

What's the Matter with John Kerry?

Special Report: As a young warrior and senator, John Kerry stood up to politicians who spread propaganda that misled the public and got people killed. Now, as a 70-year-old Secretary of State, he has become what he once challenged, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

On Feb. 1, 2013, when John Kerry replaced Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, there might have been some reason to hope that the former Vietnam veteran against the war and the man who conducted serious investigations of U.S. national security crimes in the 1980s would bring some integrity and maturity to U.S. foreign policy, especially the need to avoid exaggerations and deceptions in pursuit of American interests.

After all, Kerry personally experienced the horrors of a war fought on false pretenses as a young Navy officer patrolling the rivers of South Vietnam. After winning the Silver Star, he returned home from the war and spoke eloquently against it, making his first significant mark as a public figure.

I got to know Kerry when I was an Associated Press reporter covering President Ronald Reagan's secret operations in Central America and found Kerry to be one of the few members of Congress with the courage to follow the facts into some very dark corners of U.S. government actions, including complicity with death squads, terrorists and drug traffickers.

But Kerry soon learned there was a political price to pay for courage and honesty. For his efforts to get at hard truths, such as Reagan's tolerance for cocaine smugglers in his beloved Nicaraguan Contra operation, Kerry was targeted by the right-wing press, especially The Washington Times, but also by smug mainstream outlets. For his investigative efforts, Newsweek's Conventional Wisdom Watch dubbed Kerry a "randy conspiracy buff." [For details, see Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#).]

So, when Kerry was eyeing a run for the White House in 2002, his political handlers persuaded him to vote to give President George W. Bush the authority to invade Iraq. And, after Kerry won the Democratic nomination in 2004, he chose to airbrush out of his résumé all his honorable actions against the Vietnam War and in standing up to Reagan's crimes. When he accepted the nomination, he snapped off a corny salute and declared, "reporting for duty."

After losing to Bush partly because Kerry shied away from confronting the ugly smears against his war record, including Republicans passing out "Purple Heart

Band-Aids” to mock his war wounds Kerry retreated back to the Senate where he repackaged himself as a bipartisan figure who cultivated Republican friends, such as neocon Sen. John McCain, a fellow Vietnam vet and – after 2008 – another failed nominee for President.

Which Kerry?

So, it wasn't clear which John Kerry would be “reporting for duty” when he got his “dream job” as Secretary of State. Would we see a return of the brave and honest John Kerry of the 1970s and 1980s, or would it be the political weather vane that swung to the prevailing winds as we saw since the 1990s?

When Kerry took over at Foggy Bottom, there was a desperate need for adult supervision of U.S. diplomacy globally. President Barack Obama's disastrous decision to staff much of his national security team with “a team of rivals” including Bush holdover Robert Gates at Defense, Hillary Clinton (a neocon-lite) at State and military officers like neocon-favorite Gen. David Petraeus meant that U.S. foreign policy deviated little from the broad outlines of Bush's neocon interventionism.

Though some of the big-name neocons had left government to work at influential think tanks or write op-ed articles for the Washington Post, there was a substantial stay-behind force, especially at State where Hillary Clinton shielded them and even promoted some, like Victoria Nuland who became department spokesperson.

The rhetoric changed a bit. The phrase “war on terror” was “out,” but much of its substance remained “in,” including drone killings. There was also a subtle change in how to justify “regime change” wars. It would be “democracy promotion” and “responsibility to protect,” not “preemptive wars” and claims about WMD.

Indeed, perhaps the most significant evolution in U.S. foreign policy in Obama's first term was the merger between the neocons and the liberal “humanitarian” interventionists. In effect, the ever-skillful neocons forged an alliance with these liberal hawks, the likes of Samantha Power and Susan Rice who were key advisers to Obama.

The chief tactical change was to rely on U.S.-funded “non-governmental organizations” to stir up disruptive protests against a target government. Then, when security forces struck back often clumsily and even brutally the “regime changers” could assert a “responsibility to protect” or “R2P.”

