

Dissent for Peace, Not More War

Fifty-one mid-level U.S. diplomats signed a “dissent cable” calling for the U.S. military to launch air strikes against the Syrian military to tilt the civil war back in favor of the rebels, a mistake, writes ex-U.S. diplomat Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

I served 16 years as a U.S. diplomat. But, in late February 2003, I wrote a dissent cable to Secretary of State Colin Powell expressing my strong concerns about the Bush administration’s hot rhetoric about the need for regime change in Iraq and predicted the chaos that a U.S. invasion and occupation would have.

My dissent had no effect on the Bush administration and three weeks later on the eve of the beginning of the war on Iraq, I sent Colin Powell another cable – this time with my resignation.

I was OPPOSING the use of military force for “regime change” that was couched in the terminology of allegations of weapons of mass destruction. These 51 U.S. diplomats are now lobbying FOR military action essentially for “regime change” couched in the words of “bring Assad to the negotiating table.”

None of us condone the Assad’s government dropping horrific “barrel bombs” on anyone, but after seeing the chaos of Iraq and Libya after their leaders were removed by U.S. military action, I fail to understand how removing Bashar al-Assad by U.S. military force will have any other result than increasing chaos and violence in Syria and giving an opening for groups to gain control that may perpetrate even worse violence on the people of Syria.

Although I don’t know the names or history of the diplomats who signed the dissent cable, as mid-level officers they probably have worked in the State Department 10 to 15 years and have known nothing but U.S. wars since 2001, that is 15 years of war.

War is now the U.S. government’s norm and their viewpoints seem to be coming from that perspective, despite some resounding non-violent successes to address political disagreements in Cuba and Iran.

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the matches that lit the fires in Libya and Syria, brought thousands of international mercenary fighters to the region and precipitated the terrible attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino and possibly Orlando.

Sadly and dangerously, the diplomats who signed this letter either do not recognize or do not care that attempting to bomb Assad for “regime change”

may satisfy Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, our “allies” in blood, but would create an even stronger anti-American blaze in the region and around the world that could be uncontrollable.

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The State Department's Collective Madness

Exclusive: More than 50 U.S. State Department “diplomats” sent a “dissent” memo urging President Obama to launch military strikes against the Syrian army, another sign that Foggy Bottom has collectively gone nuts, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Over the past several decades, the U.S. State Department has deteriorated from a reasonably professional home for diplomacy and realism into a den of armchair warriors possessed of imperial delusions, a dangerous phenomenon underscored by the recent mass “dissent” in favor of blowing up more people in Syria.

Some 51 State Department “diplomats” signed a memo distributed through the official “dissent channel,” seeking military strikes against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad whose forces have been leading the pushback against Islamist extremists who are seeking control of this important Mideast nation.

The fact that such a large contingent of State Department officials would openly advocate for an expanded aggressive war in line with the neoconservative agenda, which put Syria on a hit list some two decades ago, reveals how crazy the State Department has become.

The State Department now seems to be a combination of true-believing neocons along with their liberal-interventionist followers and some careerists who realize that the smart play is to behave toward the world as global proconsuls dictating solutions or seeking “regime change” rather than as diplomats engaging foreigners respectfully and seeking genuine compromise.

Even some State Department officials, whom I personally know and who are not neocons/liberal-hawks per se, act as if they have fully swallowed the Kool-Aid. They talk tough and behave arrogantly toward inhabitants of countries under their supervision. Foreigners are treated as mindless objects to be coerced or bribed.

So, it's not entirely surprising that several dozen U.S. "diplomats" would attack President Barack Obama's more temperate position on Syria while positioning themselves favorably in anticipation of a Hillary Clinton administration, which is expected to authorize an illegal invasion of Syria – under the guise of establishing "no-fly zones" and "safe zones" – which will mean the slaughter of young Syrian soldiers. The "diplomats" urge the use of "stand-off and air weapons."

These hawks are so eager for more war that they don't mind risking a direct conflict with Russia, breezily dismissing the possibility of a clash with the nuclear power by saying they are not "advocating for a slippery slope that ends in a military confrontation with Russia." That's reassuring to hear.

Risking a Jihadist Victory

There's also the danger that a direct U.S. military intervention could collapse the Syrian army and clear the way for victory by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front or the Islamic State. The memo did not make clear how the delicate calibration of doing just enough damage to Syria's military while avoiding an outright jihadist victory and averting a clash with Russia would be accomplished.

Presumably, whatever messes are created, the U.S. military would be left to clean up, assuming that shooting down some Russian warplanes and killing Russian military personnel wouldn't escalate into a full-scale thermonuclear conflagration.

In short, it appears that the State Department has become a collective insane asylum where the inmates are in control. But this madness isn't some short-term aberration that can be easily reversed. It has been a long time coming and would require a root-to-branch ripping out of today's "diplomatic" corps to restore the State Department to its traditional role of avoiding wars rather than demanding them.

Though there have always been crazies in the State Department – usually found in the senior political ranks – the phenomenon of an institutional insanity has only evolved over the past several decades. And I have seen the change.

I have covered U.S. foreign policy since the late 1970s when there was appreciably more sanity in the diplomatic corps. There were people like Robert

White and Patricia Derian (both now deceased) who stood up for justice and human rights, representing the best of America.

But the descent of the U.S. State Department into little more than well-dressed, well-spoken but thuggish enforcers of U.S. hegemony began with the Reagan administration. President Ronald Reagan and his team possessed a pathological hatred of Central American social movements seeking freedom from oppressive oligarchies and their brutal security forces.

During the 1980s, American diplomats with integrity were systematically marginalized, hounded or removed. (Human rights coordinator Derian left at the end of the Carter administration and was replaced by neocon Elliott Abrams; White was fired as U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, explaining: "I refused a demand by the secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., that I use official channels to cover up the Salvadoran military's responsibility for the murders of four American churchwomen.")

The Neocons Rise

As the old-guard professionals left, a new breed of aggressive neoconservatives was brought in, the likes of Paul Wolfowitz, Robert McFarlane, Robert Kagan and Abrams. After eight years of Reagan and four years of George H.W. Bush, the State Department was reshaped into a home for neocons, but some pockets of professionalism survived the onslaughts.

While one might have expected the Democrats of the Clinton administration to reverse those trends, they didn't. Instead, Bill Clinton's "triangulation" applied to U.S. foreign policy as much as to domestic programs. He was always searching for that politically safe "middle."

As the 1990s wore on, the decimation of foreign policy experts in the mold of White and Derian left few on the Democratic side who had the courage or skills to challenge the deeply entrenched neocons. Many Clinton-era Democrats accommodated to the neocon dominance by reinventing themselves as "liberal interventionists," sharing the neocons' love for military force but justifying the killing on "humanitarian" grounds.

This approach was a way for "liberals" to protect themselves against right-wing charges that they were "weak," a charge that had scarred Democrats deeply during the Reagan/Bush-41 years, but this Democratic "tough-guy/gal-ism" further sidelined serious diplomats favoring traditional give-and-take with foreign leaders and their people.

So, you had Democrats like then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations (and later Secretary of State) Madeleine Albright justifying Bill Clinton's brutal

sanctions policies toward Iraq, which the U.N. blamed for killing 500,000 Iraqi children, as “a very hard choice, but the price – we think the price is worth it.”

Bill Clinton’s eight years of “triangulation,” which included the brutal air war against Serbia, was followed by eight years of George W. Bush, which further ensconced the neocons as the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

By then, what was left of the old Republican “realists,” the likes of Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, was aging out or had been so thoroughly compromised that the neocons faced no significant opposition within Republican circles. And, Official Washington’s foreign-policy Democrats had become almost indistinguishable from the neocons, except for their use of “humanitarian” arguments to justify aggressive wars.

Media Capitulation

Before George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, much of the “liberal” media establishment – from The New York Times to The New Yorker – fell in line behind the war, asking few tough questions and presenting almost no obstacles. Favoring war had become the “safe” career play.

