

Obama's True Foreign-Policy 'Weakness'

Special Report: President Obama has shied away from confronting Washington's neocons who continue to exercise undue influence at think tanks, on op-ed pages and even inside Obama's administration. With the new Iraq crisis, Obama's timidity is coming back to haunt him, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A favorite neocon meme about President Barack Obama is that he is "weak" because he failed to bomb Syria, bomb Iran, sustain the U.S. occupation of Iraq and start a full-scale economic war with Russia over Ukraine. But an alternate way of looking at Obama is that he is weak because he has failed to face down the neocons.

Since the start of his presidency, Obama has let the neocons and their "liberal interventionist" allies push him into militaristic and confrontational policies even as he is criticized for not being militaristic and confrontational enough. There was the futile "surge" in Afghanistan, the chaotic "regime change" in Libya, excessive hostility toward Iran, intemperate demands for "regime change" in Syria, and hyperbolic denunciations of Russia for its reaction to U.S.-backed "regime change" in Ukraine.

The end result of all this U.S. "tough-guy/gal-ism" has been to get a lot of people killed without actually improving the lot of the people in the countries where the neocon-driven policies have been applied. In each of those cases, a more pragmatic approach to the political and strategic concerns represented by those crises could have saved lives and averted economic pain that only has fed more disorder.

Yet, Obama remains hypersensitive to criticism from well-placed and well-connected neocons. As the New York Times reported on June 16, Obama shaped his foreign policy speech at the West Point graduation in May to deflect criticism from a single neocon, Robert Kagan, who had penned a long and pedantic essay in The New Republic urging the projection of more U.S. power around the world.

In the essay, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire," Kagan "depicted President Obama as presiding over an inward turn by the United States that threatened the global order and broke with more than 70 years of American presidents and precedence," wrote the Times' Jason Horowitz. "He called for Mr. Obama to resist a popular pull toward making the United States a nation without larger responsibilities, and to reassume the more muscular approach to the world out of vogue in Washington since the war in Iraq drained the country of its appetite for intervention."

As part of Obama's effort to deflect this neocon critique, "the president even invited Mr. Kagan to lunch to compare world views," Horowitz reported.

Kagan apparently sees himself as a vanguard for a new wave of U.S. interventionism, teamed up with his brother Frederick who devised the two "surges" in Iraq in 2007 and Afghanistan in 2009. Robert Kagan is also married to Victoria Nuland, the assistant secretary of state for European affairs who helped promote the February "regime change" in Ukraine.

According to the Times article, the husband-and-wife team share both a common world view and professional ambitions, Nuland editing Kagan's articles and Kagan "not permitted to use any official information he overhears or picks up around the house" a suggestion that Kagan's thinking at least may be informed by foreign policy secrets passed on by his wife.

Though Nuland wouldn't comment specifically on Kagan's attack on President Obama, she indicated that she holds similar views. "But suffice to say," Nuland said, "that nothing goes out of the house that I don't think is worthy of his talents. Let's put it that way."

Counting on Hillary Clinton

Kagan also has hopes that his neocon views which he prefers to call "liberal interventionist" will have an even stronger standing in a possible Hillary Clinton administration. After all, not only did Secretary of State Clinton promote his wife, Clinton also named Kagan to one of her State Department advisory boards.

According to the Times' article, Clinton "remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes." Kagan is quoted as saying: "I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy. If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue it's something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else."

Though Obama personally advocates a more multilateral approach to foreign policy including "leading from behind" as one aide famously explained the President allowed the neocons to retain great influence inside his own administration.

After winning the election in 2008, he opted for a "team of rivals" approach that put the hawkish Hillary Clinton at State, retained Republican Defense Secretary Robert Gates and kept George W. Bush's high command, including neocon-favorite Gen. David Petraeus.

That fateful decision meant Obama never asserted personal control over his foreign policy, in part, because Gates, Petraeus and Clinton formed a kind of iron triangle to promote neocon strategies. In his memoir *Duty*, Gates said he and Clinton agreed on most issues and could push them in the face of White House opposition because “we were both seen as ‘un-fireable.’”

