

Fearing Sanders as 'Closet Realist'

Exclusive: To Washington's neocons like David Ignatius, Sen. Sanders should be disqualified as a presidential candidate for being a "closet realist." Sanders seems not to accept their forced "regime change" in Syria, nor their plans for more "nation building" like the neocon handiwork in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

How little Official Washington's neocon-dominated foreign policy elite has learned from the past couple of decades can be measured by reading the last line of Friday's Washington Post op-ed by David Ignatius, supposedly one of the deeper thinkers from the American pundit class.

Ignatius writes, regarding the Syrian mess, "It's never too late for the United States to do the right thing, which is to build, carefully, the political and military framework for a new Syria."

Reading Ignatius and other neocon-oriented policy prescribers, it's as if Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya not to mention other failed states following U.S. interventions never happened. Just like Iraq was a cakewalk, Syria will be one of those child puzzles with only 24 pieces, easy to assemble and reassemble.

Though Ignatius doesn't get into the nitty-gritty of his nation-building scheme, it should be obvious that for President Barack Obama to "do the right thing" in Ignatius's way of thinking, the U.S. military would first have to invade and occupy Syria, killing any Syrians, Iranians, Russians and others who might get in the way. Then there would be the tricky process of "carefully" putting Syria back together again amid the predictable IEDs, suicide bombings and sectarian strife.

One is tempted to simply dismiss Ignatius as not a serious person, but he is considered part of the crème de la crème of Official Washington's current foreign-policy establishment. He's sought after to moderate foreign policy conferences and he pontificates regularly from the well-read pages of The Washington Post.

But he is really just another example of how dangerous it was for the American people to exact no accountability from the hubristic neoconservatives and their "liberal interventionist" sidekicks for their many disastrous miscalculations and war crimes.

If Americans still had pitchforks, they should have chased down this arrogant

elite for inflicting so much pain and bloodshed on both the people of these tragic countries and on the U.S. soldiers who were dispatched so casually to make the benighted policies work. There's also the little issue of the trillions of dollars in taxpayers' money wasted.

But the neocons are impervious to criticism from the "little people." Within the neocon "bubble," the Syrian crisis is just the result of President Obama not intervening earlier and bigger by shipping even more weapons to Syria's mythical "moderate" rebels.

No one ever wants to admit that these "moderates" were always dominated by Sunni jihadists and by 2012 had become essentially their front men for receiving sophisticated U.S. weapons before passing the hardware on, willingly or not, to Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, Islamic State and other extremist groups.

Read, for instance, a remarkable account from veteran foreign affairs writer Stephen Kinzer, who describes in [a Boston Globe op-ed](#) the reign of terror that the Syrian rebels have inflicted on the people of Aleppo, while the mainstream U.S. news media painted pretty pictures about these noble insurrectionists.

Kinzer scolds his media colleagues for their malfeasance in reporting on the Syrian crisis, writing: "Coverage of the Syrian war will be remembered as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the American press. Reporting about carnage in the ancient city of Aleppo is the latest reason why."

Another inconvenient truth is that the "moderate" rebels of Aleppo operate hand in glove with Al Qaeda's Nusra Front. So much so that a proposal for a partial Syrian cease-fire failed because U.S. diplomats wanted to extend its protections to Al Qaeda's forces, also known inside Syria as Jabhat al-Nusra.

As The Washington Post's Karen DeYoung nonchalantly mentioned deep inside [a story](#) on Saturday, "Jabhat al-Nusra, whose forces are intermingled with moderate rebel groups in the northwest near the Turkish border, is particularly problematic. Russia was said to have rejected a U.S. proposal to leave Jabhat al-Nusra off-limits to bombing as part of the cease-fire, at least temporarily, until the groups can be sorted out."

In other words, the cease-fire plan is being delayed – and possibly killed – because the Obama administration doesn't want the Syrian army and the Russian air force attacking Al Qaeda.

This strange reality underscores reporting by Mideast expert Gareth Porter who [wrote](#) that "Information from a wide range of sources, including some of those the United States has been explicitly supporting, makes it clear that every armed anti-Assad organization unit in those provinces [around Aleppo] is engaged

in a military structure controlled by Nusra militants. All of these rebel groups fight alongside the Nusra Front and coordinate their military activities with it." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Risking Nuclear War for Al Qaeda.](#)"]

Believing in Unicorns

However, to be accepted in Official Washington as a profound thinker, you must believe in the unicorns of "moderate" Syrian rebels, just like earlier you had to accept as "flat fact" that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was lying when he denied having weapons of mass destruction and that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was lying when he claimed to be under attack by terrorists.

