

# Are Neocons an Existential Threat?

**Exclusive:** Despite a record of unprecedented error, American neocons remain the dominant foreign policy force in Official Washington, demanding more “regime change” in the Middle East and a new Cold War that could heat up and end all life on the planet, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The neoconservatives arguably have damaged American national interests more than any group in modern history. They have done more harm than the marginal Communists pursued by Sen. Joe McCarthy in the 1950s, more than the Yippies of the 1960s, more than Richard Nixon’s Watergate burglars in the 1970s or the Iran-Contra conspirators in the 1980s.

The neocons have plunged the U.S. government into extraordinarily ill-considered wars wasting trillions of dollars, killing hundreds of thousands if not millions of people, and destabilizing large swaths of the planet including the Middle East, much of Africa and now Europe. Those costs include a swelling hatred against America and a deformed U.S. foreign policy elite that is no longer capable of formulating coherent strategies.

Yet, the neocons have remained immune from the consequences of their catastrophes. They still dominate Washington’s major think tanks as well as the op-ed pages of virtually all the leading newspapers, including The Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and New York Times. They hold down key positions in the State Department, and their “liberal interventionist” pals have the ear of President Barack Obama.

Clearly, the neocons are skilled operatives, knowing how to arrange a steady stream of funding for themselves, from military contractors donating to think tanks, from U.S. taxpayers footing the bill for organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy, and from ideological billionaires set on aligning U.S. foreign policy with hard-line Israeli desires.

The neocons are adept at writing op-ed articles that twist any set of facts into support for their ideological cause; they supply just the right quote that fits into the news cycle’s latest narrative; and they host policy conferences that attract powerful politicians and fawning media coverage.

But are the neocons a force that can coexist with the American Republic? Have they become an existential threat not only to the constitutional structure crafted in 1787 but to continued life on the planet? Are they locked on a course of action that could lead to a nuclear holocaust?

Clearly, the neocons' commitment to Israeli interests violates a key principle established by the nation's early presidents who all warned against "foreign entangling alliances" as a fundamental threat to a citizens' republic that would transform America into a warrior state that would inevitably sap the nation's liberties.

That loss of liberty has surely happened. Not only is there now bipartisan support for a surveillance state that can spy on the personal lives of American citizens, but the U.S. government has wedded itself to the concept of "strategic communications," a catch-phrase that merges psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. into a seamless approach toward managing public perceptions at home and abroad.

When information is systematically pushed through a filter designed to ensure consent, the core democratic concept of an informed electorate has been turned on its head: The people no longer oversee the government; the government manipulates the people.

### **Neocon Tactics**

All this has been part of the neocon approach dating back to the 1980s when key operatives, such as Robert Kagan and Elliott Abrams, were part of inter-agency task forces designed to whip the American people into line behind the government's aggressive war policies. Guided by seasoned CIA propagandists, such as Walter Raymond Jr., the neocons learned their lessons well.

But the neocons are no longer just threatening the existence of the Republic; they are now endangering the continuation of life itself. They have decided to launch a new Cold War against Russia that will push the world toward the brink of thermo-nuclear war.

Of course, the neocons will frame their doomsday strategy as all Vladimir Putin's fault. They will insist that they are just standing up to "Russian aggression" and that anyone who doesn't join them is a "stooge of Moscow" or "weak." They will dictate the shape of the debate just as they have in countless other situations, such as guiding Americans to war in Iraq over non-existent WMD stockpiles.

The neocon pundits will write seemingly authoritative op-eds about devious Kremlin strategies which will glue black hats on the Russians and white hats on whomever is on the other side, whether the neo-Nazis in Ukraine or the Islamic State/Al Qaeda terrorists in Syria. Americans will be whipped up into a frenzy that will demand a direct clash with the "Russ-kies" or "regime change" in Moscow.

There will be little or no concern about the risks. With the neocons, there never is. The assumption is that if “Amur-ika” is tough, the other side will back down. Then, with U.S.-led economic sanctions from the outside and U.S.-funded NGOs stirring up trouble from the inside, “regime change” becomes the cure-all.

