

Neocons: The 'Anti-Realists'

Special Report: America's neocons, who wield great power inside the U.S. government and media, endanger the planet by concocting strategies inside their heads that ignore real-world consequences. Thus, their "regime changes" have unleashed ancient hatreds and spread chaos across the globe, as Robert Parry explains.

By Robert Parry

Historically, one of the main threads of U.S. foreign policy was called "realism," that is the measured application of American power on behalf of definable national interests, with U.S. principles preached to others but not imposed.

This approach traced back to the early days of the Republic when the first presidents warned of foreign "entangling alliances" and President John Quincy Adams, who was with his father at the nation's dawning, explained in 1821 that while America speaks on behalf of liberty, "she has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings, as to the last vital drop that visits the heart.

"Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy."

However, in modern times, foreign policy "realism" slid into an association with a cold calculation of power, no longer a defense of the Republic and broader national interests but of narrow, well-connected economic interests. The language of freedom was woven into a banner for greed and plunder. Liberty justified the imposition of dictatorships on troublesome populations. Instead of searching for monsters to destroy, U.S. policy often searched for monsters to install.

In the wake of such heartless actions like imposing pliable "pro-business" dictatorships on countries such as Iran, Guatemala, Congo, Indonesia, Chile and engaging in the bloodbath of Vietnam "realism" developed a deservedly negative reputation as other supposedly more idealistic foreign policy strategies gained preeminence.

Some of those approaches essentially turned John Quincy Adams's admonition on its head by asserting that it *is* America's duty to search out foreign monsters to destroy. Whether called "neoconservatism" or "liberal interventionism," this approach openly advocated U.S. interference in the affairs of other nations and

took the sides of people who at least presented themselves as “pro-democracy.”

In recent years, as the ranks of the “realists” the likes of George Kennan, Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft have aged and thinned, the ranks of the neocons and their junior partners, the liberal interventionists, swelled. Indeed, these “anti-realists” have now grown dominant, touting themselves as morally superior because they don’t just call for human rights, they take out governments that don’t measure up.

The primary distinction between the neocons and the liberal interventionists has been the centrality of Israel in the neocons’ thinking while their liberal sidekicks put “humanitarianism” at the core of their world view. But these differences are insignificant, in practice, since the liberal hawks are politically savvy enough not to hold Israel accountable for its human rights crimes and clever enough to join with the neocons in easy-to-sell “regime change” strategies toward targeted countries with weak lobbies in Washington.

In those “regime change” cases, there is also a consensus on how to handle the targeted countries: start with “soft power” from anti-regime propaganda to funding internal opposition groups to economic sanctions to political destabilization campaigns and, then if operationally necessary and politically feasible, move to overt military interventions, applying America’s extraordinary military clout.

Moral Crusades

These interventions are always dressed up as moral crusades the need to free some population from the clutches of a U.S.-defined “monster.” There usually is some “crisis” in which the “monster” is threatening “innocent life” and triggering a “responsibility to protect” with the catchy acronym, “R2P.”

But the reality about these “anti-realists” is that their actions, in real life, almost always inflict severe harm on the country being “rescued.” The crusade kills many people innocent and guilty and the resulting disorder can spread far and wide, like some contagion that cannot be contained. The neocons and the liberal interventionists have become, in effect, carriers of the deadly disease called chaos.

And, it has become a very lucrative chaos for the well-connected by advancing the “dark side” of U.S. foreign policy where lots of money can be made while government secrecy prevents public scrutiny.

As author James Risen describes in his new book, *Pay Any Price*, a new caste of “oligarchs” has emerged from the 9/11 “war on terror” – and the various regional wars that it has unpacked – to amass vast fortunes. He writes: “There is an

entire class of wealthy company owners, corporate executives, and investors who have gotten rich by enabling the American government to turn to the dark side. The new quiet oligarchs just keep making money. They are the beneficiaries of one of the largest transfers of wealth from public to private hands in American history." [p. 56]

And the consolidation of this wealth has further cemented the political/media influence of the "anti-realists," as the new "oligarchs" kick back portions of their taxpayer largesse into think tanks, political campaigns and media outlets. The neocons and their liberal interventionist pals now fully dominate the U.S. opinion centers, from the right-wing media to the editorial pages (and the foreign desks) of many establishment publications, including the Washington Post and the New York Times.

By contrast, the voices of the remaining "realists" and their current unlikely allies, the anti-war activists, are rarely heard in the mainstream U.S. media anymore. To the extent that these dissidents do get to criticize U.S. meddling abroad, they are dismissed as "apologists" for whatever "monster" is currently in line for the slaughter. And, to the extent they criticize Israel, they are smeared as "anti-Semitic" and thus banished from respectable society.

Thus, being a "realist" in today's Official Washington requires hiding one's true feelings, much as was once the case if you were a gay man and you had little choice but to keep your sexual orientation in the closet by behaving publicly like a heterosexual and surrounding yourself with straight friends.

In many ways, that's what President Barack Obama has done. Though arguably a "closet realist," Obama staffed his original administration with foreign policy officials acceptable to the neocons and the liberal interventionists, such as Robert Gates at Defense, Hillary Clinton at State, Gen. David Petraeus as a top commander in the field.

