

Baiting Obama

In the midst of this complex and dangerous mix, the Post’s neocon editors are baiting Obama to stop being so weak, so “inert,” as Hiatt wrote.

On Sunday, the Post’s editors demanded that Obama issue a new military ultimatum regarding delays in Assad’s delivery of chemical weapons to a UN agency for destruction. On Tuesday, the argument was that Obama must intervene militarily to prevent Syria from becoming a base for al-Qaeda militants to plot attacks against the American “homeland.”

“Once again, terrorists linked to al-Qaeda may be using territory they control to plot attacks against the United States, even as [Secretary of State John] Kerry pursues his long-shot diplomacy and Mr. Obama offers excuses for inaction,” the Post’s editorial read.

“With or without U.N. action, it is time for the Obama administration to reconsider how it can check the regime’s crimes and the growing threat of al-Qaeda. As Mr. Kerry reportedly conceded, for now it has no answers.”

Hiatt reiterated the same points in his companion op-ed: “It is no secret that the Obama administration’s Syria policy, to the extent that one exists, is failing. Now the man with the unenviable task of implementing that policy, Secretary of State John F. Kerry, has acknowledged as much, according to two U.S. senators who spoke with him Sunday, John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.).

“Kerry said that the Geneva negotiating process hasn’t delivered, they said, and that new approaches are needed. Now, though, a new factor has emerged. Last week, in Senate testimony that got less attention than it deserved, Obama’s director of national intelligence, James Clapper, said Syria ‘is becoming a center of radical extremism and a potential threat to the homeland.’”

Hiatt continued: “Havens in Syria, in other words, could play the same role that Afghan refugees offered al-Qaeda before 9/11. As the West cold-shouldered moderate and secular forces, extremist ranks have swelled in Syria to as many as 26,000, including 7,000 foreigners, Clapper said.”

Not surprisingly, given the always-hawkish views of McCain and Graham, their proposed “new approaches” to this new threat involved military interventions in Syria. Graham wanted to unleash armed drones over the country, while McCain called for establishing “a safe zone in which to train the Free Syrian Army and care for refugees, protected by Patriot missiles based in Turkey,” Hiatt wrote.

Which Side?

Of course, a big part of the Syrian problem is that al-Qaeda-connected extremists are fighting as part of the rebel coalition against Assad’s army. Indeed, the jihadists are considered, by far, the most effective part of the rebel force. To a significant degree, the Sunni jihadists funded and armed by Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states are the rebel army.

In other words, the semantic trick that the Post is pulling off is to conflate the existence of al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria with the Syrian government when they are actually on opposite sides, bitterly fighting one another. The Post’s argument is a bit like blaming Fidel Castro for harboring al-Qaeda operatives in Cuba without mentioning that they are locked up at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo and thus outside Castro’s control.

Currently, the Syrian government is engaged in a brutal campaign to root out these “terrorists” as well as other armed rebels and is killing lots of civilians in the process. While there may be no easy solution to this catastrophe, the idea of another U.S. military intervention could easily lead to even more death and destruction.

As Hiatt noted, “Obama has doubted that the United States could intervene in such a messy conflict without making things worse. He reportedly worries that even a limited commitment would inexorably suck the nation into something deeper. There certainly is no public clamor to intervene.”

But lack of public support for another Mideast war is no concern to Hiatt and other Post editors who have never really apologized for helping to mislead

the American people into the Iraq invasion which resulted in the deaths of nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Indeed, the Iraqi bloodbath – initiated by President Bush and promoted by the neocons – has already been forgotten, as the Post cited the Syrian civil war as the worst humanitarian disaster since the Rwanda genocide in the 1990s, jumping over the Iraqi carnage of the past decade.

Now, Hiatt and the other neocons are promoting “themes” designed to maneuver Obama into another Mideast conflict, pushing the hot button of al-Qaeda “refuges” as if Assad is protecting the extremists, not trying to kill them.