Everyone who’s important in Official Washington everyone on the talk shows and op-ed pages knows that these disruptive situations always play out just the way they’re diagramed inside the top think tanks. A hand-picked “democratic reformer” who’s traveled the think-tank circuit and gotten the seal of approval the likes of Iraq’s Ahmed Chalabi will easily be installed and then the target country will do whatever the neocons dictate. After all, that approach worked so well in Iraq. The neocons always know best.

### **Raising the Stakes**

Yet, with Russia, the stakes are even higher than with Iraq. Yes, it’s easy to find fault with Vladimir Putin. I myself have a personal rule that men over 40 should keep their shirts on when out in public (unless maybe they’re actors in a Bond film or going for a swim at the beach).

But Putin at least is a rational player in global affairs. Indeed, he has tried to cooperate with President Obama on a variety of key issues, including convincing Syria to surrender its chemical weapons and getting Iran to make concessions in the nuclear deal two contributions to world peace that infuriated the neocons who favored bomb-bomb-bombing both Syria and Iran.

At a dinner party in Europe this summer, I was asked by a well-informed British woman what should be done with Putin. My answer was that Putin doesn’t frighten me; it’s the guy who comes after Putin who frightens me because despite the neocons’ confidence that their “regime change” plans for Moscow will install a malleable moderate, the more likely result would be a much harder-line Russian nationalist than Putin.

The idea of the nuclear codes being handed to someone determined to defend the honor of Mother Russia is what scares me. Then, the clumsily aggressive neocons in Washington would have their reckless counterpart in Moscow, with neither side having the wisdom of a John F. Kennedy or a Nikita Khrushchev as displayed during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

Would American neocons or a Russian super-nationalist have the wisdom and courage to back down, to compromise, to make the concessions necessary to avoid plunging over the edge? Or would they assume that the other guy would blink first and that they would “win” the showdown?

I recall what William R. Polk, one of Kennedy's mid-level aides during the Cuban Missile Crisis, wrote recently about what happens to the human mind under such stress.

"Since human beings make the decisions, we must be aware of decision makers' vulnerabilities," Polk wrote. "During the Cuban Missile Crisis, I was one of about 25 civilians fully engaged in the events. I was not at the center but in the second or third 'echelon.' So I did not feel the full strain, but by the Thursday of the Crisis, I was thoroughly exhausted. My judgment must have been impaired even though I was not aware of it.

"I do remember, however, a terrible episode fortunately lasting only a few minutes at which I thought to myself, 'let's just get it over with.' When later I met with my Soviet counterparts, I got the impression, although they denied it, that my feelings were not unique. How the strain impacted on the inner group I can only guess."

If someone as stable and serious as Bill Polk had such thoughts "let's just get it over with" what might happen when American neocons or hyped-up Russian nationalists are inserted into the decision process? That is an existential question that I don't want to even contemplate.

### **Endless Putin-Bashing**

And, if you doubt that the neocons will engage in over-the-top Cold War-style Putin bashing, you should read the op-ed by The Washington Post's neocon deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl on Monday, entitled "Putin shifts fronts: With a move into Syria, he continues his in-your-face maneuvers."

Diehl delves into Putin's psyche a process that is so much easier than doing real reporting and concludes that Putin's decision to join the fight in Syria against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda is just another attempt to stick his finger in the eye of the righteous but clueless United States.

Diehl, of course, starts off with the neocon-approved narrative of the Ukraine crisis, ignoring the key role of neocon Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland (Robert Kagan's wife) in midwifing the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installed an intensely anti-Russian regime on Russia's border. Nuland even handpicked the new Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, telling U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt in a phone call several weeks before the coup that "Yats is the guy."

The coup-makers then dispatched neo-Nazi militias (and Islamist militants) to wage a bloody "anti-terrorism operation" against ethnic Russian Ukrainians who resisted the "regime change." [See Consortiumnews.com's "Ukraine Merges Nazis

and Islamists.”]

But all that complexity is neatly boiled down by American neocons and the mainstream U.S. media as “Russian aggression.” Regarding the Syrian civil war, some neocons have even joined with senior Israeli officials in claiming that a victory by Al Qaeda is preferable to the continuation of Assad’s secular regime. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Syria’s Nightmarish Narrative.”]