Even in his second term, the foreign-policy hawks have remained dominant, with people like neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland enflaming the crisis in Ukraine and UN Ambassador Samantha Power, an R2Per, pushing U.S. military intervention in Syria.

A Slow-Motion Catastrophe

I have personally watched today's foreign-policy pattern evolve during my 37 years in Washington – and it began innocently enough. After the Vietnam War and the disclosures about bloody CIA coups around the globe, President Jimmy Carter called for human rights to be put at the center of U.S. foreign policy. His successor, Ronald Reagan, then hijacked the human rights rhetoric while adapting

to it to his anticommunist cause.

Because Reagan's usurpation of human rights language involved support for brutal right-wing forces, such as the Guatemalan military and the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, the process required an Orwellian change in what words meant. "Pro-democracy" had to become synonymous with the rights and profits of business owners, not its traditional meaning of making government work for the common people.

But this perversion of language was not as much meant to fool the average Guatemalan or Nicaraguan, who was more likely to grasp the reality behind the word games since he or she saw the cruel facts up close; it was mostly to control the American people who, in the lexicon of Reagan's propagandists, needed to have their perceptions managed. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Victory of Perception Management](#)."]]

The goal of the young neocons inside the Reagan administration the likes of Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan (now Victoria Nuland's husband) was to line up the American public behind Reagan's aggressive foreign policy, or as the phrase of that time went, to "kick the Vietnam Syndrome," meaning to end the popular post-Vietnam resistance to more foreign wars.

President George H.W. Bush pronounced this mission accomplished in 1991 after the end of the well-sold Persian Gulf War, declaring "we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all."

By then, the propaganda process had fallen into a predictable pattern. You pick out a target country; you demonize its leadership; you develop some "themes" that are sure to push American hot buttons, maybe fictional stories about "throwing babies out of incubators" or the terrifying prospect of "a mushroom cloud"; and it's always smart to highlight a leader's personal corruption, maybe his "designer glasses" or "a sauna in his palace."

The point is not that the targeted leader may not be an unsavory character. Frankly, most political leaders are. Many Western leaders and their Third World allies both historically and currently have much more blood on their hands than some of the designated "monsters" that the U.S. government has detected around the world. The key is the image-making.

What makes the process work is the application and amplification of double standards through the propaganda organs available to the U.S. government. The compliant mainstream American media can be counted on to look harshly at the behavior of some U.S. "enemy" in Venezuela, Iran, Russia or eastern Ukraine, but to take a much more kindly view of a U.S.-favored leader from Colombia, Saudi

Arabia, Georgia or western Ukraine.

While it's easy and safe career-wise for a mainstream journalist to accuse a Chavez, an Ahmadinejad, a Putin or a Yanukovych of pretty much anything, the levels of proof get ratcheted up when it's a Uribe, a Saudi King Abdullah, a Saakashvili or a Yatsenyuk not to mention a Netanyahu.

The True Dark Side

But here is the dark truth about this "humanitarian" interventionism: it is spinning the world into an endless cycle of violence. Rather than improving the prospects for human rights and democracy, it is destroying those goals. While the interventionist strategies have made huge fortunes for well-connected government contractors and well-placed speculators who profit off chaos, the neocons and their "human rights" buddies are creating a hell on earth for billions of others, spreading death and destitution.

Take, for example, the beginnings of the Afghan War in the 1980s after the Soviet Union invaded to protect a communist-led regime that had sought to pull Afghanistan out of the middle ages, including granting equal rights to women. The United States responded by encouraging Islamic fundamentalism and arming the barbaric mujahedeen.

At the time, that was considered the smart play because Islamic fundamentalism was seen as a force that could counter atheistic communism. So, starting with the Carter administration but getting dramatically ramped up by the Reagan administration, the United States threw in its lot with the extremist Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia to invest billions of dollars in supporting these Islamist militants who included one wealthy Saudi named Osama bin Laden.

At the time, with Great Communicator Ronald Reagan leading the way, virtually the entire U.S. mainstream media and nearly every national politician hailed the mujahedeen as noble "freedom fighters" but the reality was always much different. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[How US Hubris Baited Afghan Trap.](#)"]

By the end of the 1980s, the U.S.-Saudi "covert operation" had "succeeded" in driving the Soviet army out of Afghanistan with Kabul's communist regime ultimately overthrown and replaced by the fundamentalist Taliban, who stripped women of their rights and covered up their bodies. The Taliban also provided safe haven for bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist band, which by the 1990s had shifted its sights from Moscow to Washington and New York.

Even though the Saudis officially broke with bin Laden after he declared his intentions to attack the United States, some wealthy Saudis and other Persian

Gulf multi-millionaires, who shared bin Laden's violent form of Islamic fundamentalism, continued to fund him and his terrorists right up to and beyond al-Qaeda's attacks on 9/11.

Then, America's fear and fury over 9/11 opened the path for the neocons to activate one of their longstanding plans, to invade and occupy Iraq, though it had nothing to do with 9/11. The propaganda machinery was cranked up and again all the "smart" people fell in line. Dissenters were dismissed as "Saddam apologists" or called "traitors." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

By fall 2002, the idea of invading Iraq and removing "monster" Saddam Hussein was not just a neocon goal, it was embraced by nearly ever prominent "liberal interventionist" in the United States, including editors and columnists of the New Yorker, the New York Times and virtually every major news outlet.