Yet, if preventing al-Qaeda from establishing a safe haven in Syria is now the top U.S. concern and not just the latest neocon excuse for another U.S. invasion of a Muslim country then a more logical approach might be to seek a power-sharing arrangement between Assad’s government and the more moderate opposition, creating a united front against the jihadists.

Such an agreement could be followed by a coordinated strategy to rid Syria of these extremists. Obama also might put the squeeze on the Saudis and other oil-rich sheiks to stop funding the Sunni jihad inside Syria.

But the U.S. insistence that Assad negotiate his own surrender especially when his forces have gained the upper hand militarily will simply ensure more fighting and killing, while the neocons ramp up their pressure on Obama for one more “regime change.”

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](#).

Fear Itself: Democrats Duck FDR’s Lessons

The lessons of Franklin Roosevelt are relevant today, especially the need for an activist government to “promote the general Welfare” by investing in infrastructure and combating the power of “organized money.” But many Democrats shy away from the debate, says Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

Last Thursday Jan. 30 was the 132nd anniversary of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's birth. You'd think that the Democratic Party would celebrate the occasion: the birth of the Democratic president who led the nation out of the worst economic crisis in its history, who guided the country through a catastrophic global war, who fulfilled the constitutional mandate on the federal government to "provide for the general Welfare," and who devised the policies that helped create the Great American Middle Class while also stabilizing the capitalist system.

"No president since the founders has done more to shape the character of American government," notes historian Alan Brinkley in his biography of Roosevelt. "No president since Lincoln served through darker or more difficult times. The agenda of postwar American liberalism was set out by FDR in 1944, when he called for an 'economic bill of rights.'"

Nicholas Lemann in his review of Ira Katznelson's book, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, reminds us that during Roosevelt's first term the threat of fascism was real, that "alternate systems were on the verge of imposing themselves by force on many other countries."

Yet, by the counter-force of his personal will and his creative policies, Roosevelt steered America and arguably the world away from that abyss. But modern Democrats are hesitant to celebrate the contributions of FDR and his New Deal.

These days, the Democratic Party acts more like an enabler of the Republican Party as it seeks to poison the memory of the 32nd president and bury the significance of what FDR accomplished. Instead of highlighting Roosevelt's remarkable legacy, today's Democrats seem afraid to argue the point that government is vital to a successful society. They shy away from that debate despite the fact that the lessons of Roosevelt are central to solving the problems that the nation faces in 2014.

Besides the mainstream Democrats and their timidity, many average Americans suffer from "terminal historical amnesia" and appear oblivious of the history of FDR's era. Too many who came of age in the years of Ronald Reagan (and after Reagan) bought into his idiom that "government is the problem" and his prescription of "trickle-down economics" (giving massive tax cuts to the rich and trusting that their investments and spending will spill over to raise the living standards of working- and middle-class Americans).

For some Americans, it doesn't even matter that Reagan's nostrums have failed miserably, as today's rich have amassed huge wealth and the power that goes with

it while pretty much everyone else has stagnated or lost ground.

Still, an appreciation of FDR's accomplishments and a recognition of Reagan's mistakes are alive among serious historians. When 238 participating presidential scholars took part in the Siena College Research Institutes Survey of U.S. Presidents in 2010, Franklin Roosevelt ranked as the top all-time chief executive. Ronald Reagan was not even in the top ten.

If only that awareness could penetrate Official Washington's conventional wisdom. Though President Barack Obama has highlighted the problem of income inequality, which Roosevelt ameliorated and which Reagan exacerbated, Obama has shied away from making the forceful argument that Reagan was just a skillful front man for the same forces of "organized money" that Roosevelt fought.

Obama also has failed to dislodge the resistance to activist government that is represented by Republicans, the Tea Party and the Right and some analysts wonder if Obama and the Democrats really want to do so.

Economics professor Richard D. Wolff says "Obama and most Democrats are so dependent on contributions and support from business and the rich that they dare not discuss, let alone implement, the kinds of policies Roosevelt employed the last time U.S. capitalism crashed."