Yet, however the story goes, the biggest bad guy is Putin, always with sinister motives and evil intent. So, in explaining the situation in Ukraine and Syria, Diehl writes:

“Throughout the summer, Russia’s forces in eastern Ukraine kept up a daily drumbeat of attacks on the Ukrainian army, inflicting significant casualties while avoiding a response by Western governments. On Sept. 1, following a new cease-fire, the guns suddenly fell silent. Optimists speculated that Vladimir Putin was backing down.

“Then came the reports from Syria: Russian warplanes were overflying the rebel-held province of Idlib. Barracks were under construction at a new base. Ships were unloading new armored vehicles. Putin, it turns out, wasn’t retreating, but shifting fronts, and executing another of the in-your-face maneuvers that have repeatedly caught the Obama administration flat-footed.”

The rest of the op-ed is similarly didactic and one-sided: Putin is the villain and Obama is the rube. In Diehl’s world, only he and other neocons have what it takes to take on Putin and put Russia down.

Any alternative explanation for Russia’s action in Syria is brushed aside, such as Putin deciding that a victory by either Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front as favored by Israel or the even more bloodthirsty Islamic State is unacceptable and thus Assad’s regime must be stabilized to avert a major geopolitical catastrophe.

Typically, the neocons breeze past the frightening logic of what the collapse of Assad’s military would mean for the Middle East, Europe and the world. After all, once Israeli leaders decided to throw in their lot with Al Qaeda in Syria, the die was cast as far as the neocons were concerned.

But the notion that the neocons can micromanage the outcome in Syria, with “moderate” Al Qaeda taking Damascus rather than the more “radical” Islamic State, reflects the arrogant know-nothing-ism of these U.S. opinion leaders. More likely, Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front would coordinate with their former allies in the Islamic State and share in the Sunni revenge against Syria’s Christian, Alawite, Shiite and other minorities.

So, while the Islamic State would busy itself chopping off heads of “heretics,” Al Qaeda could use its new headquarters in Damascus to plot the next round of terror attacks against the West. And, as destabilizing as the current refugee flow into Europe has been, it would multiply astronomically as the survivors of the Islamic State/Al Qaeda bloodletting flee Syria.

With Europe in chaos and the neocons still insisting that the real enemy is Russia, the possible consequences would be frightening to contemplate. Yet, this is the course that the neocons have set for the world and nearly all the Republican candidates for president have signed on for the journey along with Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

In 2014, arch-neocon Robert Kagan, whom Secretary of State Clinton selected as one of her advisers while also promoting his wife, Victoria Nuland, told The New York Times that he could embrace a Clinton presidency: “If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue it’s something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else.” [For more, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?”](#) and [“Obama’s True Foreign Policy ‘Weakness.’”](#)]

So far, virtually no one in the 2016 presidential race or in the mainstream U.S. news media is seriously addressing the reality of the neocons’ “regime change” chaos spreading across the Middle East and the prospect of a destabilized Europe. What limited discussion there is on the campaign trail mostly echoes Jackson Diehl’s Putin-bashing.

No one dares confront the existential question of whether the United States and the world can continue to tolerate and accommodate the neoconservatives.

**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](#).**

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## How Russia Can Help in Syria

Despite Official Washington’s annoyance, the Russian involvement in Syria could work in favor of U.S. national interests by adding forces experienced in dealing

with Islamic extremists and capable of restoring some stability, a prerequisite for a political settlement, writes ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

Washington has been wrapped in confusion and indecision for years now in trying to sort out just what its real objectives are in Syria. The obsessive and ultimately failed goal of denying Iran influence in the Middle East has notably receded with President Barack Obama's admirable success in reaching a deal with Iran on the nuclear issue and gradual normalization of Iran's place in the world.

But while the Israel lobby and its Republican allies failed to block Obama's painstaking work in reaching that agreement, they now seem determined to hobble its implementation in any way possible. This is utterly self-defeating: unable to block Iran's re-emergence they seem determined to deny themselves any of the key payoffs of the agreement, the chance to work with Iran selectively on several important common strategic goals: the isolation and defeat of ISIS, a settlement in Syria that denies a jihadi takeover, the rollback of sectarianism as a driving force in the region, a peaceful settlement in Iran's neighbor Afghanistan, and the freeing up of energy/pipeline options across Asia.

But let's address this Syrian issue. There's a new development here, stepped-up Russian involvement, that poses new challenge to the American neocon strategic vision. So here is where Washington needs to sort out what it really wants in Syria.