The new battlefield of this global propaganda warfare would be the release of YouTube videos showing (or purporting to show) atrocities committed by some embattled government against “innocent civilians.” The competition was to make

these videos “go viral” and stir up emotional reactions that would prompt demands from average people to “do something.”

Hawkish Clinton

Clinton’s State Department had been unapologetically hawkish. In 2009, Clinton joined with Gates and Petraeus to mousetrap Obama into a “surge” of 30,000 troops for Afghanistan, what turned out to be a pointless “counterinsurgency” campaign that got about 1,000 more U.S. troops killed without changing the conflict’s strategic arc toward failure.

In 2009-2010, Clinton also joined in ratcheting up the confrontation with Iran in line with the interests of Israel and the neocons. Clinton’s aggressiveness was encouraged, in part, by her State Department secretly engineering the elevation of Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano to head the International Atomic Energy Agency. The malleable Amano was in the U.S. government’s back pocket, ready to be pulled out as necessary to “prove” Iran’s bad faith regarding its nuclear program.

With Amano securely in place, Clinton spiked a solution to the Iranian nuclear dispute that had been arranged by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey at Obama’s urging. Instead of that deal which called for Iran surrendering most of its nuclear material in exchange for processed nuclear plates for medical research, Clinton opted for more sanctions against – and more tensions with – Iran, just as the neocons wanted.

But the clearest example of this new strategy was Libya where the forces of Muammar Gaddafi responded to violent protests, spearheaded by Islamic extremists based in the east around Benghazi, by launching a counteroffensive aimed at eliminating the “terrorist” threat.

However, guided by Secretary of State Clinton and foreign policy advisers Power and Rice, Obama was persuaded to commit U.S. and European forces supposedly to protect the civilian population in eastern Libya. But this “R2P” became just another excuse to undertake “regime change” against Gaddafi.

The West’s widespread bombing campaign, combined with covert military support for the rebels, devastated Gaddafi’s military and paved the way for a rebel victory. After being captured, Gaddafi was tortured and murdered, while Secretary Clinton was caught on video happily receiving the news of Gaddafi’s demise.

The Libyan “victory” was short-lived, however, as the country fell into chaos and under the sway of extremists. On Sept. 11, 2012, Islamic terrorists overran the U.S. consulate in Benghazi (housing a large CIA station) and killed four

Americans including Ambassador Christopher Stevens. Clinton called the incident her worst moment as Secretary of State.

Kerry: Old vs. New

So, when John Kerry replaced Hillary Clinton on Feb. 1, 2013, the State Department was in need of a responsible adult who would rein in the department's penchant for stirring up trouble and then looking on helplessly as the chaos spun out of control.

But which Kerry would show up? The young Kerry who recognized how belligerent talk and playing with facts could end up getting lots of innocent people killed or the older Kerry who had trimmed his sails and learned to go with the prevailing winds, regardless of the dangers to the world?

There are times at the end of a politician's career when the person reverts back to an earlier, more idealistic self, though more often a deeply compromised politician just continues doing what's been learned over the decades of political survival.

It's now clear that John Kerry fell into the latter approach. He did undertake a quixotic pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, perhaps hoping that success in such an impossible undertaking would be the "crown jewel" of his career, compensating for his 2004 defeat.

But Kerry also let himself be turned into a hand puppet for the neocons and R2Pers who had gained bureaucratic control of State and were set on escalating confrontations with Syria and Iran by essentially following the "regime change" blueprint designed by Vice President Dick Cheney and the neocons in the Bush-43 administration.

Influential neocons and R2Pers took command of key positions in 2013, as Kerry moved from Capitol Hill to Foggy Bottom and Obama entered his second term. Neocon Victoria Nuland was promoted from State Department spokesperson to Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. Susan Rice became National Security Adviser, and Samantha Power took over as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

The Sarin Attack

So, when a mysterious Sarin attack occurred outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, the State Department was eager to jump to the conclusion that the Syrian government was responsible. Despite doubts among U.S. intelligence analysts, Kerry chose not to ask too many questions or press for hard evidence.