The Republican Party and many of these corporatist Democrats would have the United States regress to that earlier, more primitive time, the days before Roosevelt. But look more closely at the inequities of the 1920s – and the era's reckless capitalism that drove the country into the Great Depression. You won't like what you see.

Yet, corporatist Democrats have let the Right get away with re-writing this history, canonizing Reagan as the "greatest president ever" (with his name etched into government buildings and his statue outside public facilities across the country), while consigning Roosevelt to a second-tier status (even questioning the effectiveness of his efforts to pull the nation out of the Great Depression).

Salvaging that history as well as its important lessons about the necessity of government action on behalf of the people to counterbalance the destructive excesses of the "market" can be the beginning of a crucial debate about where the United States is heading now and where it should go in the future.

That debate can start with our remembering one leader who dared to challenge an unjust status quo, someone who fearlessly fought the power of "organized money" and who helped save the American Republic. Some of us do remember.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[FDR's Legacy of Can-Do Government.](#)"]

Beverly Bandler's public affairs career spans some 40 years. Her credentials include serving as president of the state-level League of Women Voters of the Virgin Islands and extensive public education efforts in the Washington, D.C. area for 16 years. She writes from Mexico. As full disclosure, she notes that she considers herself a member of the "Democratic wing" of the Democratic Party, but a U.S. citizen first.

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Hugo Chavez's Legacy at Risk

Exclusive: Over the past generation, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez changed the political dynamics of Latin America with a socialist experiment that spread the wealth and improved the lives of the poor. But nearly a year after Chávez's death, his movement is in jeopardy, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

Fifteen years into Venezuela's Chavista socialist revolution and almost a year since the death of its charismatic founder Hugo Chávez the movement's new leader, President Nicolás Maduro, is running out of time to consolidate a sustainable political and economic regime.

His most immediate ticking clock is 2016 when the opposition will likely try to force a recall referendum to remove Maduro from power. Assuming Maduro survives that, Chavismo will face another test when Maduro's presidential term ends in 2019.

At this point, the survival of Chavismo is almost entirely dependent on public opinion. Under Maduro, it has few repressive tools to wield and thus needs to retain the loyalty of the nation's poor and, at least, the partial support of the middle class.

Maduro's challenge since he took power after the death of President Chávez on March 5, 2013 has been to prove Chavismo is a mature enough movement that it can outlive its founder. The old tactic of blaming foreign and oligarchic enemies for waging an "economic war" against the revolution will probably not be enough to win another election. Maduro barely survived the last two electoral tests.

Simply put, the Chavista socialist regime will not survive unless Maduro can bring economic sustainability to the revolution that he inherited. Facing an economy in shambles, he has two years to get things in order and convince the electorate that better days are ahead, all while facing significant internal and external pressures. If he fails, the opposition will surely try to gut the Chavistas' share-the-oil-wealth approach.

Beyond relying on Venezuela's oil resources, Maduro must show skills in managing the economy to benefit most of the nation's nearly 30 million people, especially the hard-hit middle class. If Maduro continues to lose middle-class support in the cities, he will find it hard to prevail by relying on Chavismo's strength in the countryside.

Maduro, like Chávez, has accused Venezuela's traditional ruling elites and their foreign backers of trying to undermine the revolution. But populist price controls and currency strategies meant to counter this so-called "economic war" are failing to improve the lot of many middle-class supporters of Chavismo who are losing faith that Maduro can carry on the movement effectively.

Inflation rose more than 50 percent in 2013; crime is at record levels; and the value of the bolivar has plunged. As oil revenues decline, Venezuela's dollar reserves have shrunk to a 10-year low, even as demands for more public spending grow. At this point, Venezuela is spending more than it earns, which might not be a problem except the economy is forecast to keep shrinking and along with it the quality of life for the average Venezuelan.

Amid these economic troubles, markets are demanding a higher premium for Venezuelan debt than that of Argentina and even Greece. Foreign investment is drying up, and international creditors namely the Chinese doubt Maduro's promises to deliver meaningful economic reforms and a more stable security for investment.

