

The Neocons' Grim 'Victory' in Iraq

The neocons who plunged the U.S. into the disastrous Iraq War never say they're sorry. Instead, it's all about how their idea was great but President Bush bungled the implementation or how the war was "won" but President Obama chose defeat. Still, the real neocon "victory" could be their success in inflicting endless chaos on the Middle East, as JP Sottile observes.

By JP Sottile

Neocons do like to declare victory, especially regarding the Iraq War. So it came as no surprise that Paul Wolfowitz, apparently unimpressed by Iraq's mounting crisis, regaled a recent panel discussion at the U.S.-Africa Summit with the blunt proclamation, "We have won it, in 2009." Unsurprisingly, that's when Team Bush left the White House – and approximately 150,000 troops behind in Iraq.

Perhaps also not surprisingly, war-weary Americans didn't pay much attention to Paul's pronouncement. No doubt they are as tired of Wolfowitz as they are of the war he helped to start. It probably rang as hollow as the faint echo of his earlier pitch for a quick, all-expenses-paid war against 2003's Hitler of the Moment, Saddam Hussein.

But it's not quite as simple as that. The issue got more complicated shortly after the Africa summit when President Barack Obama, who had pinned his legacy on extricating the United States from Iraq, suddenly found himself at a podium to announce limited, but open-ended military action to halt the dreaded march of The Islamic State (often called ISIS or ISIL) through the repeatedly rocked Cradle of Civilization.

Many have explained the organization's plan for creating a fundamentalist caliphate and its reliance on shockingly brutal tactics that make ISIS something that even al-Qaeda could never be, nor perhaps ever wanted to be. Many others have prodded the dying corpse of Iraq to assign blame here, there and everywhere. But the most basic reason for more bombing is found right there in the self-aggrandizing quip by Paul Wolfowitz.

The simple fact is that the Iraq War *was* a smashing success at least for the neocons *because* it smashed the keystone in the arch of the region's stability. By removing Saddam Hussein, his government and the Republican Guard, neocons removed a bulwark against the very jihadism that has policymakers and pundits forever wringing their hands raw, military contractors ringing their cash registers, and the denizens of the national security state resting assured under

a blanket of secrecy.

Considering the persistent ubiquity of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, their growing presence around the Horn of Africa and extension into Sub-Saharan Africa, Wolfowitz's declaration of victory may not be ironic or delusional; it may have some measure of truth at least from his perspective but for a reason most would not consider victorious. That "victory" achieved something the neocons could only dream of during a fitful slumber brought on by counting the media's sheep, i.e. a permanent war in the Middle East.

No Walking Away

The Iraq War made it functionally impossible for the United States to ever fully walk away from Iraq, the Persian Gulf or anywhere Muslims and oil mix. And for Wolfowitz, Don Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and William Kristol, it's a dream come true. Regime change in Iraq created a power vacuum that was and is too strong to resist.

In fact, that vacuum allowed a wandering Jordanian jihadist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his group of international also-rans to run amok in the chaos of post-Saddam Iraq. After a series of suicide attacks and a pledge to al-Qaeda, the anti-Shi'ite, anti-American, anti-almost-everything group became "al-Qaeda in Iraq," and, as Bobby Ghosh explains, eventually metastasized into ISIS.

ISIS's regional road show took off after Zarqawi was killed in June 2006 and a tenuous stability was literally bought by the U.S. during the Sunni Awakening and the much-ballyhooed Surge. The Sunni Awakening was a cash-incentivized purchase of cooperation from just enough angry Iraqis to force interlopers and internecine adversaries to retreat, retool or retire. And that cash made it safe to hang the trappings of democracy over a vacuum that would eventually suck America back in again. And did it ever suck.

Although Team Obama was content to let ISIS grow in war-torn Syria's radicalized incubator, ISIS's unimpeded advance onto the doorstep of Erbil, the shining oil metropolis at the heart of the Kurdish semi-state, could not be tolerated.