At this point, the "realists" were in near total eclipse, left to grumble futilely or grasp onto some remaining "relevance" by joining the pack, as Henry Kissinger did. The illegal U.S.-led invasion of Iraq also brushed aside the "legal internationalists" who believed that global agreements, especially prohibitions on aggressive war, were vital to building a less violent planet.

An Expanding Bloodbath

In the rush to war in Iraq, the neocons and the liberal interventionists won hands down in 2002-2003 but ended up causing a bloodbath for the people of Iraq, with estimates of those killed ranging from hundreds of thousands to more than a million. But the U.S. invaders did more than that. They destabilized the entire Middle East by disturbing the fragile fault lines between Sunni and Shiite.

With Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein ousted and hanged, Iraq's vengeful Shiite politicians established their own authoritarian state under the military wing of the U.S. and British armies. Neocon hubris made matters worse when many former Sunni officials and officers were cashiered and marginalized, creating fertile ground for al-Qaeda to put down roots among Iraqi Sunnis, planting a particularly brutal strain nourished by Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Zarqawi's Al-Qaeda in Iraq attracted thousands of foreign Sunni jihadists eager to fight both the Westerners and the Shiites. Others went to Yemen to join Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Trained in the brutal methods of these Iraqi and Yemeni insurgencies, hardened jihadists returned to their homes in Libya, Syria, Europe and elsewhere.

Though the disaster in Iraq should have been a powerful cautionary tale, the

neocons and the liberal interventionists proved to be much more adept at playing the political-propaganda games of Washington than in prevailing in the complex societies of the Middle East.

Instead of being purge en masse, the Iraq War instigators faced minimal career accountability. They managed to spin the Iraq “surge” as “victory at last” and maintained their influence over Washington even under President Obama, who may have been a “closet realist” but who kept neocons in key posts and surrounded himself with liberal interventionists. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Surge Myth’s Deadly Result.”](#)]

Thus, Obama grudgingly was enlisted into the next neocon-liberal-interventionist crusades in 2011: the military intervention to overthrow Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and the covert operation to remove Syria’s Bashar al-Assad. In both cases, the propaganda was ramped up again, presenting the opposition groups as “pro-democracy moderates” who were peacefully facing down brutal dictators.

In reality, the oppositions were more a mixed bag of some actual moderates and Islamist extremists. When Gaddafi and Assad emphasizing the presence of terrorists struck back brutally, the “R2P” crowd demanded U.S. military intervention, either directly in Libya or indirectly in Syria. With the U.S. mainstream media onboard, nearly every occurrence was put through the propaganda filter that made the regimes all dark and the oppositions bathed in a rosy glow.

After the U.S.-led air war destroyed Gaddafi’s military and opened the way for an opposition victory, Gaddafi was captured and brutally murdered. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who might be called a “neocon-lite,” joked: “We came, we saw, he died.”

But the chaos that followed Gaddafi’s death was not so funny, contributing to the killing of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American diplomatic personnel in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, and to the spreading of terrorism and violence across northern Africa. By July 2014, the U.S. and other Western nations had abandoned their embassies in Tripoli as all political order broke down.

Syrian Madness

In Syria, which had long been near the top of the neocon/Israeli hit list for “regime change,” U.S., Western and Sunni support for another “moderate opposition” led to a civil war. Soon, what “moderates” there were blended into the ranks of Islamic extremists, either the Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda affiliate, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or simply the Islamic State, which evolved from Zarqawi’s Al-Qaeda in Iraq, continuing Zarqawi’s hyper-brutality

even after his death.

Though the mainstream U.S. media blamed almost everything on Syrian President Assad, many Syrians recognized that the Sunni extremists who emerged as the power behind the opposition were a grave threat to other Syrian religious groups, including the Shiites, Alawites and Christians – and that Assad’s authoritarian but secular regime represented their best hope for survival. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Syrian Rebels Embrace al-Qaeda.”](#)]

But instead of looking for a realistic political solution, the neocons and the liberal interventionists insisted on a U.S. military intervention, either covertly by arming the opposition or overtly by mounting a Libyan-style bombing campaign to destroy Assad’s armed forces and open the gates of Damascus to the rebels. Under pressure from the likes of Ambassador Power and Secretary of State Clinton, Obama bowed to the demand to ship weapons to the rebels, although the CIA later discovered that many U.S. weapons ended up in extremist hands.

Still, with Obama dragging his feet on a larger-scale commitment, the neocon/liberal-interventionist coalition saw a great chance to push Obama into a bombing campaign after a Sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. The war hawks and the U.S. media immediately blamed Assad despite doubts among some U.S. intelligence analysts who suspected a provocation by the rebels.

Those doubts and Obama’s fear of an extremist victory led him to call off the planned bombing at the last minute, and he accepted a deal brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin to arrange for Assad to surrender all Syria’s chemical weapons, while Assad continued to deny any role in the Sarin attack. The neocons and liberal interventionists were furious at both Obama and Putin.

Alarmed about this “realist” Obama-Putin collaboration, the “anti-realists” turned to demonizing the Russian president and driving a wedge between him and Obama. The place to splinter that relationship turned out to be Ukraine, where neocon Assistant Secretary of State Nuland was perfectly positioned to push for the ouster of elected pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich.