But a nascent anti-war movement among rank-and-file Democrats did emerge, propelling Barack Obama, an anti-Iraq War Democrat, to the 2008 presidential nomination over Iraq War supporter Hillary Clinton. But those peaceful sentiments among the Democratic “base” did not reach very deeply into the ranks of Democratic foreign policy mavens.

So, when Obama entered the White House, he faced a difficult challenge. The State Department needed a thorough purging of the neocons and the liberal hawks, but there were few Democratic foreign policy experts who hadn’t sold out to the neocons. An entire generation of Democratic policy-makers had been raised in the world of neocon-dominated conferences, meetings, op-eds and think tanks, where tough talk made you sound good while talk of traditional diplomacy made you sound soft.

By contrast, more of the U.S. military and even the CIA favored less belligerent approaches to the world, in part, because they had actually fought Bush’s hopeless “global war on terror.” But Bush’s hand-picked, neocon-oriented high command – the likes of General David Petraeus – remained in place and favored expanded wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obama then made one of the most fateful decisions of his presidency. Instead of cleaning house at State and at the Pentagon, he listened to some advisers who came up with the clever P.R. theme “Team of Rivals” – a reference to Abraham

Lincoln's first Civil War cabinet – and Obama kept in place Bush's military leadership, including Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, and reached out to hawkish Sen. Hillary Clinton to be his Secretary of State.

In other words, Obama not only didn't take control of the foreign-policy apparatus, he strengthened the power of the neocons and liberal hawks. He then let this powerful bloc of Clinton-Gates-Petraeus steer him into a foolhardy counterinsurgency "surge" in Afghanistan that did little more than get 1,000 more U.S. soldiers killed along with many more Afghans.

Obama also let Clinton sabotage his attempted outreach to Iran in 2010 seeking constraints on its nuclear program and he succumbed to her pressure in 2011 to invade Libya under the false pretense of establishing a "no-fly zone" to protect civilians, what became a "regime change" disaster that Obama has ranked as his biggest foreign policy mistake.

The Syrian Conflict

Obama did resist Secretary Clinton's calls for another military intervention in Syria although he authorized some limited military support to the allegedly "moderate" rebels and allowed Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to do much more in supporting jihadists connected to Al Qaeda and even the Islamic State.

Under Secretary Clinton, the neocon/liberal-hawk bloc consolidated its control of the State Department diplomatic corps. Under neocon domination, the State Department moved from one "group think" to the next. Having learned nothing from the Iraq War, the conformity continued to apply toward Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia, China, Venezuela, etc.

Everywhere the goal was same: to impose U.S. hegemony, to force the locals to bow to American dictates, to steer them into neo-liberal "free market" solutions which were often equated with "democracy" even if most of the people of the affected countries disagreed.

Double-talk and double-think replaced reality-driven policies. "Strategic communications," i.e., the aggressive use of propaganda to advance U.S. interests, was one watchword. "Smart power," i.e., the application of financial sanctions, threats of arrests, limited military strikes and other forms of intimidation, was another.

Every propaganda opportunity, such as the Syrian sarin attack in 2013 or the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 shoot-down over eastern Ukraine, was exploited to the hilt to throw adversaries on the defensive even if U.S. intelligence analysts doubted that evidence supported the accusations.

Lying at the highest levels of the U.S. government – but especially among the State Department’s senior officials – became epidemic. Perhaps even worse, U.S. “diplomats” seemed to believe their own propaganda.

Meanwhile, the mainstream U.S. news media experienced a similar drift into the gravity pull of neocon dominance and professional careerism, eliminating major news outlets as any kind of check on official falsehoods.

The Up-and-Comers

The new State Department star – expected to receive a high-level appointment from President Clinton-45 – is neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who orchestrated the 2014 putsch in Ukraine, toppling an elected, Russia-friendly president and replacing him with a hard-line Ukrainian nationalist regime that then launched violent military attacks against ethnic Russians in the east who resisted the coup leadership.

When Russia came to the assistance of these embattled Ukrainian citizens, including agreeing to Crimea’s request to rejoin Russia, the State Department and U.S. mass media spoke as one in decrying a “Russian invasion” and supporting NATO military maneuvers on Russia’s borders to deter “Russian aggression.”

Anyone who dares question this latest “group think” – as it plunges the world into a dangerous new Cold War – is dismissed as a “Kremlin apologist” or “Moscow stooge” just as skeptics about the Iraq War were derided as “Saddam apologists.” Virtually everyone important in Official Washington marches in lock step toward war and more war. (Victoria Nuland is married to Robert Kagan, making them one of Washington’s supreme power couples.)

So, that is the context of the latest State Department rebellion against Obama’s more tempered policies on Syria. Looking forward to a likely Hillary Clinton administration, these 51 “diplomats” have signed their name to a “dissent” that advocates bombing the Syrian military to protect Syria’s “moderate” rebels who – to the degree they even exist – fight mostly under the umbrella of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al Sham.

The muddled thinking in this “dissent” is that by bombing the Syrian military, the U.S. government can enhance the power of the rebels and supposedly force Assad to negotiate his own removal. But there is no reason to think that this plan would work.

In early 2014, when the rebels held a relatively strong position, U.S.-arranged peace talks amounted to a rebel-dominated conference that made Assad’s departure a pre-condition and excluded Syria’s Iranian allies from attending. Not surprisingly, Assad’s representative went home and the talks collapsed.

Now, with Assad holding a relatively strong hand, backed by Russian air power and Iranian ground forces, the “dissenting” U.S. diplomats say peace is impossible because the rebels are in no position to compel Assad’s departure. Thus, the “dissenters” recommend that the U.S. expand its role in the war to again lift the rebels, but that would only mean more maximalist demands from the rebels.

Serious Risks

This proposed wider war, however, would carry some very serious risks, including the possibility that the Syrian army could collapse, opening the gates of Damascus to Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front (and its allies) or the Islamic State – a scenario that, as The New York Times noted, the “memo doesn’t address.”

Currently, the Islamic State and – to a lesser degree – the Nusra Front are in retreat, chased by the Syrian army with Russian air support and by some Kurdish forces with U.S. backing. But those gains could easily be reversed. There is also the risk of sparking a wider war with Iran and/or Russia.

But such cavalier waving aside of grave dangers is nothing new for the neocons and liberal hawks. They have consistently dreamt up schemes that may sound good at a think-tank conference or read well in an op-ed article, but fail in the face of ground truth where usually U.S. soldiers are expected to fix the mess.

We have seen this wishful thinking go awry in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Ukraine and even Syria, where Obama’s acquiescence to provide arms and training for the so-called “unicorns” – the hard-to-detect “moderate” rebels – saw those combatants and their weapons absorbed into Al Qaeda’s or Islamic State’s ranks.

Yet, the neocons and liberal hawks who control the State Department – and are eagerly looking forward to a Hillary Clinton presidency – will never stop coming up with these crazy notions until a concerted effort is made to assess accountability for all the failures that that they have inflicted on U.S. foreign policy.

As long as there is no accountability – as long as the U.S. president won’t rein in these warmongers – the madness will continue and only grow more dangerous.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Democrats Are Now the Aggressive War Party”](#) and [“Would a Clinton Win Mean More Wars?”](#)]

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](#)).

The War Risk of Hillary Clinton

Hawkish State Department officials and Official Washington's neocons are eager for a Hillary Clinton presidency, counting on a freer hand to use U.S. military force around the world, but that future is not so clear, says Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

Is Hillary Clinton a warmonger? Well, the record demonstrates that she certainly is a hawk – someone who believes strongly in the utility of military force and is ready to use it.

There is ample evidence in support of this contention. Her actions as Senator and Secretary of State as well her speeches and campaign statements paint a picture of a would-be President who views the world in terms of an ominous threat environment, who believes that core American interests are being challenged across the globe, who is a firm advocate of intervening on a preventive basis (e.g. Syria, Libya) as well as a preemptive or defensive basis, who is dedicated to keeping putative rivals like China or Russia in a subordinate position.