Is the main goal still to erode Iranian influence in the region by taking out Iran's ally in Damascus? Or does it want to check Russian influence in the Middle East wherever possible in order to maintain America's (fast becoming illusory) dominant influence? These two goals had seemed to weigh more heavily in Washington's calculus than Syrian domestic considerations. In other words, President Bashar al-Assad is a proxy target.

There are two major countries in the world at this point capable of exerting serious influence over Damascus, Russia and Iran. Not surprisingly, they possess that influence precisely because they both enjoy long-time good ties with Damascus; Assad obviously is far more likely to listen to tested allies than heed the plans of enemies dedicated to his overthrow.

The overthrow of Assad seemed a simple task in 2011 as the Arab Spring sparked early uprisings against him. The U.S. readily supported that goal, as did Turkey along with Saudi Arabia and others. As the Assad regime began to demonstrate serious signs of resilience, however, the U.S. and Turkey stepped up support to

nominally moderate and secular armed opposition against Damascus, thereby extending the brutal civil war.

That calculus began to change when radical jihadi groups linked either to Al Qaeda or to ISIS (the “Islamic State”) began to overshadow moderate opposition forces. As ruthless as Assad had been in crushing domestic opposition, it became clear that any likely successor government would almost surely be dominated by such radical jihadi forces, who simply fight more effectively than the West’s preferred moderate and secular groups who never got their act together.

### **The Russian Card**

Enter Russia. Moscow had already intervened swiftly and effectively in 2013 to head off a planned U.S. airstrike on Damascus to take out chemical weapons by convincing Damascus to freely yield up its chemical weapons; the plan actually succeeded. This event helped overcome at least Obama’s earlier reluctance to recognize the potential benefits of Russian influence in the Middle East to positively serve broader western interests in the region as well.

Russia is, of course, no late-comer to the region: Russian tsars long acted as the protector of Eastern Orthodox Christians in the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century; the Russians had been diplomatic players in the geopolitical game in the region long before the creation of the Soviet Union.

During the West’s Cold War with the Soviet Union the two camps often strategically supported opposite sides of regional conflicts: Moscow supported revolutionary Arab dictators while the West supported pro-western dictators. Russia has had dominant military influence in Syria for over five decades through weapons sales, diplomatic support, and its naval base in Tartus.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russian influence in the area sharply declined for the first time as the new Russia sorted itself out. America then began declaring itself the “world’s sole superpower,” allegedly free to shape the world strategically as it saw fit.

And the significant neoconservative and liberal interventionist factions in Washington still nourish the same mentality today, predicated on the belief that the U.S. can continue to maintain primacy around the world, economic, military, and diplomatic. In this sense, any acknowledgment of Russian influence in the Middle East (or elsewhere) represents an affront, even “a threat” to U.S. dominance and prestige.

For similar reasons Iran’s long-time open challenge against American ability act with impunity in the Middle East has always constituted a deep source of American strategic anger, viscerally surpassing the more Israel-driven nuclear



issue.

Today the combination of Russia and Iran (whose interests do not fully coincide either) exert major influence over the weakening Assad regime. If we are truly concerned about ISIS we must recognize that *restoration of a modicum of peace in Syria and Iraq are essential prerequisites* to the ultimate elimination of ISIS that feeds off of the chaos.

Russia appears now to be unilaterally introducing new military forces, stepped up weapons deliveries, and possibly including limited troop numbers into Syria specifically to back the Assad regime's staying power. Washington appears dismayed at this turn of events, and has yet to make up its mind whether it would rather get rid of Assad or get rid of ISIS. It is folly to think that both goals can be achieved militarily.

### **Even More Chaos**

In my view, the fall of Assad will not bring peace but will instead guarantee deadly massive long-term civil conflict in Syria among contending successors in which radical jihadi forces are likely to predominate, unless the West commits major ground forces to impose and supervise a peace. We've been there once before in the Iraq scenario. A replay of Iraq surely is not what the West wants.

So just how much of a "threat" is an enhanced Russian military presence in Syria? It is simplistic to view this as some zero-sum game in which any Russian gain is an American loss. The West lived with a Soviet naval base in Syria for many decades; meanwhile the U.S. itself has dozens of military bases in the Middle East. (To many observers, these may indeed represent part of the problem.)