As Nuland noted in one speech, the U.S. government had invested \$5 billion in the “European aspirations” of the western Ukrainians, including funding for political activists, journalists and various business groups. The time to collect on that investment came in February 2014 when violent demonstrations in Kiev, with well-organized neo-Nazi militias supplying the muscle, drove Yanukovich from power. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons’ Ukraine-Syria-Iran Gambit.”](#)]

The Ukraine coup played out along another historic fault line, between European-

oriented western Ukraine, where Adolf Hitler's SS had gained significant support during World War II, and eastern Ukraine with its ethnic Russian population and close business ties to Russia.

After the U.S. State Department rushed to embrace the coup regime as "legitimate" and as the U.S. media dished out anti-Yanukvysh propaganda, such as citing a sauna in his home, Obama tagged along, falling into the neocon trap, again. U.S.-Russian relations spiraled into a hostility not seen since the Cold War. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Obama's True Foreign Policy Weakness.](#)"]

Shattering Ukraine

Yet, while the neocons and their liberal allies had "won" again, what did that winning mean for the people of Ukraine? Their country, already teetering on the status of failed state, slid into deeper economic chaos and civil war. With neo-Nazis and other extremists appointed to key national security positions, the new regime began lashing out at ethnic Russians who were resisting Yanukovych's ouster.

Crimea voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, a move that Western government's denounced as an illegal "annexation" and the major U.S. media termed an "invasion," although the Russian troops involved were already stationed in Crimea under an agreement to maintain the Russian naval base at Sevastopol.

Ukraine's eastern provinces also sought secession, prompting military clashes that inflicted some of the worst bloodshed seen on the European continent in decades. Thousands died and millions fled.

Of course, the standard line in the U.S. media was that it was all Putin's fault, even as the Kiev regime shelled eastern cities and unleashed brutal neo-Nazi militias to engage in street fighting, the first time storm troopers emblazoned with Nazi insignias had been deployed in Europe since World War II. Yet, buoyed by how easily the anti-Putin propaganda had prevailed, some neocons even began fantasizing about "regime change" in Moscow.

Yet, if you were to step back for a minute and look at the history of the past 35 years from the Afghan covert op through the Iraq War and the U.S. interventions in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere what you would see is the neocons and their liberal sidekicks behaving like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, stirring up troubles that soon spun out of control.

Just look at the chaos that has been unleashed by these reckless neocon and liberal interventionist policies from encouraging the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and facilitating the formation of al-Qaeda via the covert war in

Afghanistan, from creating a hotbed for attracting and training jihadists during the Iraq War, from undermining regimes in Libya and Syria that for all their faults were trying to contain this spread of terrorism, and from provoking a new Cold War in Ukraine that risks bringing nuclear weapons into play in a showdown with Russia.

The latest outgrowth of all this trouble was the terror attack in Paris this month, with some European hotheads now calling for another neocon favorite idea, “a war of civilizations,” pitting Christian societies against Islam in some modern version of the actual Crusades.

Yes, I know we’re not supposed to talk about root causes of this chaos “at a time like this,” and we are surely not supposed to blame the neocons and their liberal interventionist chums. Instead, we’re supposed to escalate the conflicts and the chaos.

We’re supposed to continue the neocon “tough-guy-ism” – by repressing Muslims in the West, by ousting Assad in Syria, by crushing the ethnic Russian resistance in Ukraine, by destabilizing Russia, and by forsaking negotiations with Iran over its nuclear facilities in favor of more sanctions and maybe more bombing. All somehow in the name of “democracy” and “human rights” and “security.”

As we gaze out upon this mad house built by the neocons, we are witnessing on a grand scale the old adage about the inmates running the asylum, except that this asylum possesses the world’s most sophisticated weapons including a massive nuclear arsenal.

What the neocons have constructed through their skilled propaganda is a grim wonderland where no one foresees the dangers of encouraging Islamist fundamentalism as a geopolitical ploy, where no one takes heed of the historic hatreds of Sunni and Shiite, where no one suspects that the U.S. military slaughtering thousands upon thousands of Muslims might provoke a backlash, where no one thinks about the consequences of overthrowing regimes in unstable regions, where no one bothers to study the bitter history of a place like Ukraine, and where no one worries about spreading turmoil to nuclear-armed Russia.

Yet, this neocon madness this “anti-realism” has been playing out in the real world on a grand scale, destroying real lives and endangering the real future of the planet.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#)

and barnesandnoble.com). 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](#).

France's Wavy Line on 'Free Speech'

Though called a "satirical" magazine, Charlie Hebdo was really more "scatological," obsessed with depicting the naked derrieres of political and religious figures often bent over in humiliating postures, especially Prophet Mohammed, a willful provocation that reflected more bigotry than free speech, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On Jan. 7, two heavily armed men walked into the Paris offices of a satirical magazine called *Charlie Hebdo* (*Charlie Weekly*) and methodically murdered 12 people, including the magazine's editor Stephane Charbonnier (aka Charb), four cartoonists, a columnist, a proofreader, a maintenance worker, two policemen stationed inside the building, and one outside.