So the squeeze is on Maduro and Chavismo. Either Maduro controls inflation, stops the plunging value of the currency and jump-starts the economy or Venezuelans are unlikely to hand him another electoral mandate. And two years might not be enough time to convince disenchanted voters that a turnaround is underway.

In short, Chavismo appears to be cracking under the combination of economic and political pressures. Plus, Maduro lacks the personal charisma of Chávez, which often was the glue that held the movement together. Yet, while fissures are appearing in the Chavista bloc, the opposition is united in a single-minded priority: end Chavismo.

A Two-Year Respite

Still, Maduro was granted a year to rule by decree and eked out a slim margin of victory in municipal elections last December. So, he has about two years to address the nation's troubles before voters will likely deliver a verdict on whether to extend his mandate.

Venezuela is also a very wealthy country, thanks to 2.8 million barrels of oil per day that it produces. According to government estimates, it also possesses the world's biggest reserves, some 297 billion barrels. During the last decade, Chávez used this vast oil wealth to significantly increase public spending. Cutting back that spending would be unpopular with many Venezuelans who were mostly shut out from the oil riches under the old oligarchy.

Much of the money has been spent to reduce Venezuela's poverty, achieving the most impressive results in all of South America. But corruption, cronyism and mismanagement are also rampant. Maduro pledged to stop wasteful spending at the start of his term but met resistance from his coalition, including the military. Thus, there has been little improvement.

And, Maduro must remember that the last time a Venezuelan government tried to seriously cut public handouts, including almost free fuel, Venezuelans revolted in a 1989 uprising known as the Caracazo, which eventually led to Ch avez sweeping to victory. So, Maduro will have to walk a fine line, trimming waste and tackling corruption within his ranks, while preserving the more successful welfare programs for the population.

Maduro has ruled out a devaluation of the currency, even if a dollar trades for 80 bolivares in the black market, compared to the official 6.3 rate, and the recently relaxed rate for travelers of around 11 per dollar. But achieving the necessary economic reforms without a devaluation will be difficult, especially as Venezuela's fiscal deficit increases and its credit dries up.

Venezuela also desperately needs to attract foreign investors, but Maduro would stir up widespread anger if he invited back in the big bad Western companies, which Chavismo regularly denounces. But Maduro also has failed to retain Chinese trust that the revolution will be able to pay its debts, a feat that Ch avez managed skillfully.

The Chinese government, in effect, has frozen additional credit for Venezuela, pending new rules to ensure proper controls over projects involving Chinese companies. Chinese companies, especially in the oil sector, also have frozen most investments until Venezuela pays for its part of the capital investments, but that money is lacking.

Without those investments, oil production will keep falling along with the revenue that Maduro needs to pay for public services. Of course, economic mismanagement is not new to Venezuela. But Ch avez was able to surf a wave of high oil prices to consolidate his regime's hold on power.

But even Ch avez realized in 2010 that his regime was vulnerable to shifts in public opinion. Without resources, Chavismo risked losing its hold. Thus, Ch avez implemented limited reforms to attract more foreign investors, diversify the economy and boost oil production.

However, as Ch avez's health deteriorated, the regime increased its populist spending to secure Maduro's electoral victory. But that left Venezuela in dire shape, made worse by the global macroeconomic climate, including the recent

flight of capital from emerging economies.

Maduro also will not get much sympathy from Venezuelan voters, many of whom are enduring a worsening quality of life. Indeed, if the economic crisis were to boil over into social turmoil, Venezuela's military, which is by no means a loyal servant of Maduro, could decide to restore order, as it did when ChÃavez was briefly deposed in 2002.

Confronted with all these difficulties and lacking ChÃavez's charisma, Maduro has resorted to more confrontational and bellicose rhetoric. Yet, after 15 years under Chavismo, there is a loss of enthusiasm among many longtime supporters, including some who find Maduro's words and style tiresome, lacking the excitement of ChÃavez.

So, Maduro has a two-year window to address the country's economic woes. If he doesn't, Chavismo the movement that has transformed Venezuela and much of Latin America over the past generation could end under his watch.

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