For instance, they teamed up in support of the ill-conceived Afghan “surge” of 2009 which was devised by neocon theorist Frederick Kagan who sold this “counterinsurgency” plan to Gates. The “surge” led to another 1,000 or so U.S. deaths and many more Afghans killed without changing the trajectory of that ill-fated war. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?”](#)]

The neocons and “liberal interventionists” carried the day on other key policy decisions, such as the U.S.-supported bombing campaign over Libya in 2011. The aerial bombardments broke the back of Muammar Gaddafi’s security forces but also shattered the country’s political cohesion. After Gaddafi was ousted and murdered, radical jihadists seized control over much of the country (and killed four American diplomatic personnel in Benghazi).

At other points, Obama bought into the neocon narrative but dragged his heels about following their policy prescriptions. In Syria, Obama talked tough, saying President Bashar al-Assad “must go” and pushed the interventionist notion of helping “moderate” rebels, but Obama limited the U.S. role after recognizing that the Sunni-dominated insurgents had veered increasingly into radicalism.

Obama’s middling approach provoked heavy criticism from the neocons and the “liberal interventionists” who wanted him to intervene more aggressively in Syria by sending sophisticated weaponry to the “moderate rebels.” Obama also was excoriated for not launching a massive bombing campaign to destroy Assad’s military after a disputed chemical weapons incident outside Damascus last summer.

Turning to Putin

Instead, Obama accepted help from Russia’s President Vladimir Putin to defuse the Syrian crisis by getting Assad to surrender his chemical weapons. But Obama’s halfway approach wouldn’t let him challenge administration hawks who treated Geneva negotiations for a Syrian political settlement as just another excuse to demand Assad’s departure.

Yet, based on this month’s elections, which Assad won handily, the Syrian president appears to retain a substantial base of support among Alawites, Shiites, Christians and other minorities as well as some secular Sunnis. Many Syrians seem to view Assad as the bulwark against a victory by radical Sunni

jihadists who have flocked to Syria from around the Middle East with funding from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Persian Gulf states.

But Robert Kagan and the neocons see a new vulnerability for Obama now that the Sunni-jihadist war in Syria has spilled back into Iraq where an al-Qaeda spinoff, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, first emerged in reaction to President Bush's neocon-inspired invasion in 2003. ISIS is spearheading an offensive that has routed the U.S.-supplied Iraqi army from key cities in the country's north and west.

Referring to Obama's completion of the U.S. military withdrawal in 2011 and his tepid response to the Syrian civil war, Kagan told the Times that "It's striking how two policies driven by the same desire to avoid the use of a military power are now converging to create this burgeoning disaster."

The neocons are also apoplectic about the prospect of the Obama administration cooperating with Shiite-ruled Iran to bolster the Shiite-led government of Iraq. The neocons, along with Israel and Saudi Arabia, consider Iran their top enemy in the Middle East.

For years, the neocons have been hyping the threat of Iran's nuclear program as a rationalization to bomb Iran. They have been rooting for negotiations that would constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions to fail so the route to war would be opened, much as Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wants.

Since Russian President Putin helped avert a U.S. war against Syria and cooperated on negotiations for limiting Iran's nuclear program, he now has emerged as the neocons' most dangerous adversary on the global stage. And last year, the neocons quickly identified a Putin vulnerability in Ukraine.

Prominent neocons including National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and Sen. John McCain were at the forefront of agitation in Ukraine to overthrow the elected President Viktor Yanukovich and install a rightist regime hostile both to Russia and to Ukraine's large ethnic Russian population.

The Feb. 22 coup in Kiev and subsequent anti-Russian actions by the coup regime prompted the regional authorities in Crimea to hold a referendum seceding from Ukraine and rejoining Russia, a move that Putin supported.

Crimea's secession prompted hysteria across Official Washington, which billed the move as "Russian aggression." As the rest of Ukraine descended into a nasty civil war, the neocons pushed for a new Cold War against Russia, including broad economic sanctions designed to undermine Putin by destabilizing nuclear-armed Russia. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis.](#)"]

'Chaos Promotion'

The neocons and the "liberal interventionists," of course, couch all this chaos promotion as "democracy promotion," even when their efforts involve overthrowing democratically elected leaders, like Yanukovych, and ignoring the will of the people, such as denying the desire of the Crimean people to escape the failed state of Ukraine and rejoin Russia. It seems elections are only valid when they come out the way the U.S. government prefers; otherwise, the elections are deemed "rigged."