This complex of attitudes puts a considerable amount of blue water between her and Barack Obama. Indeed, early in her campaign she made a point of criticizing the White House for its overly restrained policies vis a vis Syria's Bashar al-Assad, Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping. She only switched tacks when it became evident that she needed to associate herself with the Obama record in the face of the unexpected Sanders insurrection.

The specific criticisms directed at HRC from those who find her too hawkish are well-known. They include her vote in favor of the Iraq war; her cheerleading for the Global War on Terror in all its aspects; her collaboration with the Robert Gates-led faction to push President Obama into a major Afghan escalation; her advocacy of direct military action in Libya to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi and in Syria to unseat Assad; her unbending attitude toward containing Iran even after the nuclear accord; and her bellicose language in calling Putin another "Hitler" after Russia's seizure of the Crimea.

Hillary Clinton's big foreign policy address at the Council on Foreign Relations reinforced the impression of a hard-liner across-the-board who thinks primarily in terms of power balances and its deployment. In addition, her full-throated endorsement of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's actions left no room for accommodating the concerns of those realists who see the United States as inflicting unnecessary harm on itself through its unqualified backing of

everything Israel does.

Praise from Neocons

It is no coincidence that she has drawn admiring remarks from Robert Kagan and other neoconservative luminaries who envisage her as a President sympathetic to their audacious, muscular conception of American foreign policy. The coalescing of the neocons and the gung-ho liberal interventionists who pushed hard for the Libyan intervention (Samantha Power, Ann-Marie Slaughter, Susan Rice) who now promote aiding the Saudis and Gulf Cooperation Council in Yemen, and wading into Syria involves a number of people who worked for Clinton in the State Department and/or figure prominently among her current advisers.

The outstanding example is Victoria Nuland – Clinton's spokesperson at State and now Assistant Secretary of State for Europe – who has aggressively spearheaded the anti-Russian crusade. Previously, she had been principal deputy foreign policy advisor for Vice President Dick Cheney.

Nuland was escorted into the Obama administration by Strobe Talbot who was her boss at Brookings and viewed her as his protege. Talbot himself, who had been Deputy Secretary of State during the second Bill Clinton administration, has moved progressively toward the hawkish end of the foreign policy establishment continuum (admittedly a rather short band width these days). The affiliation at Brookings of the prominent neocon Robert Kagan, Nuland's husband, may have cemented the deal.

Some of Hillary Clinton's defenders argue that her hawkish views must be understood in a political context. Her presidential ambitions, they explain, dictated that she find a way to overcome the liabilities she incurred on national security matters as a supposedly liberal Democrat, as heir to the Clinton dynasty that emphasized building bridges of cooperation in foreign relations – at least as seen by Republican critics, and as a woman.

That became an imperative after 9/11. So, we saw a series of moves in the form of votes and rhetoric designed to make her look tough. Hence, the much publicized buddying with John McCain on senatorial junkets to faraway places with strange sounding names highlighted by reports of her matching her macho colleague in knocking back shots of vodka.

We should bear in mind that foreign policy never had been a prominent concern of HRC. Most certainly not national security. It was a slate of domestic issues that drew her attention and on which she was knowledgeable. Her prepping only began seriously when she set her sights on winning the Democratic nomination in 2008.

Conviction or Expediency?

It is reasonable to infer that what began as an exercise in political expediency hardened into genuine conviction – at least insofar as general predisposition is concerned. There is no evidence of HRC having formulated a comprehensive strategy for the U.S. in the world, much less a theoretical model of what international affairs are all about.

At the same time, though, there is abundant reason to believe that her hard-edged rhetoric and policy proposals do express her views – however nebulous they may be. Her few concrete proposals have been half-baked and unrealistic: the idea of enforcing a “safe zone” in northern Syria being a case in point. All that it might accomplish is to create a secure base for Al Qaeda/Al Nusra and their Salafist partners while carrying the high risk of an encounter with Russian military forces operating in the area.

Does this mean that an HRC Presidency automatically would mean the dispatch of American troops to Syria? Intensified military efforts against ISIS in Iraq? The insertion of American-led force into Libya? Further provocation of Russia in Eastern Europe including an invitation to Ukraine to join NATO as first offered by George W. Bush?

It is premature to answer those questions in the affirmative. Jingoistic rhetoric is easy when you're on the outside. When you are the one who actually has to make the decisions about military deployments and to anticipate dealing with the unpredictable consequences, anyone will move with a measure of caution.

Hillary Clinton is more likely to stumble into a war than calculatingly start one – for a number of reasons. First, there are no obvious places to intervene massively with ground troops, no tempting Iraq circa 2003. Iran has been high on the neocon hit list, but the nuclear accord removes what could have been a justification. Iraq (again) and Syria are also theoretical candidates. Who, though, is the enemy and what would be the purpose?

ISIS obviously; but now it is being contained and slowly is degrading. American boots on the ground simply would ensure an open-ended guerrilla war. As for Al Qaeda/Al Nusra in Syria, it is not seen as an enemy, rather as a tacit ally within the “moderate” camp.

There is Assad. With Russia on the ground, however, and the lack of a Western consensus or prospect of an enabling United Nations Security Council resolution, an invasion to replace the Ba’ath regime with Salafists of the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda could not be rationalized even with the agitation of the Kagans and Samantha Power. In addition, this is an assignment that the Pentagon brass

do not want – in contrast to the CIA. After all, we have spent enormous amounts of blood and treasure to immunize Afghanistan against a terrorist presence much smaller than what exists now in Syria – to no avail.

Libya is the one place where a substantial American force could be dispatched. The argument for doing so would be Afghanistan *redux*. Still, in the absence of 9/11-like event, that would be a hard sell to the American public.

The chances of war by miscalculation are higher. Obama's bequest to his successor is a United States stranded in a mine field in the Middle East bereft of friends or diplomatic GPS. Hillary, of course, bears a large share of responsibility for creating this hazardous topography, and for the prevailing hyper-active habits of American policy – a potentially lethal combination.

For one, maintaining a state of high tension with Iran creates opportunities for incidents to occur in the Persian Gulf. Too, American and Iranian forces in Iraq mingle like oil and water. So, there is some possibility of relatively minor encounters escalating into serious combat by stoking the political fires among crazies on both sides.

Playing with Matches in Ukraine

The other combustible situation is Ukraine. There, the narrative of Russia as an aggressor hell-bent on regaining its Eastern European empire has led to a series of provocative military moves by Washington via NATO that are generating another Cold War. The strength of ultra-nationalists in Kiev, encouraged by their backers in the Obama administration and the fiery rhetoric of American military commanders, have killed the opportunity for a resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine as embodied in Minsk II.

Paranoia is sweeping the Baltic states and Poland – again with active connivance of the “war party” in Washington. Hillary Clinton is a charter member of that group. While one can be certain that she hasn't thought through the implications, and one can be reassured by Putin's sobriety, the lack of prudential thinking makes this the most dangerous of situations.

Then, there is the Bill factor. He is the joker in the pack. We know that Hillary consults with him on all questions of consequence as a matter of routine. He is her all-purpose confidante. It is inescapable that he will act as an *eminence gris* in the White House. So a key issue is the role that he will play and the counsel that he will offer. There is good reason to believe that he will serve to tone down Hillary's war-mongering tendencies – such as they are.

After all, what Bill Clinton craves at this stage of his life is being back in the White House where he can prowl at will and whisper in his wife's ear. He

relishes that historically unique position. He relishes being on parade. It's the status that counts – not the doing.

In any case, he has few convictions about the most salient foreign policy issues. Hence, his instinct will be to avoid 3:00 a.m. phone calls, grave crises and the risks they entail. Bold acts that require courage and fortitude never have been his strong suit. Like Obama, he is not cast in the heroic mold.

We should be thankful for that.

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Making Sense of Orlando Madness

After the Orlando massacre, there was a rush to apply single-issue cures to a multi-cause disease, when what's needed is a holistic approach that attacks both the sickness and the delivery systems of death, says ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

The mind cannot quite take it in – the wantonness of the Orlando events that now rank as the worst murder spree by a gunman in U.S. history. The longer-range repercussions cannot yet be calculated, but if the past is any judge, nearly all of them are likely to be bad. How can we possibly bring any kind of rational “explanations” to bear on it? That it was an evil act is utterly clear. But when confronted with such horrific events we want better answers.