The killers were Muslim extremists associated with al-Qaeda, but their actions were praised by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) as well. Almost everyone else, including most Muslim commentators, condemned the attack for the horrible crime it certainly was.

Why *Charlie Hebdo*? The immediate reason for the attack seems to have been the repeated satirization of the Prophet Mohammed in cartoons that were, to put it mildly, of questionable taste. Of course the magazine had satirized others as well but gave disproportionate attention to Muslims and their Prophet.

All of this was done under the cover of freedom of speech. As Charb said in a [2012 interview](#), "Our job is not to defend freedom of speech but without it we're dead. We can't live in a country without freedom of speech. I prefer to die than to live like a rat."

I think everyone with a progressive outlook can agree that freedom to criticize governments and other centers of power is an absolute necessity if we are to have a free society. But we must also recognize that the notion of unimpaired free speech is an ideal that is constantly approached and retreated from. In practice its limits tend to be culturally and politically determined. Further, when we move beyond the critique of power there are good arguments for the

position that freedom of speech should be coupled with a promulgated definition of social responsibility.

It seems to me that Charb and his magazine had little concern for these issues and, by concentrating their ridicule on Muslims with occasional jabs at the Catholic Church, had accommodated themselves to France's selectively censored environment. Consider the following:

–*Charlie Hebdo* was founded in 1970 after its predecessor magazine, called the *Hara-Kiri Hebdo*, had been shut down by the French government. Why? It had insulted the memory of the then recently deceased Charles de Gaulle.

–If *Charlie Hebdo* had satirized the Jews in the same way it did the Muslims, its director and staff would have likely been hauled into court and charged with anti-Semitism, expressions of which are illegal in France.

–As the political Scientist Anne Norton points out, while “casting itself as the defender of free speech the Paris prosecutor's office is investigating [and subsequently has taken into custody] comedian Dieudonne M'bala for 'defending terrorism' after his Facebook post, 'I feel like Charlie Coulibaly.'" Coulibaly was the terrorist involved in the recent Paris violence against Jews.

Charbonnier and his fellows at *Charlie Hebdo* were aware of the first two facts. Thus, Charb was telling the truth when he said that the magazine was not defending free speech. He knew that the *Charlie Hebdo* approach would work only as long as its ridicule was seen as politically acceptable by both most French people and their government. Defaming national heroes or Jews was out of bounds, but ridiculing Muslims was and is acceptable, and maybe that is why they became *Charlie Hebdo's* preferred target. That, in turn, made the magazine's staff targets of Muslim extremists.

The Larger Context

Whatever Stephane Charbonnier's actual motives and aims, he and his fellow workers at *Charlie Hebdo* died in the course of promoting them. At that point their motives were co-opted by the French government in what was soon declared as a war of values. On Jan. 10, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared war against “radical Islam” because its practitioners had attacked “our values, which are universal.”

That last claim is an example of French hubris getting in the way of reality. For better or worse, French values are definitely not universal. They are just another version of culturally determined practices which, in terms of speech, set the limits of what the powers-that-be find permissible. These limits may be broader than the ones promoted by Islamists but, as we have seen, they are not

open-ended.

Nonetheless the illusion of universal values was used by Prime Minister Valls to rally his fellow citizens. On Jan. 11, a reported 2 million French men and women, with some 40 world leaders (most notably half the Israeli cabinet) at their head, marched through Paris to protest the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. It was said to have been the largest public rally France has seen since the liberation of Paris at the end of World War II.

Most of those who attended this historic rally probably knew little or nothing of the context of the crime they protested. And, while the magazine's demeaning cartoons might have been the immediate cause of the murders, it was certainly not the only cause. Prime Minister Valls publicly declared war just a few days ago, but in truth France has been acting as if it was at war with Muslims and their values for a very long time.

During their 130-year occupancy of Algeria, the French segregated most Muslims from European colonists and adopted policies that undermined the indigenous Arab lifestyle. Since then they haven't been very welcoming toward Muslim immigrants in France, insisting that they give up their traditional ways and integrate into French culture.

However, as riots in 2005 suggested, very little effort has been made on the part of the French government or its people to accommodate such integration. Finally, France has been promoting intervention in Syria. In an ill-advised effort to undermine the secular regime of Bashar al-Assad, French governments (all of which have had a misplaced and certainly racist sense of *mission civilisatrice* toward Syria) have helped finance and equip Syrian rebels. This threatens to be a repeat of the U.S. mistake made in Afghanistan back in the 1980s, because a good number of these Syrian rebels hate the French (and other Western powers) as much as they do al-Assad.

A Vicious Cycle

Under the present circumstances, and by this I mean given longstanding foreign policies of the Western powers, there is no end in sight for terrorist attacks such as that in Paris or, for that matter, in New York on Sept. 11, 2001. They will come again and again because they are ripostes to even more violent actions coming from the West.

In other words, what we have going here is a vicious cycle. It began with modern imperialism and has been sustained by frankly counterproductive Western policies in the Muslim world – often in support of brutal Arab dictators and racist and expansionist Israelis. What goes around comes around.

This conclusion is usually dismissed by Western leaders as blaming the (Western) victims. However, to take this position one must ignore the myriad number of victims in the Middle East and North Africa. So, sadly, it really is a matter of which victims one gives priority to: the ones in the Twin Towers or the ones in Gaza; the ones in the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* or the ones killed by French-backed rebels in Syria.