These U.S. interventionists also talk about respect for international law except when the rules get in their way, such as when they launched the aggressive war against Iraq in 2003, a crime against peace that unleashed havoc and death across Iraq and now much of the Middle East.

This neocon mindset can best be understood as an intellectual outgrowth of the 1990s when the United States emerged as the sole superpower and U.S. military technology advanced to levels beyond the capabilities of any other nation.

Many neocons viewed this moment as a unique opportunity for Israel to move beyond frustrating negotiations with the Palestinians over peace and to dictate whatever terms it wished. The new watchword would be "regime change" against any country that presented a threat to Israel or that supported Israel's near-in enemies, Palestine's Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Once the Mideast was remade to isolate Hamas and Hezbollah, Israel could do or take whatever it wanted.

This neocon strategy first surfaced in 1996 when leading American neocons, such as Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, went to work for Netanyahu's campaign for prime minister. The U.S. neocons formalized their bold new plan in a strategy paper called "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm." The paper argued that only "regime change" in hostile Muslim countries could achieve the necessary "clean break" from the diplomatic standoffs that had followed inconclusive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

By 1998, the neocon-organized Project for the New American Century with Robert Kagan as one of the co-founders had targeted Iraq as the first Israeli enemy that would face "regime change," a strategy that became feasible once neocon-backed President George W. Bush took office in 2001 and after the 9/11 attacks generated a U.S. hunger for revenge against Arabs, even if against the wrong Arabs.

There was, of course, the need for a misleading sales job to snooker the American people. So, we were given the fiction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the lie about Iraq's Saddam Hussein teaming up with al-Qaeda's

Osama bin Laden, when the two were the bitterest of enemies, Hussein leading a secular Arab government and bin Laden representing a fundamentalist Islamic movement.

The neocon thinking apparently was that once the U.S. military won a smashing victory, the American people wouldn't really care about the excuses used to justify the war; they'd just be swept up in the excitement. But the bloody low-tech war that Iraqis fought against their foreign occupiers soured the American mood – and the absence of any WMD stockpiles angered much of the public.

Over the ensuing decade, the neocons have fought what amounts to a rear-guard action against their critics, a kind of strategic retreat with many key neocon operatives withdrawing to prominent think tanks (Kagan is at the Brookings Institution) and to important op-ed pages (Kagan has been a columnist at the Washington Post) while others (like Victoria Nuland) have behaved as a stay-behind force inside the government bureaucracy.

A Neocon Revival

Now, counting on the notoriously short memories of Americans and on the sympathy of the mainstream U.S. media (which also was complicit in Bush's Iraq invasion), the neocons are reemerging from their secure positions and mounting a counterattack against Obama, whom they identify as not being one of them, but rather a "realist" who is not averse to collaborating with Russia or Iran in the cause of achieving peace or reducing tensions.

The neocons appear to have Obama on the run, having strategically cut him off from his erstwhile ally Putin because of the Ukraine crisis and having tactically seized the high ground of the mainstream media to blast away at Obama over the Iraq crisis.

The neocons, after all, are skilled at the art of propaganda and "information warfare." Indeed, I first met Robert Kagan when he was working as a propagandist in President Ronald Reagan's Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America. Kagan was in charge of palming off propaganda "themes" about Central America on a gullible Washington press corps.

As a correspondent for the Associated Press and Newsweek, I dealt frequently with Kagan's office and annoyed him and his team by subjecting their "themes" to scrutiny and often revealing them to be either disinformation or hyperbole.

For instance, one of the "themes" in late 1987 was to promote the claims of a Nicaraguan defector that the Sandinista government was building up an army for offensive purposes when the effort was clearly defensive, i.e., to resist U.S. aggression. At a Pentagon briefing, a senior Defense Department official

elaborated on the supposed Sandinista threat by warning that there was nothing to stop the Sandinista army from marching through Costa Rica and capturing the Panama Canal.

While my journalistic colleagues dutifully took notes, I raised my hand and impertinently asked whether “the 82nd Airborne might not show up?”

It was in response to my lack of “team play” that Kagan took me aside one day with a warning that if I continued with such behavior, I would have to be “controversialized,” a process that involved having administration officials and pro-Reagan activists make me a special target for criticism and attack, which subsequently did happen.

