

# VIPS Offers Advice to Candidates

Former Secretary of State Clinton, whose campaign is brimming with establishment foreign policy advisers, has chided Democratic rival Sen. Sanders for lacking a roster of experts. But ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern says an untapped resource for any candidate is the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

By Ray McGovern

A Memo to: Dr. Ben Carson, Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Marco Rubio, Bernie Sanders, Dr. Jill Stein, and Donald Trump

The media brouhaha over naming your campaign advisers on foreign policy prompts this reminder of a unique resource available, gratis, to all of you. That resource is our nonpartisan group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS). If we were into self-promotion, we would add to our (virtual) letterhead: *“serving satisfied customers since 2003.”*

We are about apolitical analysis; we are into spreading unvarnished truth around; we do not shape our analysis toward this or that debating point. Thus, we eschew the moniker “campaign adviser.” But that doesn’t mean we wouldn’t provide apolitical and unvarnished advice to anyone who seeks it.

Unique? We are on the outer edge of atypical in the sense that we are a fiercely nonpartisan, tell-it-like-it-is group of professionals with long experience in intelligence and related fields and with no policy or personal axes to grind. We are Republicans, Democrats and Independents. Abundant proof that party preference plays no role in our analysis can be seen in our enviable record in the substantive work we have produced over the past 13 years both before and after the ill-advised attack on Iraq in March 2003.

Also distinguishing us from “campaign advisers,” none of us in VIPS lust for a high position in a new administration; none are heavily invested in arms industries; none of us ask for a retainer. In other words, there are no strings attached to the substantive analysis we provide to *all* our readers and listeners. If objective, disinterested analysis is your cup of tea, we suggest that you check out VIPS’s record, to include the multiple warnings we gave President George W. Bush in the months *before* the attack on Iraq.

In fact, VIPS was founded by a handful of former CIA analysts, including me, for the express purpose of warning President Bush that his small coterie of advisers, led by Vice President Dick Cheney, was adducing *fraudulent not mistaken* “intelligence” in promoting the war on Iraq.

Indeed, in recent years VIPS has been accused of naiveté in failing to understand that Bush, to whom we addressed most of our pre-war memos, was fully aware of how Cheney and his cunning co-conspirators and comen were fabricating the false pretenses for war. We plead guilty to believing that U.S. presidents deserve unspun analysis and to trusting that honest assessments will help presidents act responsibly on behalf of the nation.

Call us old-fashioned, but we just found it hard to believe that any U.S. president would justify war on “evidence” made out of whole cloth. Equally difficult to believe was that our former colleagues would acquiesce in the deception.

So, despite the doubts that Bush really wanted the real story, we rose to the occasion, nonetheless, and issued three corporate VIPS memoranda before the attack on Iraq: (1) “Today’s Speech By Secretary Powell At the UN,” February 5, 2003; (2) “Cooking Intelligence for War in Iraq,” March 12, 2003; and (3) “Forgery, Hyperbole, Half-Truth: A Problem,” March 18, 2003.

Our commentary on Secretary of State Colin Powell’s UN speech went out on the AFP wire and was widely read abroad. Foreign media followed up with us; U.S. media not so much. (This is the primary reason you may be learning all this for the first time).

During that critical pre-war period we took pains to use whatever entrée we had to influential people. For example, I personally sought to reach then-Sen. Hillary Clinton via a key person on her staff, who assured me that the senator was being given our op-eds and our analyses to read.

In our memorandum of Feb. 5, 2003, we told President Bush we could give Powell “only a C-minus in providing context and perspective.” As for input from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon, we told the President: “Your Pentagon advisers draw a connection between war and terrorism, but for the wrong reasons. The connection takes on much more reality in a **post-U.S. invasion scenario**. [Emphasis in the original]

“Indeed, it is our view that an invasion of Iraq would ensure overflowing recruitment centers for terrorists into the indefinite future. Far from eliminating the threat it would enhance it exponentially.”

Though it went unheeded 13 years ago, the final paragraph of VIPS’s first Memorandum for the President seems quite relevant to the current discussion regarding “campaign advisers” on foreign policy. In our same-day memo to the President on Powell’s UN speech we noted that he had described what he said as “irrefutable and undeniable.” Our final paragraph started with an allusion to

those words:

“No one has a corner on the truth; nor do we harbor illusions that our analysis is irrefutable or undeniable. But after watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion beyond ... those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.”