But what is truly remarkable about these Washington "wise men and women" who are so unwise is that they simply move from one catastrophe to the next. The journalists and columnists among them routinely get basic facts wrong but are never fired by their editors and publishers, presumably because the editors and publishers are kindred ideologues.

And the neocon/liberal-hawk politicians also float above any meaningful accountability for their grotesque misjudgments and for their contributions to war crimes. On the Republican side, all the establishment candidates the likes of Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush and John Kasich favor doubling down on neoconservative foreign policies as they prove how "serious" they are.

On the Democratic side, the reputed frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, not only voted for the Iraq War but promoted similar warmongering as Secretary of State, pushing for a senseless escalation in Afghanistan, masterminding the mindless Libyan operation, and blocking any timely peace initiatives in Syria.

Her supporters may call her a "liberal" or "humanitarian" interventionist but there is no discernible difference between her policies and those of the neocons. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Hillary Clinton and the Dogs of War.](#)"]

There may be some hope from the anti-establishment candidates Donald Trump on the Republican side and Bernie Sanders in the Democratic race but that's mostly because they have steered clear of precise foreign policy prescriptions. They have, however, decried the Iraq War and suggested that collaboration with Russia makes more sense than confrontation.

Not surprisingly then, Washington's neocon-dominated foreign policy elite has been scathing toward both men, seeking to marginalize them so far from the mainstream that aspiring pundits and academics with hopes for professional advancement will obsequiously vouch for the diplomatic chops of Hillary Clinton and the seriousness of the GOP establishment contenders.

Sniffing Out 'Realism'

As for Sanders, David Ignatius has detected a clearly disqualifying characteristic, that the Vermont senator may be, gasp, a "closet realist."

On Feb. 12, Ignatius raised that shocking possibility in another Washington Post column: "Is Bernie Sanders a closet foreign policy 'realist'? Reading his few pronouncements on foreign policy, you sense that he embraces the realists' deep skepticism about U.S. military intervention."

Having sniffed out this foul odor of "realism," Ignatius further asks, "Now that Sanders has nearly tied Clinton in Iowa and won New Hampshire, there's a real possibility that he may emerge as the Democratic nominee. And the question is: How scared should mainstream Democrats be about Sanders as a foreign policy president?"

That's right, how scary would it be if there was a "realist" in the White House?

But Ignatius observes that President Obama already has demonstrated some of the same disturbing "realist" traits although Sanders might be even worse. The pundit prognosticates, "If I had to guess, I'd say that Sanders would continue and reinforce President Obama's wary approach to using force, whereas Clinton would be more hawkish. But that's just a guess. Perhaps Sanders would be far more dovish."

Like a hapless Inspector Clouseau, Ignatius then presses ahead trying to determine exactly how bad or "realistic" Sanders would be:

"Sanders's statements on Syria suggest that he would take a position embraced by many self-described realists. His first priority, he has said, would be a 'broad coalition, including Russia,' to defeat the Islamic State. 'Our second priority must be getting rid of [President Bashar al-Assad] through some political settlement, working with Iran, working with Russia.'"

Ignatius, of course, finds Sanders's priorities troubling and pulls out an old canard to make the point, reviving the long-discredited claim that Assad was responsible for the lethal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?](#)" and "[A Call for Proof on Syria-Sarin Attack.](#)"]

Ignoring the lack of evidence against Assad, Ignatius writes: "Some critics would argue that it's immoral to make replacing a leader who used chemical weapons a secondary concern."

Yes, in neocon land, the moral thing is to accuse someone of a heinous crime

without any verifiable evidence and indeed with the evidence going in the opposite direction and then invading and occupying the country in defiance of international law, killing hundreds of thousands of its people, much like neocon policymakers did with Iraq as Ignatius and other foreign policy “moralists” cheered them on.

However, with Syria, Ignatius tells us, it would be so simple to follow up the invasion and occupation with a plan “to build, carefully, the political and military framework for a new Syria.” No wonder Ignatius and other neocons are so hostile to “realism” and to Bernie Sanders.

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](#)).