In this case, as in so many others, there is no single cause to explain it all – although some will hasten to offer you one-size-fits-all explanations. Indeed, nothing could be more dangerous than to latch onto any single-cause theory to clarify everything. Like most things in life, all-of-the-above factors are at work. Not one or two, but all. Here they some key ones, in no particular order of priority.

–The killer was deeply disturbed, deranged, flawed. This goes almost without saying for anyone capable of such an inhuman act. A gasoline-drenched mind awaiting a spark.

–The killer was Muslim. In the last minutes of his life he claimed for the record that he owed allegiance to ISIS (“Islamic State”). It's not yet clear if

he had been recruited by them – probably not – but he was at least self-recruited, a lone wolf seeking wider connections.

–We cannot avoid mentioning Islam in the context of this massacre – not because Islam is an inspiration for murder, but because some Muslims in the last decades have self-identified with Islam as now representing the out-group, the oppressed. Even some disturbed *non*-Muslims have converted on that basis. Think how many American Black Muslims converted to Islam as a statement against racism in white American culture. Radical Islam has become today the ideology of preference for some individuals seeking out a “higher cause” by which to justify their frustrations, resentments, fantasies and even savagery.

–There will always be deranged individuals filled with hate, compensating for failure and impotence. They will always seek those higher justifications that can seemingly lend dignity to their own wretched state of mind and acts of rage. If it is not Islam today, it will be something else tomorrow. Anarchist and communist (Marxist-Leninist) killers proclaimed ideology to justify their acts of violence. Weird Buddhist sects in Japanese subways. Or “sacred nationalism” invoked. When religion is added, it only intensifies the psychological brew as it raises the “moral banner” higher. [Editor: In recent years, we have even seen “noble” secular causes, such as “promoting democracy” and even “humanitarianism,” used by states to justify wars.]

–Guns kill. The availability of military assault weapons to almost any unstable individual who seeks one unquestionably was key to the record number of deaths in Orlando. A handgun or a knife also kills – but not 50 people in as many seconds. Sadly, similar massacres in the past have left the gun lobby unfazed; it is unlikely it will be any different this time.

–Homophobia is widespread in the US. Christian scripture as well as Islamic law inveigh against it. In traditional Jewish law, male homosexuality called for death. Seventy-seven countries currently ban homosexuality. But while broad elements of U.S. society today have attained a fairly high tolerance for sexual freedom, there still exists a macho popular culture in many parts of the country which regularly puts gays at risk of homophobic attack.

–The Muslim world right now is undergoing intensely traumatic conditions of war, death, civil strife, sectarian witch-hunts, breakdown of social norms, and the destruction of law, order and infrastructure. There have long been many outstanding local problems, but rarely has the extent of regional devastation been of this magnitude. We must acknowledge the huge degree of U.S. responsibility in creating and prolonging many of these conditions abroad. The anguish of the region is now spreading out across much of the globe and leaching back into our own American society. The U.S. cannot kill at leisure abroad and

remain untouched at home.

–This exceptionally ugly current environment in the Middle East is churning the religious, ethnic and ideological pot, producing a broad range of extreme or deviant interpretations of Islam relating to identity, community self-preservation and resistance. People especially turn to religious faith in times of desperation. Now, clearly, the Orlando killer experienced *none of these conditions* first hand. But events in the Middle East, on television non-stop, constitute part of the ambient atmosphere in and around where all Muslims live.

No Picking and Choosing

There may be other specific explanatory factors at work here as well. But *all* of these factors must be acknowledged – we can't pick and choose our favorite hobby horse. It's not "all guns," or "all Muslims" or "all homophobia," or "all U.S. Middle East policy," or "all Israeli occupation." If each person's pet issue is cherry-picked to "prove" their position without reference to the others, we are just playing at high-school, or Fox, debating.

There are no, repeat no, policy steps – Donald Trump notwithstanding – that can immediately alleviate these conditions in the short term. The domestic and foreign scenes have created a deep and volatile mix not readily amenable to any quick fixes.

But some medium-term steps that need to be taken? They are pretty much the obverse of the conditions we cited above.

–The U.S. and the West must cease use of military force in the Middle East as the primary tool of foreign policy. U.S. "boots on the ground" everywhere are as much or more of the problem as existing local problems on their own. The presence of Western armies abroad feeds the "clash of civilization" myth and distracts regional people from dealing with issues themselves.

–We can ban the sale of assault rifles – to anyone. Gun deaths in the U.S. staggeringly outweigh those in other industrialized countries.

–If U.S. domestic politics cannot permit an even-handed American role in the Arab-Israeli problem – obviously the case – then let other nations do it. It is not America's role to make Israel safe for expansionist Zionism.

–Work more closely with U.S. Muslim communities in helping spot wayward and troubled youth who might otherwise eventually find their way to zealots advocating murder. This does not mean more FBI stings against sad, vulnerable souls fast-talked into some wacko plot. Muslim communities are the first to pay the highest price for murderous events of this sort. Muslim-American communities

are deeply motivated to stop them, especially when they are included as security partners. This is already taking place in many communities.

Given the magnitude of the problem today, there is a temptation for the U.S. government itself to monitor and control the rhetoric of preaching in U.S. mosques. But it won't really work. The issue has already long since been politicized.

Is organizing political action against Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands to be treated as "hate speech" and incitation to violence? It certainly will if AIPAC has anything to say about it. Are anti-Russian Chechens to be perceived as nothing more than freedom fighters?

American Muslim communities themselves will have to take up the sensitive and complex role of monitoring aberrant speech and behavior in their own mosques and speak out against radical interpretations of Islam in their communities. And foreign preachers may well come under particular scrutiny, posing complex judgment calls.

These are not easy times.

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Muhammad Ali's True Patriotism

Muhammad Ali angered much of America by declaring "I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong" and refusing to fight in Vietnam, but his principled stand was vindicated by history and is a lesson for today, says Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Although it is customary to say nice things about a person who has died, Muhammad Ali has been rightly commended for not only his superb boxing career but also his principled opposition to the then-popular Vietnam War. Unlike later chair-borne hawks, such as Bill Clinton and Dick Cheney, Ali did not try to evade the draft or get numerous college deferments to avoid service. He declared that because of his religion, he would not fight against people who had done nothing to him and bluntly said, "just take me to jail."

Therefore, it is difficult to argue that Ali avoided the war for selfish

reasons, because the costs of non-compliance with the draft were substantial. If the Supreme Court had not nullified his conviction 8-0, he would have served five years in prison. Although he ultimately avoided losing his liberty, he had to give up his heavyweight boxing title and experienced financial hardship as a result.

At the time, Ali's was not a popular stand, but he turned out to be right about many things, just as the then unpopular civil rights heroes Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King were. The war – in a faraway, insignificant country – turned out to be a non-strategic quagmire in the competition with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Of course, then-President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) privately predicted that at the time, but escalated the conflict anyway, so as not to be seen as a wimp politically with an eye toward winning the 1968 election. The war killed 58,000 Americans, a few million Vietnamese, and drained equipment and resources from the U.S. military, which it hollowed out for more important missions.

Like George W. Bush during the Iraq War and many other American presidents when conflict has been afoot, LBJ essentially lied the United States into war by saying that the North Vietnamese patrol boats had twice attacked a U.S. warship off the coast of Vietnam. Even if the North Vietnamese did attack once, it was in retaliation for the ships supporting secret raids on North Vietnam's coast, which LBJ just forgot to mention.

He also forgot to tell the American people that the Americans fired first in the dust-up with the patrol boats. And when LBJ ordered U.S. bombing in retaliation for these attacks, he was in such a hurry to get on prime-time TV that he announced that the U.S. air attacks on North Vietnam had occurred before they had even started.

The North Vietnamese, realizing this amazing reality, had their air defenses ready when U.S. aircraft came overhead and inflicted unneeded casualties on U.S. air forces. Subsequently, Congress passed the open-ended Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which essentially let LBJ do whatever he wanted in Southeast Asia. He, and his successor Richard Nixon, did.