Then there are the dead and injured members of the wedding parties that Western drones inflict with uncanny regularity; the million dead Iraqi civilians; the dead Afghan civilians; the victims of the French-promoted chaos in Libya. There are our victims and there are their victims. It is victims all around and everyone is out for revenge.

A Possible Way Out

Is there a way out of this vicious cycle – one that might also uphold a broad and truly universal standard for freedom of speech? Ideally, there is – it is called international law. This is not just any set of laws, but ones that reflect human and civil rights.

After World War II there were so many victims of war and terror that international laws and conventions were created to prevent, or at least ameliorate, the practices and policies that victimized millions of innocent people. Updated Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([Article 19](#) of which supports a broad interpretation of freedom of speech) are examples of these efforts.

These are very good precedents which, in theory, have many endorsers among the world's nations. Unfortunately, their influence on practice has always been marginal and even that much has been waning. Particularly in the last 50 years these rules of behavior have been undermined by fading memories of the mid-Twentieth Century horrors that once made them seem so necessary.

In the place of those memories has come a resurgence of narrow-minded nationalism, delusional racism, outright bigotry, and increasingly unchecked instances of brutality. Some might say that is the true nature of human beings at work – their fallen nature. However, I don't believe this.

The Geneva Conventions and Universal Declaration of Human Rights are every bit as much a product of human decision-making as are the criminal acts they seek to prevent.

So, ultimately, we have to ask what sort of a world we want to live in. If part of that answer is a world without terror attacks, then we have to honestly investigate why those attacks take place. And, if that investigation reveals (as

it surely will) that Western popular ignorance and intolerance, and the governmental policies these conditions allow, have helped motivate those attacks, then it behooves us to reconsider our attitudes and actions and set new standards for our behavior.

The progressive international laws and conventions cited above can serve us as good standards in such an effort.

Strangely, there may be a perverse correlation between how much blood is shed and our eventual moment of self-examination. It took two world wars to produce such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. How much blood has to be shed before we actually honor them?

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

The Integrity of Ambassador Robert White

At the start of the Reagan administration, Ambassador Robert White refused to cover up the rape-murders of four American churchwomen in El Salvador and paid for his integrity with the end of his career. His death last Tuesday at age 88 marked the passing of a courageous diplomat, writes ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman.

By Melvin A. Goodman

The death of Ambassador Robert E. White is a reminder of what an American envoy can do to advance our principles and to guide our foreign policy. As an ambassador to Paraguay and El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s, White demonstrated a commitment to social justice and human rights. Sadly, he was dismissed from the Foreign Service by Secretary of State Alexander Haig because the Reagan administration had decided on a policy of militarism in Central America.

Bob White was the ambassador in El Salvador in December 1980 when four American churchwomen were raped and murdered by the armed forces of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government. The evening before their murders, two of the women had dinner at White's home to discuss the problems that relief workers were having in El Salvador. At the grave site for two of the women, White repeated over and over again that "This time they are not going to get away with it."

White took what started as a clandestine assassination attempt and turned it into a full-fledged international incident. He filed cables to the State Department and testified to the Congress. Secretary of State Haig suppressed White's cables from El Salvador, and FBI Director William Webster refused to release any documents related to the murders.

The Reagan administration made sure that the efforts of the families of the murdered women could get no access to documents from the State Department, the FBI, and the CIA. In 1989, the CIA even relocated to Miami the Salvadoran defense minister complicit in the murder of the American nuns.

Until very recently, White was active in testifying in Florida in the trials of those involved in the murders.

Nine months before the murder of the nuns, Ambassador White informed the State Department that El Salvador's leading right-wing politician, Robert D'Aubuisson had ordered the assassination of the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero. In this case, the CIA knew exactly who pulled the trigger to kill Romero, but failed to inform the congressional intelligence committees.

The CIA's deputy director for intelligence, Robert Gates, suppressed all intelligence on the killing, part of the Agency's effort to bury many of the truths of American policy toward Latin America in the 1980s.

White was obviously aware of these truths, and in 1980 forwarded a series of sensitive cables condemning the extreme forces on the Right made up of the rich landowners, their private armies, and high-ranking military officers. He warned that there would be no end to the violence against the clergy and the disadvantaged unless the United States used its influence with the uniformed military.

Unfortunately, Secretary Haig and CIA Director William Casey had other ideas that involved a massive paramilitary program to protect the right wing in El Salvador and to train and arm the Nicaraguans in Honduras the Contras to overthrow the Sandinistas. This marked the beginning of Iran-Contra, which Ambassador White would never have tolerated.

In challenging Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America Elliott Abrams, White tried to get a replacement for the CIA station chief in San Salvador, who was forwarding politicized intelligence to justify continued military support for the government. White also took issue with a State Department "white paper," drafted by CIA analysts on instructions from Gates, that falsely pictured a "flood of arms" from such Soviet allies as Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Bulgaria to Central America.

The directorate of operations of the CIA was particularly opposed to the role of Bob White because of his opposition to its program to develop secret police forces throughout Central America. The CIA stations in Central America were at odds with the embassies because of the close collaboration between the CIA and the ministries of the interior as well as the police. White knew that the violence that ensued from this collaboration was responsible for the wave of emigration to the United States as people were fleeing from instability.