While Chevron and ExxonMobil evacuated employees, Obama sent in tactical assistance for the Yazidi religious minority trapped on a mountain. While the humanitarian crisis and looming "genocide" came and went quickly, perhaps a little too quickly for credulity's sake, the all-too predictable chaos unleashed by the legacy of regime change and left behind by a legacy-minded Obama made this latest action almost inevitable.

Hillary Clinton's Protests

Alas, the policy of regime change has been replicated, with many thanks to the "stupid stuff" both Obama and Hillary Clinton have done in Libya and Syria. After having wrung the traditional idea of diplomacy out of the State Department i.e. advancing your country's interests without warfare Hillary has climbed atop a growing stack of her unsold books so everyone can hear some classic Clintonian "triangulation" and pre-election posturing. It's still early. Maybe she can create distance between herself, her former boss and her rumored, if perpetually disproved, ideals.

Since Obama didn't go as far as Hillary now says she wanted to go in smashing Syria, it's even more likely that she played a significant role sucking two more secular regimes down the jihadist rabbit hole, Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and Bashar al-Assad's Syria (although "regime change" has come up a little short in Damascus). True enough, some Syrian rebels were only helped covertly through her State Department's Conflict Bureau (and the CIA) and, although never officially linked to the U.S., through Libyan weapons transferred to the fight against Assad, another Hitler du jour, reportedly via a little-known port at a place called Benghazi.

But now there is little doubt Clinton was present at the creation of yet more reasons for Muslim radicals to organize and arm themselves against U.S. aims, allies and proxies, from drone strikes in Yemen and Pakistan to Muslim persecution after the "foreign policy success" of Myanmar.

However, the Mother of All Sucking Sounds is still the powerful vacuum created by destroying an entire country under false pretenses. That Iraq vacuum sucked trillions of dollars out of the U.S. Treasury, sucked hundreds of thousands of Americans into a vortex of deployments and redeployments, and created the impetus for millions of Muslims around the world to quite rightly think that they were being targeted by America.

As if decades of dances with dictators and America's oil-slicked machinations weren't enough evidence, the neocon agenda for Rebuilding America's Defenses established once and for all through facts on their sandy ground, through pictures from Abu Ghraib and with extrajudicial imprisonment at Gitmo that Muslims make easy targets (in more ways than one).

Perhaps by taking out a contract on Saddam's uncooperative regime, they were, in effect, taking out a "bridge loan" for their corporate sponsors until another wave of neocon-men and con-women could breathe life into the long-since dead Cold War with their chess moves in Ukraine. But the real action was and is still at the "other" Ground Zero, in Iraq and around the oil-enriched Persian Gulf.

The bait-and-switch of 9/11 for Saddam, of Colin Powell's show-stopping vial of

fake anthrax for actual evidence of chemical weapons, of aluminum tubes as proof for non-existent nuclear centrifuges, it all set a trap that, in the final analysis, America cannot really free itself from, no matter how rabidly Uncle Sam gnaws at the exposed bone of his blood-soaked leg.

Unbloodied and Unbowed

And somehow, the planners of the Great Remaking of the Middle East have been surprisingly unbowed in spite of the colossal failures and the supposed “blunder” of a strategy gone wrong. Their lack of penance has made them the butt of jokes, but the joke may be on us.

These were not stupid men. They knew that the only way to keep their version of “the peace” was to keep America trapped in Middle East wars in perpetuity. They planned on it. Sure, Obama’s pull-out provided momentary relief from the trap, but with each passing month the death and destruction and body count mounted in a “free” and “democratic” Iraq until it predictably collapsed upon itself, unable to make whole what American indifference to facts, law and human life tore asunder.

Now that vacuum has sucked in the detritus of the Obama administration’s own failed policy of regime changes. In Syria and in Libya and, somewhere outside the news media’s bubble, in Yemen, a supposedly feckless Obama has played the same damnable game with the targeted “smashing” of drones, airstrikes and anti-terrorism initiatives.