Yet the Vietnam War was popular for a long time in America before the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive in 1968 exposed LBJ's lie that the United States was winning the war. Wars that drag on, result in mounting U.S. casualties, and do not appear to be for a worthy objective often eventually become unpopular at home, as the similar unending battles with guerrillas in Afghanistan and Iraq have become.

But why don't Americans spot these turkeys in advance and just say "no!"? Why do they wait until large amounts of blood and treasure have been futilely wasted to call it quits? (We still can't seem to admit that Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Syria have been lost.)

One reason is that the American people almost always think patriotism means giving the benefit of the doubt to the president, so much so nowadays that the if the president asks Congress to approve a war, he thinks he needs to do so only out of courtesy. Lately, we have not had very good luck with this method, which has led to perpetual war in many Third World hellholes simultaneously.

We should go back to the Founders' now seemingly out-of-fashion constitutional requirement for Congress to declare war. But members of Congress, to avoid taking any responsibility for a conflict, run into the shadows, even when a president, such as Barack Obama, says he would like an authorization for war.

Even by approving the war, the Congress could at least constrain the war on terror (even though it is also out of fashion now to label it as such) within a specific geographical area or against certain terror groups – like maybe those that have actually attacked the United States.

But many times in American history, both the Congress and the people have agreed with ill-advised wars. Perhaps citizens should remember that in America, originally "patriots" were not people who reflexively supported their government, but those who instead went against it in support of society and its values. Patriots in the American Revolution were Englishmen fighting for their rights against their English King and Parliament.

So the country was founded on a very different concept of patriotism than has taken hold nowadays. Patriotism has been turned on its head and is now synonymous with reflexive nationalism – support for your government, no matter what.

Muhammad Ali was a true patriot of the original variety when he just said "hell no" to meddling in another country's business that was unneeded and was, from the beginning, unlikely to turn out well.

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America's Many Mideast Blunders

Official Washington's neocon foreign policy establishment looks forward to more "regime change" wars in the Mideast and more "blank checks" for Israel, but ex-Ambassador Chas W. Freeman Jr. sees such actions as a continued march of folly.

By Chas W. Freeman Jr. (A June 9 speech to the Center for the National Interest, Washington)

I have been asked to speak about the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, the realignments occurring among states there, and the prospects for the achievement of renewed stability in the region. I'm tempted to suggest that you read my latest book, *America's Continuing Misadventures in the Middle East*. So much has gone wrong that it is hard to be either brief or optimistic.

Two hundred and eighteen years ago today, Napoleon was preparing to take Malta. His purpose was to clear an obstacle to his seizure of Egypt for revolutionary France. He was able to invade Egypt on July 1, 1798. Napoleon's campaign there and in Palestine kicked off a two-century-long effort by the West to transform the Middle East.

European imperial powers and, latterly, the United States, have repeatedly sought to convert Arabs, Persians, and Turks to the secular values of the European Enlightenment, to democratize them, to impose Western models of governance on them in place of indigenous, Islamic systems, and more recently to persuade them to accept a Jewish state in their midst.

This experiment in expeditionary, transformative diplomacy has now definitively failed. The next administration will inherit a greatly diminished capacity to influence the evolution of the Middle East. Amidst the imbecilities of our interminably farcical election season, it has proven expedient to blame this on President Obama. If only he had bombed Syria, repudiated his predecessor's agreement to withdraw the U.S. military from Iraq, refused to compromise with Iran on nuclear matters, knuckled under to Netanyahu, or whatever, the old order in the Middle East would be alive and well and the United States would still call the shots there.

But this is nonsense. Our estrangement from the Middle East derives from trends that are much deeper than the manifest deficiencies of executive and congressional leadership in Washington. Americans and our partners in the Middle East have developed contradictory interests and priorities. Where shared

values existed at all, they have increasingly diverged. There have been massive changes in geo-economics, energy markets, power balances, demographics, religious ideologies, and attitudes toward America (not just the U.S. government).

Many of these changes were catalyzed by historic American policy blunders. In the aggregate, these blunders are right up there with the French and German decisions to invade Russia and Japan's surprise attack on the United States. Their effects make current policies not just unsustainable but counterproductive.

Blunder number one was the failure to translate our military triumph over Saddam's Iraq in 1991 into a peace with Baghdad. No effort was ever made to reconcile Iraq to the terms of its defeat. The victors instead sought to impose elaborate but previously undiscussed terms by UN fiat in the form of the UN Security Council Resolution 687 – "the mother of all resolutions."

The military basis for a renewed balance of power in the Gulf was there to be exploited. The diplomatic vision was not. The George H. W. Bush administration ended without addressing the question of how to replace war with peace in the Gulf.

Wars don't end until the militarily humiliated accept the political consequences of their defeat. Saddam gave lip service to UNSCR 687 but took it no more seriously than Netanyahu and his predecessors have taken the various Security Council resolutions that direct Israel to permit Palestinians to return to the homes from which it drove them or to withdraw from the Palestinian lands it has seized and settled. Like Israel's wars with the Arabs, America's war with Iraq went into remission but never ended. In due course, it resumed.

The United States needs to get into the habit of developing and implementing war termination strategies.

Blunder number two was the sudden abandonment in 1993 of the strategy of maintaining peace in the Persian Gulf through a balance of power. With no prior notice or explanation, the Clinton administration replaced this longstanding approach with "dual containment" of both Iraq and Iran.

For decades, offshore balancing had permitted the United States to sustain stability without stationing forces other than a very small naval contingent in the Gulf. When the regional balance of power was undone by the Iran-Iraq War, Washington intervened to restore it, emphasizing that once Kuwait had been liberated and Iraq cut back down to size, U.S. forces would depart.

The new policy of "dual containment" created a requirement for the permanent

deployment of a large U.S. air and ground force in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar as well as an expanded naval presence in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. The political and socioeconomic irritants this requirement produced led directly to the founding of al Qa`ida and the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. "Dual containment" was plausible as a defense of Israel against its two most potent regional adversaries, Iran and Iraq. But it made no sense at all in terms of stabilizing the Gulf.

By writing off Iraq as a balancer of Iran, dual containment also paved the way for the 2003 American experiment with regime removal in Baghdad. This rash action on the part of the United States led to the de facto realignment of Iraq with Iran, the destabilization and partition of Iraq, the destabilization and partition of Syria, the avalanche of refugees now threatening to unhinge the E.U., and the rise of the so-called "Islamic state" or Da`esh.

With Iraq having fallen into the Iranian sphere of influence, there is no apparent way to return to offshore balancing. The U.S. is stuck in the Gulf. The political irritations this generates ensure that some in the region will continue to seek to attack the U.S. homeland or, failing that, Americans overseas.

The United States needs to find an alternative to the permanent garrisoning of the Gulf.

Blunder number three was the unthinking transformation in December 2001 of what had been a punitive expedition in Afghanistan into a long-term pacification campaign that soon became a NATO operation. The objectives of the NATO campaign have never been clear but appear to center on guaranteeing that there will no Islamist government in Kabul.

The engagement of European as well as American forces in this vague mission has had the unintended effect of turning the so-called "global war on terrorism" into what appears to many Muslims to be a Western global crusade against Islam and its followers. Afghanistan remains decidedly unpacified and is becoming more, not less Islamist.

The United States needs to find ways to restore conspicuous cooperation with the world's Muslims.

Blunder number four was the inauguration on February 4, 2002 – also in Afghanistan – of a campaign using missiles fired from drones to assassinate presumed opponents. This turn toward robotic warfare has evolved into a program of serial massacres from the air in a widening area of West Asia and northern Africa. It is a major factor in the metastasis of anti-Western terrorism with

global reach.

What had been a U.S. problem with a few Islamist exiles resident in Afghanistan and Sudan is now a worldwide phenomenon. The terrorist movements U.S. interventions have spawned now have safe havens not just in Afghanistan, but in the now failed states of Iraq and Syria, as well as Chad, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Sinai, Somalia, and Yemen. They also have a growing following among European Muslims and a toehold among Muslim Americans. We have flunked the test suggested by the Yoda of the Pax Americana, Donald Rumsfeld. We are creating more terrorists than we are killing.