A Skilled Propagandist

To this day, Kagan remains a skilled propagandist, casting current events in ways most favorable to the neocon cause. For instance, in his New Republic essay, he portrays the complex case of Ukraine, where his wife played a central role, in the most simplistic terms, ignoring the right-wing coup in Kiev that overthrew an elected president and the overwhelming vote for secession in Crimea where thousands of Russian troops were already stationed under an agreement with Ukraine.

Stripping away all the nuance, Kagan simply wrote: “the signs of the global order breaking down are all around us. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and seizure of Crimea was the first time since World War II that a nation in Europe had engaged in territorial conquest.”

Next, ignoring the fact that the U.S. intelligence community has concluded that Iran is not working on a nuclear bomb and leaving out that Israel is the one nation in the Middle East that has covertly amassed a nuclear arsenal, Kagan added: “If Iran manages to acquire a nuclear weapon, it will likely lead other powers in the region to do the same, effectively undoing the nonproliferation regime, which, along with American power, has managed to keep the number of nuclear-armed powers limited over the past half century.”

Apparently forgetting his own role and that of the neocons in launching an aggressive war against Iraq and provoking the Shiite-Sunni sectarian conflict that is ripping apart the Muslim world, Kagan added: “If these trends continue, in the near future we are likely to see increasing conflict [and] greater ethnic and sectarian violence.”

Kagan follows with a litany of alarmist warnings on par with the notion that the Sandinistas were about to march south and capture the Panama Canal in 1987 – and reminiscent of the neocon claims that Saddam Hussein was about to launch

remote-controlled planes to spray the U.S. mainland with chemical weapons in 2003.

Here is how Robert Kagan, Hillary Clinton's adviser and Barack Obama's lunch partner, portrayed the emerging apocalypse: "Could the United States survive if Syria remains under the control of Assad or, more likely, disintegrates into a chaos of territories, some of which will be controlled by jihadi terrorists? Could it survive if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, and if in turn Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt acquire nuclear weapons? Or if North Korea launches a war on the South?

"Could it survive in a world where China dominates much of East Asia, or where China and Japan resume their old conflict? Could it survive in a world where Russia dominates Eastern Europe, including not only Ukraine but the Baltic states and perhaps even Poland? Of course it could. From the point of view of strict 'necessity' and narrow national interest, the United States could survive all of this. It could trade with a dominant China and work out a modus vivendi with a restored Russian empire.

"Those alarmed by such developments will be hard-pressed ... to explain how each marginal setback would affect the parochial interests of the average American. As in the past, Americans will be among the last to suffer grievously from a breakdown of world order. And by the time they do feel the effects, it may be very late in the day."

A Path Toward Peace

There is, of course, a more realistic and less hysterical way of viewing these global situations.

If Obama could work with world leaders to stop Saudi Arabia and other Sunni oil sheikdoms from funding Sunni extremists in Syria, a peace settlement could be worked out that might have Assad remaining in power for some transitional period. The neocon preference – to expand the Syrian civil war by having the U.S. intervene on the side of the mythical Syrian "moderates" – is much more likely to lead precisely to what Kagan fears, an expansion of jihadist terror.

If Obama would jettison the neocon narrative about "Russian aggression" in Ukraine when it's clear that Putin was reacting defensively to Western intervention, not plotting to reassert the Russian empire a peaceful resolution of that crisis would be fairly easy to achieve along the lines of a cease-fire plan unveiled by Ukraine's new President Petro Poroshenko and endorsed by Putin.

The neocon notion that Russia is on the march to conquer the Baltic states is unsupported by any intelligence or other evidence. Russia's annexation of Crimea

resulted from a unique set of circumstances, including the U.S.-backed overthrow of the elected Ukrainian president and a popular referendum in Crimea seeking membership in the Russian Federation. It is nutty to suggest that it was some template for a grander "Russian imperialism."

Indeed, Kagan is not only spinning conspiracy fantasies but as often is the case with neocons he is promoting schemes that could facilitate the outcome that he professes to abhor. Possibly the fastest way for the United States to lose its leadership role in the world is through overextension of its global power and overspending on its military might.

The more that Kagan and other neocons push for U.S. suppression of any imaginable threat to U.S. supremacy the more certain it is that America will slide into a precipitous decline and the more dangerous that collapse may be both for Americans and the rest of the world.

President Obama seems to recognize this reality in his inclination to cooperate with Putin and other leaders to resolve crises, but Obama lacks the nerve to finally stand up to the neocons. That is his true "weakness."

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](#).
