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 Yanukovych.

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 Yanukovych 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-Yanukovych 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.