The United States needs a strategy that does not continuously reinforce blowback.

Blunder number five was the aid to Iran implicit in the unprovoked invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. This rearranged the region to the severe strategic disadvantage of traditional U.S. strategic partners like Israel and Saudi Arabia by helping to create an Iranian sphere of influence that includes much of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

It showed the United States to be militarily mighty but geopolitically naive and strategically incompetent. Rather than underscoring American military power, it devalued it. The U.S. invasion of Iraq also set off a sectarian struggle that continues to spread around the globe among the Muslim fourth of humanity. The U.S. occupation culminated in a "surge" of forces that entrenched a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad and that only its authors consider a victory.

The United States needs to deal with the reality and the challenges to others in the region of the Iranian sphere of influence it helped create.

Blunder number six has been to confuse the motives for terrorism with the religious rationalizations its perpetrators concoct to justify its immorality. Many of those who seek revenge for perceived injustices and humiliations at the hands of the West and Western-backed regimes in the Middle East, or who are treated as aliens in their own countries in Europe, give voice to their anger in the language of Islam.

But their political grievances, not heretical Islamic excuses for the mass murders they carry out, are what drive their attempts at reprisal. Islamism is a symptom of Arab anguish and rage. It is a consequence, not a cause of Muslim anger.

Religious ideology is, of course, important. It is a key factor in justifying hatred of those outside its self-selected community. To non-believers, arguments about who is a Jew or whether someone is a true Muslim are incomprehensible and

more than a little absurd.

But to the intolerant people doing the excommunicating, such debates define their political community and those who must be excluded from it. They separate friend from foe. And to those being condemned for their disbelief or alleged apostasy, the judgments imposed by this intolerance can now be a matter of life or death.

In the end, the attribution of Muslim resentment of the West to Islam is just a version of the facile thesis that “they hate us because of who we are.” This is the opiate of the ignorant. It is self-expiating denial that past and present behavior by Western powers, including the United States, might have created grievances severe enough to motivate others to seek revenge for the indignities they have experienced.

It is an excuse to ignore and do nothing about the ultimate sources of Muslim rage because they are too discomfiting to bear discussion. Any attempt to review the political effects of American complicity in the oppression and dispossession of millions of Palestinians and the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths caused by U.S. sanctions, bombing campaigns, and drone warfare is ruled out of order by political correctness and cowardice.

The United States needs to work with its European allies, with Russia, and with partners in the Middle East to attack the problems that are generating terrorism, not just the theology of those who resort to it.

Blunder number seven was the adoption after the 1973 Yom Kippur War of a commitment to maintain a “qualitative military edge” for Israel over any and all potential adversaries in its region. This policy has deprived Israel of any incentive to seek security through non-military means.

Why should Israel risk resting its security on reconciliation with Palestinians and its other Arab neighbors when it has been assured of long-term military supremacy over them and relieved of any concern about the political or economic consequences of using force against them?

Confidence in Israel’s qualitative military edge is now the main source of moral hazard for the Jewish state. Its effect is to encourage Israel to favor short-term territorial gains over any effort to achieve long-term security through acceptance by neighboring states, the elimination of tensions with them, and the normalization of its relations with others in its region. U.S. policy inadvertently ensured that the so-called “peace process” would always be stillborn. And so it proved to be.

Israel’s lack of concern about the consequences of its occupation and settlement

of the West Bank and its siege of Gaza has facilitated its progressive abandonment of the universalist Jewish values that inspired Zionism and its consequent separation from the Jewish communities outside its elastic borders. U.S. subsidies underwrite blatant tyranny by Jewish settlers over the Muslim and Christian Arabs they have dispossessed.

This is a formula for the moral and political self-delegitimization of the State of Israel, not its long-term survival. It is also a recipe for the ultimate loss by Israel of irreplaceable American political, military, and other support.

The United States needs to wean Israel off its welfare dependency and end the unconditional commitments that enable self-destructive behavior on the part of the Jewish state.

Blunder number eight has been basing U.S. policies toward the Middle East on deductive reasoning grounded in ideological fantasies and politically convenient narratives rather than on inductive reasoning and reality-based analysis. America's misadventures cannot be excused as "intelligence errors." They are the result of the ideological politicization of policy-making. This has enabled multiple policy errors based on wishful thinking, selective listening, and mirror-imaging. Examples include:

–The conviction, despite U.N. inspections and much evidence to the contrary, that Saddam's program to develop weapons of mass destruction was ongoing, representing an imminent danger, and could only be halted by his overthrow;

–The supposition that, despite his well-documented secularism, because he was an Arab, a Muslim, and a bad guy, Saddam must be colluding with the religious fanatics of al Qaeda;

–The assumption that the U.S. military presence in Iraq would be short, undemanding, and inexpensive;

–The belief that the overthrow of confessional and ethnic balances would not cause the disintegration of societies like Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon or ignite a wider sectarian conflict;

–The spurious attribution to people in Iraq of political attitudes and aspirations found mostly among exiles abroad;

–The ludicrous expectation that U.S. forces invading Iraq would be greeted as liberators by all but a few;

–The unshakeable presumption that Israel must want peace more than land;

–The impulse to confuse mob rule on the Arab street with a process of

democratization;

–The confidence that free and fair elections would put liberals rather than Islamist nationalists in power in Arab societies like Palestine and Egypt;

–The supposition that the removal of bad guys from office, as in Libya, Yemen, or Syria, would lead to the elevation of better leaders and the flowering of peace, freedom, and domestic tranquility there; and

–Imagining that dictators like Bashar Al-Assad had little popular support and could therefore be easily deposed.

I could go on but I won't. I'm sure I've made my point. Dealing with the Middle East as we prefer to imagine it rather than as it is doesn't work. **The United States needs to return to fact-based analysis and realism in its foreign policy.**

All these blunders have been compounded by the consistent substitution of military tactics for strategy. The diplomatic success of the Iran nuclear deal aside, the policy dialogue in Washington and the current presidential campaign have focused entirely on the adjustment of troop levels, whether and when to bomb things, the implications of counterinsurgency doctrine, when and how to use special forces, whether to commit troops on the ground, and the like, with nary a word about what these uses of force are to accomplish other than killing people. When presented with proposals for military action, no one asks "and then what?"

Military campaign plans that aim at no defined political end state are violence for the sake of violence that demonstrably create more problems than they solve. Military actions that are unguided and unaccompanied by diplomacy are especially likely to do so. Think of Israel's, our, and Saudi Arabia's campaigns in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen.

By contrast, military interventions that are limited in their objectives, scale, and duration, that end or phase down when they have achieved appropriate milestones, and that support indigenous forces that have shown their mettle on the battlefield can succeed. Examples include the pre-Tora Bora phase of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and the first round of Russian intervention in Syria.

The objectives of what was initially conceived as a punitive raid into Afghanistan in October 2001 were (1) to dismantle al Qaeda and (2) to punish its Taliban hosts to ensure that "terrorists with global reach" would be denied a continuing safe haven in Afghanistan. The United States pursued these objectives by supporting mostly non-Pashtun enemies of the mostly Pashtun Taliban who had proven politico-military capabilities and staying power.

A limited American and British investment of intelligence capabilities, special forces, air combat controllers, and air strikes tilted the battlefield in favor of the Northern Alliance and against the Taliban. Within a little more than two months, the Taliban had been forced out of Kabul and the last remnants of al Qaeda had been killed or driven from Afghanistan. We had achieved our objectives.

But instead of declaring victory and dancing off the field, we moved the goal posts. The United States launched an open-ended campaign and enlisted NATO in efforts to install a government in Kabul while building a state for it to govern, promoting feminism, and protecting poppy growers. The poppies still flourish. All else looks to be ephemeral.