Even were Syria to become completely subservient to Russia, U.S. general interests in the region would not seriously suffer (unless one considers maintenance of unchallenged unilateral power to be the main U.S. interest there. I don't.) The West has lived with such a Syrian regime before.

Russia, with its large and restive Muslim population and especially Chechens, is more fearful of jihadi Islam than is even the U.S. If Russia were to end up putting combat troops on the ground against ISIS (unlikely), it would represent a net gain for the West. Russia is far less hated by populations in *the Middle East* than is the U.S. (although Moscow is quite hated by many Muslims of the former Soviet Union.)

Russia is likely to be able to undertake military operations against jihadis from bases within Syria. Indeed, it will certainly shore up Damascus militarily, rather than allowing Syria to collapse into warring jihadi factions.

What Russia will not accept in the Middle East is another unilateral U.S. (or "NATO") fait accompli in "regime change" that does not carry full UN support. (China's interests are identical to Russia's in most respects here.)

We are entering a new era in which the U.S. is increasingly no longer able to call the shots in shaping the international order. Surely it is in the (enlightened) self-interest of the U.S. to see an end to the conflict in Syria with all its cross-border sectarian viciousness in Iraq. Russia is probably better positioned than any other world player to exert influence over Assad.

The U.S. should be able to comfortably live even with a Russian-dominated Syria if it can bring an end to the conflict, especially when Washington meanwhile is allied with virtually every one of Syria's neighbors. (How long Assad himself stays would be subject to negotiation; his personal presence is not essential to 'Alawi power in Syria.)

What can Russia do to the West from its long-term dominant position in Syria? Take Syria's (virtually non-existent) oil? Draw on the wealth of this impoverished country? Increase arms sales to the region (no match for U.S. arms sales)? Threaten Israel? Russia already has close ties with Israel and probably up to a quarter of Israel's population are Russian Jews.

Bottom line: Washington does not have the luxury of playing dog in the manger in "managing" the Middle East, especially after two decades or more of massive and destructive policy failure on virtually all fronts.

It is essential that the U.S. not extend its new Cold War with Russia into the Middle East where shared interests are fairly broad, unless one rejects that very supposition on ideological grounds. The same goes for Iran. We have to start someplace.

**Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle). [This story originally appeared at [www.grahamefuller.com](http://www.grahamefuller.com)]**

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## US Confusion over the Syrian War

Official Washington is in a tizzy over Russia's decision to join the fight in Syria to defeat Al Qaeda and ISIS, though one might have thought the U.S. would welcome Moscow's help. But there are other factors, including the wishes of Israel and Saudi Arabia, complicating matters, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On May 1, I wrote an analysis on "Changing Alliances and the National Interest in the Middle East." In this piece, I made the argument that, at least since September 2001 and the declaration of the "war on terror," the defeat of Al Qaeda and its affiliates has been a publicly stated national interest of the United States. This certainly has been the way it has been presented by almost continuous government pronouncements and media stories dedicated to this "war" over the years.

Given this goal, it logically follows that, with the evolution of Al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (aka ISIS or Daesh) and Jabhat al Nusra (aka Al Qaeda in Syria), those who also seek the destruction of such groups are America's de facto allies in the "war on terror" and warrant our assistance. Likewise, those who openly or clandestinely support these religious fanatics are opponents of a central U.S. national interest, and their relationship with the United States should at least be open to review.

Then came the shocker: Who has been and continues to actively oppose these al-Qaeda derivatives with soldiers on the ground? It turns out to be, among others – Iran, Hezbollah and Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government. And, who are clandestinely aiding the Al-Qaeda affiliates, the enemies of Washington? It turns out to be Israel and Saudi Arabia.

As I explain in my original analysis, this latter development has much to do with the fact that both the Israelis and the Saudis have decided that regime change in Syria is a high priority, even if it means ISIS and al-Nusra end up taking over Syria and, as Robert Parry puts it in a Consortiumnews.com article, ISIS "chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other 'heretics' and/or Al Qaeda having a major Mideast capital from which to plot more attacks on the West."

Has the U.S. government, or for that matter the U.S. media, brought this anomalous situation to the attention of the general public? No. Has Washington altered its policies in the region so as to ally with the actual anti-al-Qaeda forces? Not at all. Why not? These are questions we will address below, but first we must look at a recent complicating factor.