Like a replay of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident that gave President Lyndon Johnson an excuse to escalate the war in Vietnam which a few years later put Kerry on a Swift Boat in rivers slicing through Vietnamese jungles Kerry hyped the case against Syria.

Kerry's Aug. 30 speech bordered on the hysterical in its tone as he repeatedly insisted that "we know" the Syrian government was responsible for the Sarin attack, though he refused to release any evidence that could be independently evaluated.

His speech was accompanied by a four-page "Government Assessment" that also offered no verifiable proof and looked to be an attempt to evade a more formal National Intelligence Estimate, a consensus view of the U.S. intelligence community which would have had to reveal any dissents from analysts. The "Government Assessment" simply ignored any challenges to the emerging "group think."

Kerry then took his belligerent message to Congress, where at one hearing his wife, heiress Teresa Heinz, sat behind him as he urged a military assault on Syria. Accompaniment by a spouse is usually reserved for confirmation hearings and is virtually unheard of when an official is seeking something as grave as launching a war.

Yet, while Kerry's wife was there, no one from the U.S. intelligence community was sitting near Kerry, presumably because a senior intelligence representative might have drawn a question about whether all U.S. analysts were onboard in blaming the Syrian government for the attack. The inconvenient answer would have been no.

Such a presence also might have stirred memories of CIA Director George Tenet sitting behind Secretary of State Colin Powell on Feb. 5, 2003, as Powell delivered his deceptive speech on Iraq's WMD.

While Kerry pounded the war drums, the two other witnesses at the table with him, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, were much more circumspect and somber. The tableau suggested that the Pentagon was less enthusiastic about war than Kerry and his diplomats.

Putin's Interference

The U.S. bombing campaign against Syria was finally averted when President Obama accepted a deal proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin that called for Syria surrendering its chemical weapons even as President Bashar al-Assad continued to deny any involvement in the Aug. 21 attack.

Obama's decision not to bomb Syria was treated as a betrayal by the neocons and the R2Pers. The editorial pages of the Washington Post and other leading newspapers were filled with criticism of Obama's lack of resolve.

But Obama seemed, briefly at least, to be working cooperatively with Putin to resolve some dangerous crises in the Middle East. Putin also helped arrange an interim agreement with Iran to impose constraints on its nuclear program but not eliminate its ability to use nuclear technological for peaceful purposes.

That move, too, infuriated the American neocons as well as Saudi Arabia and Israel which have long been trying to enlist the U.S. military in a massive bombing campaign against Iran, with hopes that the devastation could lead to more "regime change."

In November 2013, Kerry again showed up as an abettor of more confrontation with Iran. Dispatched to Geneva to sign the interim accord, Kerry consulted with the French, who were carrying water for their wealthy patrons in Saudi Arabia, and inserted some last-minute language which derailed the signing agreement. I'm told Obama then instructed Kerry to return to Geneva and sign the deal, which Kerry finally did.

These twin defeats infuriated the neocons who escalated their op-ed campaign against Obama's foreign policy of "appeasement." Key neocons also took aim at Putin by putting in their sights a country of particular sensitivity to Russia, neighboring Ukraine.

Aiming at Ukraine

In late September, as the neocon drive for bombing Syria was petering out, neocon Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), penned a Washington Post op-ed that called Ukraine "the biggest prize" and expressed hope that "Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

NED was founded in 1983 essentially to carry out the sorts of activities that traditionally were done by the CIA, i.e., supporting activists, "journalists" and other operatives who would be useful in destabilization campaigns against troublesome governments, all in the name of "democracy promotion." NED's annual report listed a staggering 65 projects in Ukraine.

By fall 2013, Kerry's State Department was committed to prying Ukraine loose from Russia's orbit, all the better to weaken Putin (and drive a wedge between him and Obama). At the forefront of this effort was Victoria Nuland, the wife of prominent neocon Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century which famously pushed the case for invading Iraq.