Mr. Putin's intervention in Syria in 2015 relied for its success on ingredients similar to those in the pre-Tora Bora U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. The Russians committed a modest ration of air power and special forces in support of a Syrian government that had amply demonstrated its survivability in the face of more than four years of Islamist efforts to take it down. The Russian campaign had clear political objectives, which it stuck to.

Moscow sought to reduce the complexities of Syria to a binary choice between life under the secular dictatorship of the Assad regime and rule by Islamist fanatics. It cemented a Russian-Iranian entente. It hedged against the likelihood that the Syrian Humpty Dumpty cannot be reassembled, ensuring that, whatever happens, Russia will not lack clients in Syria or be dislodged from its bases at Tartus and Latakia.

Russia succeeded in forcing the United States into a diplomatically credible peace process in which regime removal is no longer a given and Russia and Iran are recognized as essential participants. It retrained, reequipped, and restored the morale of government forces, while putting their Islamist opponents on the defensive and gaining ground against them. The campaign reduced and partially contained the growing Islamist threat to Russian domestic tranquility, while affirming Russia's importance as a partner in combating terrorism.

Moscow also put its hands on the stopcock for the refugee flow from West Asia that threatens the survival of the European Union, underscoring Russia's indispensable relevance to European affairs. It demonstrated its renewed military prowess and reestablished itself as a major actor in Middle Eastern affairs.

And it showed that Russia could be counted upon to stand by protégés when they are at risk, drawing an invidious contrast with the American abandonment of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. The cost of these achievements has been collateral damage

to Russia's relations with Turkey, a price Moscow appears willing to play.

But state failure in Syria continues, as it does in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. Jordan and Bahrain are under pressure. Tunisia and Turkey – once avatars of democratic Islamism – seem to be leaving democracy behind. Israel is strangling Gaza while swallowing the rest of Palestine alive. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain are in a near state of war with Iran, which is in the midst of a breakthrough in relations with Europe and Asia, if not America. Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are trying to stay out of the fight. Once the region's Arab heavyweight, Egypt now subsists on handouts from the Gulf Arabs and cowers under martial law. Sudan has been partitioned, sidelined, and ostracized by the West.

The Middle East kaleidoscope has yet to come to rest. We can see that the region's future political geography will differ from its past and present contours. But we cannot yet say what it will look like.

"More-of-the-same" policies will almost certainly produce more of the same sort of mess we now see. What is to be done? Perhaps we should start by trying to correct some of the blunders that produced our current conundrums. The world's reliance on energy from the Gulf has not diminished. But ours has. That gives us some freedom of maneuver. We should use it.

We need to harness our military capabilities to diplomacy rather than the other way around. The key to this is to find a way to reenlist Iraq in support of a restored balance of power in the Gulf. That would allow us reduce our presence there to levels that avoid stimulating a hostile reaction and to return to a policy of offshore balancing.

This can only be done if Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Sunni states rediscover the differences between the varieties of Shi'ism in Iraqi Najaf and Iranian Qom. The Shi'ism of Najaf tends to be fatalistic and supportive of Iraqi nationalism. The Shi'ism of Qom is more assertively universalistic and activist. The Saudis and their allies need to make common cause with Shi'ite Iraqis as Arabs rather than castigate them as heretics.

The limited normalization of Iranian relations with the West, including the United States, is an inevitability. The strategies of our Arab partners in the region need to anticipate and hedge against this. And we need to prepare them to do so.

Such an adjustment will take some very tough love from the United States. It will require the Saudis and their allies to back away from the policies based on Salafi sectarianism they have followed for the better part of this decade and

reembrace the tolerance that is at the heart of Islam. It will also require some measure of accommodation by them with Iran, regardless of the state of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Without both a turn away from sectarianism and the achievement of a modus vivendi with Iran, the Saudis and their allies will remain on the defensive, Iraq will remain an extension of Iranian influence, and the region will remain inflamed by religious warfare. All this will spill over on Americans and our European allies.

Islamism is an extreme form of political Islam – a noxious ideology that invites a political retort. It has received none except in Saudi Arabia. There a concerted propaganda campaign has effectively refuted Islamist heresies. No effort has been undertaken to form a coalition to mount such a campaign on a regional basis.

But such a coalition is essential to address the political challenges that Muslim extremists pose to regional stability and to the security of the West. Only the Saudis and others with credibility among Salafi Muslims are in a position to form and lead a campaign to do this. This is an instance where it makes sense for the United States to “lead from behind.”

For our part, Americans must be led to correct our counterproductive misunderstanding of Islam. Islamophobia has become as American as gun massacres. The presumptive candidate of one of our two major parties has suggested banning Muslims from entry into the United States. This is reflective of national attitudes that are incompatible with the cooperation we need with Muslim partners to fight terrorist extremism. If we do not correct these attitudes, we will continue to pay not just in treasure but in blood. Lots of it.

Finally, the United States must cease to provide blank checks to partners in the region prone to misguided and counterproductive policies and actions that threaten American interests as well as their own prospects. No more Yemens. No more Gazas or Lebanons. No more military guarantees that disincentivize diplomacy aimed at achieving long-term security for Israel.

The obvious difficulty of making any of these adjustments is a measure of how far we have diverged from an effective approach to managing our relations with the Middle East and how impaired our ability to contribute to peace and stability there has become. Our mainstream media is credulous and parrots the official line. Our politicians are devoted to narratives that bear almost no relation to the realities of the Middle East. Our government is dysfunctional. Our politics is ... well, ... you pick the word.

Frankly, the prospects that we will get our act and our policies together are not good. But history will not excuse us for acting out Einstein's definition of insanity: doing more of the same and expecting different results. We won't get them.

Ambassador Freeman chairs Projects International, Inc. He is a retired U.S. defense official, diplomat, and interpreter, the recipient of numerous high honors and awards, a popular public speaker, and the author of five books.

<http://chasfreeman.net/u-s-policy-and-the-geopolitical-dynamics-of-the-middle-east/>

Hillary Clinton's 'Entangled' Foreign Policy

Exclusive: Besides bashing Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton offered few specifics in her big foreign policy speech which stressed the value of "friends." But those "entangling alliances" helped create today's global chaos, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Now that Hillary Clinton has clinched the Democratic nomination, her June 2 foreign-policy speech is looking more and more important. The reason is simple: Clinton is going to be all over Donald Trump in the coming months, punching away at his racism and xenophobia, his thinly veiled appeals to violence, and his fraudulent business practices.

But what she'll no doubt hit him hardest on is his general unfitness to be anywhere near the nuclear button. As she put it in San Diego: "This is not someone who should ever have the nuclear codes – because it's not hard to imagine Donald Trump leading us into a war just because somebody got under his very thin skin."

It's hard to disagree – the man does seem out of control. But what has critics choking on their morning coffee is the implication that because Trump is bonkers, Hillary must be the opposite, i.e. thoughtful and mature. As opponents ranging from ConsortiumNews's Robert Parry to Paul R. Pillar, Jeffrey Sachs, Jeet Heer, Diana Johnstone, and Gary Leupp have pointed out, this is a woman who has had a hand in five or six of the major foreign-policy disasters of the post-9/11 period. So where does she get off calling Trump reckless?

But while critics have subjected her record to close examination, they haven't given the June 2 speech itself the attention it deserves beyond quoting the zingers hurled Trump's way. Yet everything about her flawed methodology is right there in that one 35-minute talk – the misguided logic, the ill-considered assumptions, the one-sided worldview that consistently leads her into trouble. Essentially, the speech is an ode to international friendship without recognizing how some of those “entangling alliances” have helped tie U.S. foreign policy into knots.

As Clinton put it: “America's network of allies is part of what makes us exceptional. And our allies deliver for us every day. Our armed forces fight terrorists together; our diplomats work side by side. Allies provide staging areas for our military, so we can respond quickly to events on the other side of the world. And they share intelligence that helps us identify and defuse potential threats.”

Friends make America strong, Clinton assures us, and if the U.S. is the most powerful country on earth, it's because it has so many friends. Indeed, “Moscow and Beijing are deeply envious of our alliances around the world,” Clinton went on, “because they have nothing to match them.”