### **Russia to the Rescue**

This screwball situation has now taken yet another turn. The Russian government, which also sees Al Qaeda and its affiliates as a growing threat, has decided that the U.S. will not meaningfully act against the religious fanatics now threatening Syria – a country with which it, Russia, has strong ties. Having

come to this conclusion, Moscow has decided to take the initiative and increase its military assistance to Damascus.

According to a *New York Times* article of Sept. 5, this includes bringing into Syria as many as a thousand military advisers and support staff. Russia already has a naval base at the port city of Tartus. Now it is establishing a presence at the main airbase outside the city of Latakia.

All of this has raised alarms in Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry, who has met several times with Russian officials about the Syrian civil war, was reported by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on Sept. 10 to have called his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to tell him that the Russian moves will only increase the level of violence rather than help promote a negotiated settlement.

If this report is accurate, Kerry must have come across as rather lame. After over four years of protracted internecine slaughter, over 4 million refugees, and numerous failed attempts at a negotiated settlement, all one has as a result is the growth of rampaging religious fanatics who now control much of Syria and part of Iraq as well.

It might just be the case that Moscow has come to the conclusion that a negotiated settlement is not possible, and what one really needs is a military victory that destroys organizations such as ISIS and al-Nusra. Oddly, the U.S. government seems to be alarmed at this prospect. No doubt this is because Moscow sees no reason to displace its ally, Bashar al-Assad, while "regime change" is a cause celebre for U.S. and Israeli leaders.

Washington has gone so far as to request NATO-affiliated countries to deny Russian transport planes permission to overfly their territory on their way to Syria. At least one such country, Bulgaria, has done just that. Fortunately, this does not really hamper the Russian effort. Iran, another enemy of Al Qaeda, has granted permission for the over-flights, thus opening up a convenient and more or less direct route for the Russian supply line.

The goal of destroying Al-Qaeda-like organizations is, supposedly, what the "war on terror" is all about. Nonetheless, the U.S. government's policies in this regard are inconsistent. Does the U.S. want to destroy Al Qaeda and its affiliates or not? The answer is, mostly, yes. However, something often holds the government back – something that the Russians don't have to contend with.

That something breaks down into three parts: (1) longstanding, conservative Washington-based special interest lobbies, the most powerful of which is sponsored by Israel; (2) the pro-war neoconservative elements within American

society that often cooperate with these lobbies; and (3) an American military bureaucracy parts of which are committed to maintaining a system of land, air and naval bases situated mostly in dictatorial Middle East states hostile to both Russia and Syria. It is this combination of forces that prevents meaningful changes even as evolving realities would seem to demand them.

In other words, while Israel and Saudi Arabia can act in ways they consider to be in their national interests, their agents and allies in Washington exercise enough influence to discourage U.S. policymakers from doing the same thing when it comes to the Middle East. That is why Washington is not pointing up the fact that two close “allies” are helping the same sort of people who attacked the World Trade Center, while simultaneously chastising the Russians for actually acting forcefully against those same terrorists.

The inability to adjust to changing realities is a sure sign of decline, particularly for a “great power.” And, unfortunately that seems to be the situation for the U.S. At least at this point, one can only conclude that the Obama administration’s ability to secure the Iran nuclear agreement is an isolated example of realism.

Current U.S. policy toward Syria shows that Washington has not made the turnaround leading to a permanent clear-sighted ability to assess national interests in the Middle East.

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## Donald Trump’s Nativist Impulse

The anti-immigrant focus of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign reminds historian Bernard A. Weisberger of shameful past eras that conflict with America’s self-image as a place of refuge for people from many lands.

By Bernard A. Weisberger

It has so far annoyed but not really surprised me that Donald Trump, despite being an obnoxious bully, has defied expectations with a steady rise in the public opinion polls. It may be that his buffoonery and megalomania are simply more attractive to some early voters than rival candidates, with their solemn professions that what pushes them into the grind of campaigning is their

dedication to promoting the public welfare.