Our VIPS memorandum of Feb. 5, 2003, was sent to the President more than two years before the *London Times* published the minutes of a July 23, 2002 briefing at 10 Downing Street, during which Richard Dearlove, the head of British intelligence, reported to British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Dearlove's talks three days earlier with his U.S. counterpart, CIA Director George Tenet, at CIA headquarters. According to those undisputed minutes, Dearlove said the following:

“Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. **But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.**” [Emphasis added]

Our warnings to President Bush also came more than five years before the completion of a five-year investigation by the Senate Intelligence Committee on pre-war intelligence, the results of which were approved by a bipartisan majority. On June 5, 2008, the date of its release, committee chair Jay Rockefeller commented on its findings:

“In making the case for war, the administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.”

### **Just So You Know**

One presidential candidate is said to have “an army of several hundred, perhaps even more than a thousand, foreign policy advisers;” another has been criticized for having no “talent pool” of “trusted experts.” Little is known about those advising other candidates or, for example, in which campaign headquarters erstwhile advisers to dropout candidates like Jeb Bush are now hanging their hats.

The purpose of this open letter is merely to ensure that you know that you are welcome to dip into a different and unique “talent pool” Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS). This pool is now several hundred years deep in collective experience and brimming with the kind of knowledge that flows from

senior-level work in intelligence and related fields. Our record of memoranda, averaging three per year, speaks for itself.

If nonpartisan, fact-based analysis is your cup of tea, have a look at those memoranda, which we believe are second to none in terms of candor and tell-it-like-it-is analysis. Our work reflects the ethos that earlier guided the work of intelligence community analysts at CIA and elsewhere, a commitment to both objectivity and scholarship.

That was before Director Tenet decided to welcome frequent visits by Vice President Dick Cheney to make sure CIA analysts were finding or fabricating enough “intelligence” to “justify” the launch of an unnecessary war. We take no pleasure in having been correct at the outset, in predicting “the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.”

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## Why McConnell Blocks Scalia Replacement

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell says his obstruction of President Obama’s nominee to replace Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia is to empower the people, but it’s more about making sure that the Citizens United gusher of special interest money keeps pouring into Republican coffers, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Many years ago, I worked on a documentary about the how and why of political TV ads. The primary focus was on two media consultants: the late Bob Squier, a Democrat; and Bob Goodman, Republican. One ad of which Goodman was especially proud was for a fellow in Kentucky running against Todd Hollenbach, Sr., the incumbent judge/executive of Jefferson County. Produced in 1977, the spot featured a farmer complaining about taxes that he claimed Judge Hollenbach had raised and then lied about.

As he mucked out a barn and his faithful horse whinnied, the farmer declared, "Maybe Hollenbach ought to have my job, because in my business, I deal with that kind of stuff every day." Then he threw a shovel of manure right at the camera. Hollenbach lost to the candidate who approved this message: Mitch McConnell.

McConnell has been shoveling it ever since, but perhaps never as stunningly as on Tuesday, when he spoke from the floor of the U.S. Senate. The now-majority leader of the so-called greatest deliberative body in the world blustered, as he has several times in the last couple of weeks, that Senate Republicans would never, ever consider an appointment by President Obama to replace the still-dead Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

The President, McConnell then said, "has every right to nominate someone, even if doing so will inevitably plunge our nation into another bitter and avoidable struggle."

Excuse me, Senator, the bitter and undeniably avoidable struggle was created by *you* on the Saturday that Scalia's corpse was found. The body was barely cold when you crassly announced that the duly-elected President of the United States should not name the judge's successor but must leave it to the next president more than 300 days from now.

McConnell continued, "Even if he never expects that nominee to be actually confirmed but rather to wield as an election cudgel, he certainly has the right to do that." Again, Senator, it's *you* who is wielding the blunt object.

And then the Majority Leader had the *chutzpah*, as they say down home in his Bluegrass State, to add that Barack Obama also "has the right to make a different choice. He can let the people decide and make this an actual legacy-building moment rather than just another campaign roadshow."