Meanwhile, the result of illegally smashing Iraq still speaks for itself. So maybe, just maybe, Wolfowitz is, technically speaking, correct when he said “we won.” The problem is that the “we” is not America or even most Americans. The “we” is the quirky cabal of desk jockeys, chicken-hawks and Sunday showmen who, through their interconnected web of think tanks and political appointments and corporate connections, ensnared the United States into a conflagration that is beginning its second act.

And if the U.S. somehow avoids getting sucked into a long-term battle against disaffected, dislocated and disenfranchised Muslims? Cold War 2.0 ensures that the perpetual machine designed to continually “rebuild” America’s defenses has a never-ending supply of financial fuel and antagonistic grist for its multi-generational mill.

Either way, the neocon mission has truly been accomplished.

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The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case

From the Archive: At the first anniversary of the Sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, there is a concerted effort to reestablish the original conventional wisdom, blaming the Syrian government for the hundreds of deaths. The goal seems to be to bury the alternative narrative that later emerged, as Robert Parry wrote last April.

By Robert Parry April 7, 2014

One shouldn't be surprised, I guess, that some wannabe-journalist bloggers are auditioning before possible mainstream employers by attacking investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh for writing a [groundbreaking article](#) implicating Syrian jihadist rebels and Turkish intelligence in the lethal use of Sarin on Aug. 21 outside Damascus.

From a sampling of these defenses of Official Washington's old conventional wisdom blaming the Syrian government the chief attack line against Hersh is to repeat the initial U.S. government claim of a widespread strike involving multiple rockets.

The thinking then was that only the Syrian government had the capability to launch such a widespread assault. But this claim is outdated. The United Nations inspectors who fanned out across the Ghouta suburb of Damascus recovered only two suspicious rockets and one was found to be clean of Sarin or any other chemical agent.

The one Sarin-laden rocket, which struck in the Zamalka/Ein Tarma neighborhood, was found to be crudely made and had a maximum range of about 2 to 3 kilometers, meaning that it would have been launched from rebel-controlled areas, not from a government zone.

But conventional wisdom is a difficult thing to shake once many "very important people" have embraced its certainties. Such VIPs don't like to admit that they were suckered and there are always some aspiring operatives who hope to earn some brownie points by attacking anyone who deviates from the "group think."

That's what we're seeing now as the Obama administration's case against the Syrian government collapses, not that it was ever very sturdy. There is

desperation across Official Washington to try to prop the old narrative back up.

The flimsiness of the administration's indictment was always apparent. The U.S. "Government Assessment" of the attack, published Aug. 30, was a four-page white paper making unsubstantiated allegations against the Syrian government. No verifiable evidence was presented either then or since then.

The point of the "Government Assessment" itself was to avoid the standard requirement of a National Intelligence Estimate (or a quicker Special National Intelligence Estimate) preceding a U.S. military assault on a sovereign country. NIEs represent the consensus view of the 16 intelligence agencies. NIEs also require inclusion of footnotes revealing any dissents.

I was told at the time that there was substantial concern within the U.S. intelligence community that we were witnessing another rush to judgment. Yet, to keep those doubts secret, the Obama administration cobbled together this new creation, a "Government Assessment," that left out the dissents.

The small package of material released on Aug. 30 did, however, include one significant footnote attached to a map and offering an explanation for why there may have been an initial belief of a more widespread attack.

The footnote read: "Reports of chemical attacks originating from some locations may reflect the movement of patients exposed in one neighborhood to field hospitals and medical facilities in the surrounding area. They may also reflect confusion and panic triggered by the ongoing artillery and rocket barrage, and reports of chemical use in other neighborhoods."

In other words, even the White House's white-washing white paper offered a contradictory explanation to what the administration was claiming about the number of neighborhoods struck by the chemical attack of Aug. 21, i.e., victims from one location may have rushed to clinics in other neighborhoods, creating the false impression of a more widespread attack.

More significantly, however, the four-page "Government Assessment" of the case against the Syrian government contained not a single piece of evidence that could be checked independently. It was filled with "we assess" this and "we assess" that. To this day, the Obama administration has not released a shred of evidence that could be examined and evaluated.