Ultimately, White was punished because he would not repeat the official lie that there was a “serious investigation” of the murders in El Salvador. Instead, he pointed out that there was “no reason to believe the government of El Salvador is conducting a serious investigation.”

As a result, he was summarily dismissed as ambassador and was told that the only job available to him was in the Foreign Service Inspection Corps, a traditional dumping ground for career officers singled out for retribution. When Bob White declined this assignment, he was dismissed from the Foreign Service.

Once again, a serious whistleblower was totally vindicated by the events that took place in Central America in the 1980s. White warned the Reagan administration against a policy of militarism, but the neoconservatives of the time led by Haig, Casey, Gates, and Abrams got their policy and the violence that accompanied it. The United States would clearly benefit by having more diplomats like Bob White.

Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy in Washington, DC and adjunct professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *The Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA and National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism* as well as the forthcoming *The Path to Dissent: The Story of a Whistleblower at the CIA* (City Lights Publishers, 2015). Goodman is the national security and intelligence columnist for counterpunch.org, where this story first appeared.)

How CIA Got NYT to Kill Iran-Nuke Story

When reporter James Risen called CIA to ask about a covert scheme to slip flawed nuclear blueprints to Iran, the Bush administration brought out some big guns to get the New York Times to rein in Risen, showing how cozy those relationships can be, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who also served as President George W. Bush's national security adviser, made headlines when she testified Thursday at the leak trial of former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling, underscoring that powerful people in the Bush administration went to great lengths a dozen years ago to prevent disclosure of a classified operation.

But as The Associated Press noted, "While Rice's testimony helped establish the importance of the classified program in question, her testimony did not implicate Sterling in any way as the leaker."

Few pixels and little ink went to the witness just before Rice, former CIA spokesman William Harlow, whose testimony stumbled into indicating why he thought of Sterling early on in connection with the leak, which ultimately resulted in a ten-count indictment.

Harlow, who ran the CIA press office, testified that Sterling came to mind soon after *New York Times* reporter James Risen first called him, on April 3, 2003, about the highly secret Operation Merlin, a CIA program that provided faulty nuclear weapon design information to Iran.

Harlow testified that he tried to dissuade Risen without confirming the existence of Operation Merlin, first telling the reporter "that if there was such a program, I didn't think a respectable newspaper should be writing about it." The next day, when Risen called back, "I said that such a story would jeopardize national security."

Not until cross-examination by a defense attorney did Harlow acknowledge something that he'd failed to mention when describing his initial conversation with Risen: In fact, Harlow had told Risen that only Al Jazeera would be willing to cover the story he was pursuing.

As a prosecution witness, Harlow volunteered some information that may come back to haunt the prosecutors. With alarm spreading among CIA officials, Harlow testified, someone at the agency mentioned to him that Sterling had worked on the Operation Merlin program. In his testimony, Harlow went on to say that Sterling's name was familiar to him because Sterling, who is African American, had filed a race discrimination lawsuit against the CIA.

Left dangling in the air was the indication that Harlow thought of Sterling as a possible leaker because he'd gone through channels to claim that he had been a victim of racial bias at the CIA. Sterling's complaint had received substantial coverage in several major news outlets. (The CIA eventually got the suit thrown out of court on the grounds of state secrets.)

According to Harlow's testimony, everything he heard about Operation Merlin at

the CIA was that it was going swimmingly. The only words otherwise came from Risen, who told him the Iranians were already aware of the flaws in the nuclear weapons design that the CIA had arranged to be passed along to them. Harlow testified that it was the first time he'd heard any assertion that Operation Merlin was not well run.

Along the way, on the witness stand Thursday afternoon, the veteran PR operative for the CIA let some paternalism slip: "I did think there was a way to dumb the story down so it would be appropriate to put in the paper," Harlow said.

But his hopes to block the story or water it down enough to render it insignificant were clearly failing. Risen showed no sign of backing off. So the CIA called in big guns. Twenty-seven days after Risen's first call on the subject to Harlow, national security adviser Rice hosted a meeting that included CIA Director George Tenet and other government officials as well as Risen and *Times* Washington bureau chief Jill Abramson.

The pressure worked. Within 10 days, the *Times* told the National Security Council that it would not publish the story. "I was relieved when I learned the story was not running," Rice testified on Thursday, "and I was grateful to the *Times*."

Her relief lasted almost three years, until Risen included a chapter about Operation Merlin in his 2006 book *State of War*. But Rice has never had a reason to rescind her gratitude to the *New York Times*; the newspaper never published the story. Information about the dangerous CIA program only reached the public because Risen took the risk of putting it in a book.

Norman Solomon is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and the author of *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. He is a co-founder of RootsAction.org. [This article originally was published by ExposeFacts.org]

Can Obama Untangle from Syria's Civil War?

President Obama appears open to a UN strategy of negotiating local ceasefires in Syria as a step toward a political solution to that civil war, but he remains tangled in the demand from Israel, Saudi Arabia and other U.S. allies for

“regime change” in Damascus, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Contradictions between the Obama administration’s policy in Syria and realities on the ground have become so acute that U.S. officials began last November discussing a proposal calling for support of local ceasefires between opposition forces and the Assad regime in dozens of locations across Syria.