Oh brother, look who's talking. Of all the pompous, insincere bloviation; ignoring courtesy, tradition let alone the U.S. Constitution in the name of Senator McConnell's own misbegotten ambitions.

Psychiatrists call this "projection," the defensive method by which people take their own negative beliefs or feelings and attribute them to someone else otherwise known as shifting blame. In McConnell's case, add to it a megadose of the cynical manipulation and crass opportunism characteristic of most of his political career.

Not that it was always so. McConnell began his political life as a liberal Republican remember them?, interning for legendary Kentucky senator and statesman John Sherman Cooper. He supported the Equal Rights Amendment and collective bargaining. Friends say he was pro-Planned Parenthood and he even

wrote an op-ed piece in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* favoring campaign finance reform.

Former McConnell press secretary Meme Sweets Runyon told Jason Cherkis and Zach Carter at *The Huffington Post*, “He was kind of a good-government guy. He thought the government could do good and could be a solution.”

But once Mitch McConnell got to Washington as an elected senator and the mood of the Republican Party shifted right, so did he. Delay and obstruction became stepping stones. At the same time, the man who New York Times columnist Gail Collins famously described as having “the natural charisma of an oyster,” developed a Jekyll-and-Hyde style of self-serving pragmatism bashing government from Capitol Hill but using all of its perks to bolster support among his constituents.

It’s worth quoting at length what Cherkis and Carter wrote in 2013: “Up until the tea party-led ban on earmarks a few years ago, McConnell played out this dichotomy across Kentucky. In Washington, he voted against a health care program for poor children. In Kentucky, he funneled money to provide innovative health services for pregnant women. In Washington, he railed against Obamacare. In Kentucky, he supported free health care and prevention programs paid for by the federal government without the hassle of a private-insurance middleman.

“This policy ping-pong may not suggest a coherent belief system, but it has led to loyalty among the GOP in Washington and something close to fealty in Kentucky. It has advanced McConnell’s highest ideal: his own political survival.

“McConnell’s hold on Kentucky is a grim reminder of the practice of power in America, where political excellence can be wholly divorced from successful governance and even public admiration,” the *Huffington Post* reporters continued. “The most dominant and influential Kentucky politician since his hero Henry Clay, McConnell has rarely used his indefatigable talents toward broad, substantive reforms. He may be ruling, but he’s ruling over a commonwealth with the lowest median income in the country, where too many counties have infant mortality rates comparable to those of the Third World. His solutions have been piecemeal and temporary, more cynical than merciful.”

And so it goes. “He privileges the scoreboard above all,” The New Yorker’s Evan Osnos wrote in 2014. “Asked about his ideological evolution, he explained simply, ‘I wanted to win.’”

Tailoring his positions to adjust to the shifting seasons, what sets Mitch McConnell apart is that his motives aren’t really ideological but so baldly about holding onto personal power. His opposition to Obama’s naming of a Scalia

replacement puts the majority leader in solid with the far-right Republicans he purportedly so dislikes but who have threatened his job security over the last few years, both at home and in DC.

What's more, McConnell is desperate to keep a conservative majority on the Court to preserve the unbridled flow of campaign cash that the Citizens United decision let loose and that he so successfully has tapped for himself and the GOP. Unlike the young man who penned that campaign finance reform op-ed back in Louisville, fundraising has become his favorite thing, and he's scary good at it.

As his former Republican Senate colleague Alan Simpson said, "When he asked for money, his eyes would shine like diamonds. He obviously loved it."

And even if a Democrat holds onto the White House next year, chances are McConnell – the man who once said that the most important thing was to make Barack Obama a one-term president – will still play a power broker role in determining which Supreme Court candidate will successively run the 60-vote supermajority gauntlet needed for Senate approval. It's good to be king.

But if he wants us all to wait for a Republican president to choose the next appointment to the Court, he might want to think twice. Donald Trump bows before no man – just ask him – and he shovels muck even better than that farmer who helped Mitch McConnell win his first public office.

**Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of Moyers & Company and BillMoyers.com, and a former senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos. Follow him on Twitter at @MichaelWinship. [This story originally appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/mitch-mcconnell-has-a-horse-in-the-supreme-court-race-himself/>]**

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