The Kagans are not just neocons but neocon royalty who can place op-eds in major newspapers at the snap of a finger. I've known Robert Kagan since he headed the Reagan administration's State Department propaganda office on Central America. He was the guy who told me that my skeptical reporting on the Reagan administration's claims could lead to me being "controversialized."

Robert's brother, Frederick, was an architect of both the Iraq War "surge" and the Afghan War "surge." Indeed, in his memoir, *Duty*, former Defense Secretary Gates says Frederick Kagan was the one who sold him on the Afghan "surge," which was then essentially imposed on Obama by his willful "team of rivals" Gates, Clinton and Petraeus in 2009.

By late 2013, Nuland, aided and abetted by Kerry's chum Sen. John McCain, was encouraging western Ukrainian protesters to challenge Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich over his refusal to sign a deal with Europe that would have included harsh austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Yanukovich had opted for a more generous \$15 billion aid package from Moscow.

Stirring Up Discontent

On Dec. 13 in a speech at the National Press Club, Nuland reminded Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested more than \$5 billion in Ukraine's "European aspirations" with the goal of taking "Ukraine into the future that it deserves," i.e., out of the Russian orbit and into a Western one.

Why the United States should be spending such large sums of money to create political turmoil in Ukraine has never been fully explained, short of the emotional appeals based on YouTube videos of attractive young people who took part in mass and sometimes violent demonstrations in Kiev's Maidan square against Yanukovich.

Clearly, it is true that all the Ukrainian governments that have held power since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 have been marred by corruption, but much of that was driven by the U.S.-prescribed "shock therapy" of "free market" extremism that allowed a handful of well-connected "oligarchs" to plunder the nation's wealth.

Yet, the U.S. policy prescription is to apply IMF "austerity," which further punishes the average citizen while leaving the "oligarchs" largely untouched.

As Nuland, McCain and other neocons stoked the fires of protest against Yanukovich, Ukrainian neo-Nazis moved to the front of the demonstrations, engaging in increasingly violent clashes with police. On Feb. 20, another murky incidence occurred in which snipers opened fire and killed a number of protesters and police. The U.S. government and Western media immediately put the

blame on Yanukovich although he denied giving such an order.

The Coup

On Feb. 21, Yanukovich sought to tamp down the violence by agreeing to an accord brokered by three European countries in which he agreed to reduce his powers, accept an early election so he could be voted out of office, and withdraw police forces. That last concession, however, prompted the neo-Nazi militias to overrun government buildings and force Yanukovich to flee for his life.

Then, without following constitutional procedures and with neo-Nazi storm troopers patrolling the buildings a rump parliament immediately "impeached" Yanukovich and elected Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who had been Nuland's choice to run the country. Far-right parties also were given four ministries in recognition of their crucial role in providing the armed militias who carried out the coup.

Rather than provide any objective coverage of events, the U.S. news media, led by the New York Times and Washington Post, behaved more as state propaganda organs, pushing the U.S. government's version and especially playing down the role of the neo-Nazis from Svoboda and the Right Sektor. Since the presence of swaggering neo-Nazis in the Maidan clashed with the preferred image of idealistic democratic youth, the brown shirts were essentially whited-out of the picture.

Only occasionally, in passing, do the major U.S. newspapers find themselves forced to mention the neo-Nazis: either while mocking "Russian propaganda" or when interviewing some of these rightists in other context. For instance, on April 6, the New York Times published a human-interest profile of a Ukrainian hero named Yuri Marchuk who was wounded in clashes around Kiev's Maidan square in February.

If you read deep into the story, you learn that Marchuk was a Svoboda leader from Lviv, which if you did your own research you would discover is a neo-Nazi stronghold where Ukrainian nationalists hold torch-light parades in honor of World War II Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera. Without providing that context, the Times does mention that Lviv militants plundered a government arsenal and dispatched 600 militants a day to do battle in Kiev.