The proposal surfaced in two articles in Foreign Policy magazine and in a column by the Washington Post’s David Ignatius. Those indicated that it was under serious consideration by administration officials. In fact, the proposal may even have played a role in a series of four White House meetings during the week of Nov. 6-13, to discuss Syria policy, one of which Obama himself presided over.

Ignatius, who usually reflects the views of senior national security officials, suggested that the administration have nothing better to offer than the proposal. And Robert Ford, who served as U.S. ambassador to Syria until last May and is now a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, told David Kenner of Foreign Policy that he believes the White House “is likely to latch onto” the idea of local cease-fires “in the absence of any other plan they’ve been able to develop.”

The proposal also appears to parallel the thinking behind the efforts of new United Nations peace envoy, Steffan de Mistura, who has called for the creation of what he calls “freeze zones” – meaning local ceasefires that would allow humanitarian aid to reach civilian populations.

The fact that the proposal is being taken seriously is especially notable, because it does not promise to achieve the aims of existing policy. Instead, it offers a way out of a policy that could not possibly deliver on the results it promised.

But the implication of such a policy shift would be a tacit acknowledgement that the United States cannot achieve its previous stated goal of unseating the Assad regime in Syria. The Obama administration would certainly deny any such implication, at least initially, for domestic political as well as foreign policy reasons, but the policy would refocus on the immediate need of saving lives and promoting peace, rather than on unrealistic political or military ambitions.

The U.S. government’s Syrian policy lurched from Obama’s abortive plan to launch an air war against the Assad regime in September 2013 to the idea that the U.S. would help train thousands of “moderate” Syrian opposition fighters to resist

the threat from Islamic State in September 2014. But the “moderate” forces have no interest in fighting the Islamic State. And in any case, they have long-ceased to be a serious rival of the Islamic and other jihadi forces in Syria.

It was no accident that the alternative policy surfaced in November, just as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) had been completely routed from its bases in the north by Islamic State forces. Post columnist Ignatius, whose writing is almost always informed by access to senior national security officials, not only mentioned that rout as the context in which a proposal was presented in Washington, but quoted from three messages the desperate FSA commander under attack sent to the U.S. military, requesting air support.

The author of the paper that appears to have struck a chord in Washington, Nir Rosen, is a journalist whose depth of knowledge of human realities on the ground in conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon, is unmatched. His personal encounters with the people and organizations that fought in those conflicts, recounted in his 2010 book, Aftermath, reveal nuances of motives and calculations that can be found nowhere else in the literature.

Rosen now works for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, which was active in bringing about the local ceasefire in Homs, considered the most significant such achievement so far. Rosen gave Robert Malley, the senior National Security Council official responsible for Syria, a 55-page, single-spaced report, making the case for a policy of supporting the negotiation of local ceasefires, which also calls for “freezing the war as it is.”

The report is based on the twin premises that neither side can defeat the other militarily, and that the resulting stalemate strengthens the Islamic State and its jihadi allies in Syria, according to James Traub’s story in Foreign Policy.

Negotiating local deals under the conditions of the Syrian war is devilishly difficult, as an examination of 35 different local deals by researchers at the London School of Economics and the Syrian NGO Madani shows. Most of the deals were prompted by the Syrian regime’s strategy of besieging opposition enclaves, which meant the regime’s forces were hoping to impose terms that were nothing less than surrender.

Sometimes local pro-government militias frustrated potential deals, because of a combination sectarian score-settling and because they were gaining corrupt economic advantages from the sieges they were imposing. (In other cases, however, the pro-government NDF militias lent their supportive to local deals.)

The Syrian regime ultimately recognized that its interests lay in a successful deal in Homs, but the researchers found that the farther military commanders

were from the location of fighting, the more they clung to the idea that military victory was still possible. The primary source of pressure for ceasefire, not surprisingly, was from the civilians, who suffered its consequence most heavily. The study observes that the larger the ratio of civilians to fighters in the opposition enclave the stronger the commitment to a ceasefire.

Both the LSE-Madani study and the Integrity Research paper say that international support in the form of both mediators and truce monitors would help establish both clearer arrangements and legal commitments for ceasefire, safe passage and opening routes of humanitarian assistance. Homs is an example of a deal where the UN actually plays a positive role in influencing the implementation of the truce, according to Integrity.

The small steps toward peace and reconciliation that the local truces represent are highly vulnerable unless they lead to a comprehensive process. Even though the challenge from the Islamic State is a shadow over the entire process, it is an approach that is likely to be more effective than escalating foreign military involvement. And surprising as it may seem, the LSE-Madani study reveals that even the Islamic State concluded a ceasefire deal with a civil society organization in Aleppo.

But even if the Obama administration recognizes the advantages of the proposal of the local ceasefire approach for Syria, it cannot be assumed that it will actually carry out the policy. The reason is the heavy influence of its relations with its main regional allies on Washington. Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar would all reject a policy that would allow a regime they regard as an Iranian ally to persist in Syria.

Unless and until the United States can figure out a way to free its Middle East policy from its entangling regional alliances, its policy in Syria will be confused, contradictory and feckless.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and historian writing on US national security policy. His latest book, *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, was published in February 2014. [This article originally appeared in Middle East Eye.]