But I am considerably more than annoyed when Trump puts himself at the head of the armies of the new nativism by using his bullhorn to echo the warnings of the movement's Cassandras against the supposed "hordes" of undocumented immigrants pouring through our "open southern border." His point of attack is the so-called "anchor babies", children of pregnant mothers who supposedly sneak into the United States so that their children will be born here and automatically become citizens.

The hidden, malodorous and unproven subtext is that these children, entitled to the privileges of citizenship, will open the gates to legalizing the entry of family members, swarms of whom will qualify for welfare state entitlement programs, so that they may live in happy idleness at the expense of "real" American taxpayers. None of these suppositions has yet been proven by any serious evidence.

So thus far, disgusting enough. But when Trump dipped into the gutter to add to this repertory of lies and half truths one of the oldest and rankest, namely that Mexico was emptying its prisons and asylums to let rapists and thieves run free on our streets (a charge eagerly snapped up by the likes of O'Reilly and Limbaugh, and left unchallenged by many of Trump's rivals for the nomination) I boiled over. That's crossing the line that separates debate from shameless indecency.

### **Historical Background**

I am a historian of the United States and have heard it all before, sometimes almost verbatim and no less gross. Our works of history rightly celebrate our role as a land of asylum and opportunity for people from almost everywhere on the globe. It's a pillar of our cherished self-image as exceptional among nations. But they often overlook or minimize the contrasting truth that there was always stiff resistance to that hospitality.

Listen to this: "America has become the sewer into which the pollutions of European jails are emptied." Substitute "Mexican" or "Latin American" for "European" and it could be straight out of Trump's latest eruption. But it's from a newspaper published in the 1850s by supporters of an anti-Catholic and foreigner-hating movement that began as a secret society whose members were ordered, when asked nosy questions, to say: "I know nothing."

Eventually, the "Know-Nothings" emerged into the open and organized themselves into a political organization that campaigned in 1854 as "the American Party."

In that first off-year foray, the new entry won a number of state and local

offices and some seats in both House and Senate. The basic glue that held Know-Nothing-ism together was hatred of the alien (especially the Irish). The slither of the Know Nothings into the American Party was a way of “protecting” America from the Pope’s minions and other evil foreign influences.

Happily, 1854 was only a flash in the pan. When the party ran a national ticket headed by so respectable a figure as ex-US President Millard Fillmore, they won only a single state, Maryland.

By the time Abraham Lincoln ran for the Senate in 1858, two years before his presidential campaign, as many as half of the American people were the offspring of Europeans and could not trace their ancestry back to the stirring days of 1776. But if they looked at the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln said in a campaign speech in Chicago, they found the words “all men are created equal” became “the father of all moral principle in them, and they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.”

This self-evident truth of equal creation became the “electric cord that link[ed] the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men everywhere.” To be American was not about ancestry but to commit oneself heart and soul to the ideal of equality.

### **Defining Citizenship**

A few years later, Lincoln was dead along with some 600,000 casualties of the Civil War, and a radical Republican Congress oversaw writing the Union’s victory into the Constitution via the Fourteenth Amendment. Its opening clause proclaimed, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”

That flipped the prewar position, in which state citizenship was necessary to become a United States citizen, leaving room for states to refuse citizenship to “undesirables” like Negroes and foreigners. Now, no state could deny its born or naturalized resident citizens “the equal protection of its laws” or the guarantees of the Bill of Rights.

The Fourteenth Amendment clearly intended to make sure that the newly freed ex-slaves would have their full civil rights, though it would take a Fifteenth to specify that voting was included. The inclusion of children born in the United States to recent immigrants was almost incidental. That is the “error” that the enemies of birthright citizenship aim to correct. They argue that almost no other nations outside the Western hemisphere show such foolish generosity.

Somehow, this is one issue on which they are willing to forget or forgo our proud exceptionalism.

Meanwhile, American ports began receiving the first waves of an enormous and transformative mass migration, some 31 million between 1860 and 1930. They represented a “new” immigration: Chinese, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Russians, Syrians, Slovaks, Serbs, Armenians. To many so-called “old stock” Americans, millions of these newcomers were dangerous and unworthy, and to the members of an Immigration Restriction League which included in its number many of “the best people” of New England the immigrants were of the “wrong” religions and nationalities. Poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich explained that through our “unguarded gates” pressed,

a wild motley throng Men from the Volga and the Tartar Steppes Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn; These bringing with them unknown gods and rites Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.