Marchuk also described how these well-organized militants, consisting of paramilitary brigades of 100 fighters each, launched the fateful attack against the police on Feb. 20, the battle where Marchuk was wounded and where the death toll suddenly spiked into scores of protesters and about a dozen police.

Marchuk later said he visited his comrades at the occupied City Hall. What the

Times doesn't mention is that City Hall was festooned with Nazi banners and even a Confederate battle flag as a tribute to white supremacy.

The Times touched on the inconvenient truth of the neo-Nazis again on April 12 in an article about the mysterious death of neo-Nazi leader Oleksandr Muzychko, who was killed during a shootout with police on March 24. The article quoted a local Right Sektor leader, Roman Koval, explaining the crucial role of his organization in carrying out the anti-Yanukovych coup.

"Ukraine's February revolution, said Mr. Koval, would never have happened without Right Sector and other militant groups," the Times wrote. Yet, whenever that reality is mentioned by independent journalists it is denounced as "Russian propaganda."

New Cold War?

As tensions ratcheted up between the United States and Russia amid talk of a new Cold War there was a desperate need for a mature voice on the American side who would acknowledge some of the legitimate concerns of Moscow and the Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the east and south who had just witnessed neo-Nazis spearhead a coup against a democratically elected president from their region.

Kerry – who witnessed first-hand in Vietnam the kind of bloodbath that can result when the United States locks itself in to a one-sided propagandistic view of another country's complex reality – could have been that person. Instead, Kerry behaved like a neocon adolescent.

When the people of Crimea voted understandably and overwhelmingly to bail out of the failed Ukrainian state and rejoin Russia, Kerry insisted that it was a case of Russian aggression, declaring "you just don't in the 21st Century behave in 19th Century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext."

Kerry, of course, voted in 2002 to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq in pursuit of hidden WMD stockpiles that didn't exist, but the mainstream U.S. press corps politely left out that troubling fact while reporting Kerry's denunciation of Russia.

President Obama joined in with a slap at the Crimean referendum, calling it "sloppily organized." But he made no mention of the "sloppily organized" impeachment of Yanukovych, which is what precipitated the secession by the people of Crimea.

Also not surprisingly, with the coup regime in Kiev nearly bankrupt and unable to fund pensions and other social services, Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the

Donetsk area have begun to mount their own resistance to the imposition of undemocratic authority from Kiev. Of course, in this case, the U.S. news media treats the protesters as either delusional clowns or puppets of Moscow.

Again, someone like the young Kerry might have spoken up about the danger from unintended consequences when arrogant U.S. officials interfere in the internal affairs of another country. The young Kerry might have pondered how the Nuland-Gershman strategy of destabilizing Ukraine actually helps either the Ukrainians or the American people.

So far, the scheme holds the possibility of civil war in Ukraine, disastrous economic trouble for Europe (with fallout for the U.S. economy, too) and another splurge of U.S. military spending as bellicose politicians cut back even more on domestic priorities.

The younger Kerry might have been wise enough to cool the rhetoric and redirect the narrative into a realistic discussion that could resolve the crisis. For instance, it wouldn't have been very hard to insist that the Feb. 21 agreement be enforced with Yanukovich possibly serving in a ceremonial capacity until new elections could select a new president, rather than the U.S. and the EU immediately embracing a neo-Nazi-led coup.

But the older Kerry is behaving much like the older generation of Cold Warriors did in the 1960s when they insisted that there was no choice other than a U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, that the lives of tens of thousands of young American men and millions of Vietnamese was a small price to pay to stop some imaginary dominoes from toppling. South Vietnam had to be kept in the "free world."

Yet, rather than the dovish warrior of his youth, Kerry has become a hawkish diplomat in his old age, refusing to see the other side's case and eager to take extreme positions that are sure to get more young people killed. John Kerry in his 20s was a much wiser man than John Kerry at age 70.

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](#).