Instead, the propaganda approach has been the old tactic of repeating an unproven assertion again and again, knowing that if a charge is declared with sufficient certitude often enough, the weak-minded will simply begin treating it as accepted wisdom. That's especially easy when the target of the accusations has been thoroughly demonized as is the case with Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad.

The 'Vector Analysis'

The only publicly available evidence implicating the Syrian government was a "vector analysis" produced by Human Rights Watch and the New York Times retracing the flight paths of the two recovered rockets to where their azimuths intersected 9.5 kilometers away at a Syrian military base.

When this analysis was touted last September including a front-page story in the Times it was considered the "slam-dunk" proof of the Syrian government's guilt. Pretty much everyone in the U.S. news media, including many ambitious bloggers, climbed onto the bandwagon and laughed at anyone who wasn't onboard.

However, the "vector analysis" soon fell apart. First, the rocket that struck Moadamiya, south of Damascus, had clipped a building on the way down so the UN calculation of its azimuth was highly unreliable. Plus, the rocket was found to contain no Sarin, making its inclusion in the vectoring of two Sarin-laden rockets nonsensical.

Even more devastating to the HRW-NYT analysis was the fact that when leading rocket scientists analyzed the capabilities of the home-made device that landed in Zamalka, they concluded that it had a maximum range of about 2 to 3 kilometers, less than one-third the required distance. U.S. intelligence experts, such as former CIA analyst Larry Johnson, also noted that the two recovered rockets were not part of the Syrian military's Order of Battle.

With the "vector analysis" discredited, the New York Times then waited until the Christmas holidays to grudgingly acknowledge deep in a story, deep inside the paper that it had been snookered again, an embarrassing replay of its infamous "mushroom cloud" report in 2002 on Iraq's "aluminum tubes" supposedly showing that Saddam Hussein was building nuclear centrifuges. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["NYT Backs Off its Syria-Sarin Analysis."](#)]

Junk Heap of Bad Evidence

So, with the "slam-dunk evidence" of the "vector analysis" consigned to the giant junk heap of false claims used to justify wars, what was left to support the U.S. government's indictment of the Syrian regime? Nothing that could be checked out and verified. That, in turn, has left the bloggers defending the Assad-did-it charge recycling old claims that have previously been discarded, such as the notion of multiple rockets carrying Sarin.

Despite the glaring weaknesses of the U.S. government's case, these blogosphere defenders of the old conventional wisdom are dissecting Hersh's exposé looking

for tiny points to criticize rather than joining in a demand that the Obama administration finally lay whatever evidence it thinks it has on the table.

Nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died because of false and fabricated intelligence disseminated about Iraqi WMD in 2002-03. Yet, almost no one in Official Washington was held accountable.

A decade later, the process came very close to repeating itself. The United States nearly went to war again on what was highly dubious information. If the U.S. political/media establishment is so inept at dealing with reality in such life-or-death situations, a major overhaul of the system is desperately needed.

There are other dangerous implications from Hersh's article, including the possibility that Syrian jihadists in the Nusra Front with close ties to al-Qaeda have developed the capability to manufacture and deploy Sarin, a powerful chemical weapon that can kill hundreds of people in a matter of minutes.

If that is the case, President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry owe it to the public to recant their rush to judgment of last summer and refocus U.S. intelligence on this clear and present danger. Sure, it's not what Obama and Kerry want to do admit they misled the people about the certainty of the U.S. government's case against Assad but they have a responsibility to put their egos aside and assess what is possibly an actual terrorist threat.

Despite his role in deceiving the world, President Obama does deserve some credit for veering away from another catastrophe at the last moment. Obama accepted Russian President Vladimir Putin's plan to have Syria's government surrender all its chemical weapons, even as Assad continued to deny a role in the Aug. 21 attack.

But the mystery of who gassed the Ghouta suburb of Damascus killing hundreds of people is one that deserves a serious examination. If as Sy Hersh reports the U.S. government has evidence revealing collaboration between radical jihadists in Syria and Turkish intelligence, that should be revealed regardless of the political discomfort it might cause.

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](#).