The same old charges were recycled, newcomers threatened the jobs of Americans; they swelled the statistics of crime, violence and dependency; they clung stubbornly to their religions, customs and languages and could neither absorb nor understand the values of genuine Americans.

Eventually, the gates began to swing shut on unrestricted immigration. There was denial of entry to those convicted of crimes in their home countries, which might include rebellion against tyrannical regimes. Then, rejection for those harboring contagious diseases.

A third barrier, literacy tests, never quite made it into law but in 1921 and 1924, laws were enacted that set overall limits on immigration, divided by “national origins” quotas that favored the descendants of pre-1860 immigrants, while sharply narrowing openings for the children and grandchildren of those who had come later. Asians were barred completely.

But those who squeezed through narrowed gates did what immigrants have always done when given a chance, assimilated the American values of the time, grabbed educational opportunities provided by the public school system, and by the millions took out the naturalization papers that gave them the ultimate step in acceptance, participating in democracy on an equal footing with the snootiest Mayflower descendant. So armed, they entered American politics and, over time, changed it for the better.

### **An Era of Liberalism**

A three-decade period of liberalism following the Depression, World War II and the assumption of an American global presence resulted in a 1965 change to the



laws that replaced national origins quotas with others based on family reunification, specially needed skills, and refugee status. They erased the barrier to Asians altogether, setting off a new and continuing wave of immigration, still in progress.

But none of this will continue if the likes of Trump and his allies can help it. The children of that slandered “new” immigration helped to build our cities and dedicated their working lives in mines, mills and factories to make us a mighty industrial power. They fought and died in our wars. But for some “real Americans” that hasn’t been enough. So here we are again, in a period of reaction, staring into the ugly face of nativism.

Trump’s announced intention to deport 11 million “illegals” while building a wall from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico at no cost, details conveniently not provided, is simultaneously savage and ludicrous. Yet what troubles me deeply is the possibility of this kind of cesspool politics finding wider acceptance, or being ignored apathetically by large numbers of Americans.

Even more disturbing is the sluggishness of the response from Republican and Democratic opinion makers. Where is the outrage? Why is the counterattack left largely to Hispanic organizations? Why isn’t every decent media outlet shouting a few, simple home truths over the bullhorns of those insisting on their xenophobic lies? Such truths as these:

–The “illegals” are not indolent. For years now they have been picking our crops, nursing our elderly, cleaning our homes and babysitting our children. They are not freeloaders. That honor should be reserved for people like rancher Cliven Bundy who grazes his cattle on federally owned land but refuses to pay federal fees and taxes.

–They do not take jobs from Americans. Their bottom-of-the-ladder, low-wage service jobs don’t pay enough to attract American workers, white or black. Probably as many or more job losses are caused by employers moving operations abroad, or automation, which is a generic problem for all of today’s workers.

–They are not “takers.” They contribute positively to the economy through sales and excise taxes, and cannot claim Social Security, Medicare or other benefits because it would reveal their undocumented status, which makes them vulnerable to threats and exploitation by their bosses.

–Their crime rates are comparable to those of the general population, allowing for differences in income and living conditions.

It’s true that completely unregulated immigration may no longer be feasible. But the movement of people from poor and turbulent nations to wealthy, stable and

reasonably free ones is happening all over the world. Our governments must come together in trade and economic treaties that level the playing field by helping to enrich and empower poorer peoples. Trade pacts need to elevate the status of working men and women rather than maximize the profits of corporations promising that some of the swag will mysteriously trickle down to “the lower orders.”

Until that miracle happens, no walls will keep desperate and courageous, motivated people from taking big risks to evade or scale them. Far better to provide our undocumented with reasonable and non-punitive paths to citizenship.

That can't take place when truth is befogged by racist and hateful lies, which is the reason that every school should teach and every network newscast should repeat this essential reality: the story of our nation's long practice of welcoming immigrants and opening a wide door to full rights is an American triumph, all the more so because it has been achieved over constant resistance and with many relapses and setbacks.

Should Trump and associates ever get their way, the symbol of America would change from the Statue of Liberty with her uplifted torch lighting the path through the golden door to one of the Wall, complete with searchlights, guard towers, barbed wire and watchdogs. May it never be so.

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