Yet Trump, a classic bull in the china shop, wants to wreck what generations of U.S. diplomats have worked so hard to build up, Clinton argued. If he gets away with it, the Kremlin will celebrate while Americans will mourn the loss of an international power structure that has kept them safe:

“And if America doesn't lead, we leave a vacuum – and that will either cause chaos, or other countries will rush in to fill the void. Then they'll be the ones making the decisions about your lives and jobs and safety – and trust me, the choices they make will not be to our benefit.”

Stressing Allies

Allies – a word that appears in various combinations some 15 times during the talk – are what allow the U.S. to multiply its force around the world, Clinton argues. Instead of insulting everyone from Mexico to the Pope, the White House should therefore concentrate on strengthening the friendships it has and adding as many more as it can, Clinton contends.

But there's an obvious fallacy here. Simply put, it is that every ally is a separate nation with a separate set of priorities, none of which coincide completely with those of the U.S. (and often don't coincide even more with the priorities of either their own people or the American people). Hence, every “friend” is also a problem, and the more “friends” a country has, the more the

problems pile up.

This is an old issue in statecraft, which is why George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and other Founders warned against “entangling alliances” and why Lord Palmerston declared that great powers do not have friends, only interests.

But since the June 2 speech says nothing about goals, problems to be addressed or any other long-range considerations, Clinton apparently views friendship as an end in itself. Friends make America great, and great is what America ought to be. It’s circular reasoning like this that continually leads Clinton astray.

Take the Middle East where the two dominant powers (and U.S. “friends”) are Israel and Saudi Arabia. Although they have certainly had their differences, for the moment their governments’ interests overlap particularly with regard to Syria, the great bleeding wound on the edge of Europe. But this is not the case with the U.S. Even though both Saudi Arabia and Israel are old, old friends of Washington, they are in fact sharply at odds with key American interests.

The chief reason has to do with Al Qaeda, known in Syria as the Al Nusra Front, and its offshoot Islamic State, the ultra-terrorist group also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh. Saudi Arabia’s attitude toward such groups is ambiguous. It is obviously hostile to ISIS since it calls for the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy. But it is not entirely unsympathetic either, especially in Syria and Iraq where the Islamic State is locked in combat with Shi’ite forces that Riyadh despises even more.

This is why the Saudi kingdom has taken part (albeit halfheartedly) in the U.S.-led bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria while at the same time allowing private donations to flow to the group via Kuwait. It’s a hedge that allows Saudi Arabia to keep its options open.

Meanwhile, Saudi attitudes toward Al Nusra have been frankly positive ever since King Salman, a hardliner, ascended the throne in January 2015. Despite Saudi promises never to have anything to do with Al Qaeda, one of Salman’s first acts was to meet with Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan and work out plans to supply it with U.S.-made TOW anti-tank missiles so that it could mount a major offensive in Syria’s northern Idlib province, which it did just a few weeks later. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda.”]

The reason for the rapprochement is clear: Al Nusra is the most effective force against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom the Saudis regard as part of a great Iranian-Shi’ite conspiracy stretching from Yemen to Bahrain and the kingdom’s own oil-rich, Shi’ite-dominated Eastern Province. This makes Assad public enemy number one. Since Al Nusra is the enemy of Saudi Arabia’s

enemy, it must to a degree be Saudi Arabia's friend.

Israel's Reasons

Israel is more or less in the same boat. It has fought three wars with Syria and one with its close ally Hezbollah, and it regards Iran as a long-term threat to its very existence. Thus, it regards Assad as the prime enemy as well. For that reason, it "prefers IS to Iran," as then-Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon remarked at a conference last January, and Israel is so friendly to Al Nusra that it has taken in its wounded for treatment in Israeli hospitals.

But the U.S. does not quite agree since the American people still recall Al Qaeda as the villains of 9/11 and ISIS chopping off the heads of Western hostages (and claiming credit for Sunday's massacre of some 50 people at an Orlando, Florida night club). Various neocons and neolibers have tried to confuse matters by arguing that Al Qaeda and longtime bêtes noires like Saddam Hussein were essentially the same, the "logic" that helped trick many Americans into supporting the Iraq War even though the secular Hussein was a bitter enemy of Al Qaeda.

Along those lines, Clinton, in her October 2002 speech endorsing an invasion of Iraq, accused Hussein of "giv[ing] aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including Al Qaeda members, though there is apparently no evidence of his involvement in the terrible events of September 11, 2001." (Clinton's claim about aiding "Al Qaeda members" apparently was a reference to Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi supposedly going to a hospital in Baghdad although there was never any evidence that Iraqi authorities were aware of Zarqawi's whereabouts if indeed he did seek treatment at a Baghdad hospital. Still the canard worked as an effective way to confuse the American people.)

But when push has come to shove regarding these terrorists, official U.S. policy since 9/11 has been that the fight against Al Qaeda and its spinoff ISIS must take top priority. So if Israel and Saudi Arabia are both soft on Al Nusra and even to a degree on ISIS, the U.S., at least on paper, is committed to being ultra-hard, a dilemma that Clinton's speech ignored.

But this paradox is a problem that no amount of fancy footwork can get around. Consequently, the White House dithers, stalls and generally ties itself up in knots trying to do the impossible. It bombs ISIS except when ISIS is locked in battle with Assad's troops, at which point the U.S. military holds its fire so as not to offend Saudi sensibilities.

The U.S. government supports Sunni extremists such as the fighters of Ahrar al-Sham who fight alongside Al Nusra in the Saudi-and-Turkish-backed Army of

Conquest. The Obama administration even suggested at one point that Russia refrain from bombing Nusra forces in Aleppo since they are so intermingled with U.S.-backed fighters that it is all but impossible to pry them apart. But sometimes the U.S. bombs Al Nusra as well just to keep up appearances.

The Obama administration continues to call for Assad's removal even though the effect would be to clear a path for ISIS and Al Nusra straight through to the presidential palace in Damascus. When Assad recently vowed to "rip out terrorism from its root wherever it exists," State Department spokesman Mark C. Toner replied that the "remarks show once again how delusional, detached and unfit he is to lead the Syrian people."

Since Israel and the Saudis regard Assad as an enemy, the U.S. feels obliged to follow suit. But since Assad also battles ISIS and Al Nusra on a daily basis, no one can quite figure out why the Obama administration continues with this contradictory policy. (The best the State Department and the mainstream U.S. media can come up with is a claim that somehow Assad is to blame for Al Qaeda and ISIS although the terror groups trace their origins back to U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s and the Iraq War last decade.)

As Secretary of State, Clinton helped engineer this incomprehensible and incoherent policy by leading the charge against Assad on Saudi Arabia and Israel's behalf. She called for his ouster in July 2011, a full month before Obama got around to declaring that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

Dooming Peace Talks

As Jeffrey Sachs points out, her insistence on Assad's resignation as precondition for peace talks insured that negotiations would die aborning. Although she insists in *Hard Choices*, her 2014 memoir of her State Department years, that the U.S. provided the rebels only with nonlethal aid, she had to be aware that, with the death of strongman Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011, U.S. officials began shipping large amounts of Libyan weaponry – including hundreds of sniper rifles, RPG launchers, and howitzer missiles – from Benghazi to the ports of Baniyas and Borj Islam, Syria.

Since Saudi Arabia is committed to the violent overthrow of Assad, how could the U.S. say no? Isn't that what friends do – stand by one another regardless of the consequences?

Libya is yet another example of the horrors that this Clinton doctrine of "entangling alliances" leads to (with France and other European "allies" eager

to oust Gaddafi and thus strengthen their influence in oil-rich northern Africa).

According to a State Department memo, the Secretary of State spent much of late March 2011 persuading Qatar to contribute to the anti-Gaddafi effort. She was therefore overjoyed when Doha at last agreed, as was her boss. Welcoming Qatar's dictatorial leader Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to the White House the following month, a grateful Obama said:

"We would not have been able I think to shape the kind of broad-based international coalition that includes not only our NATO members but also includes Arab states without the Emir's leadership. He is motivated by a belief that the Libyan people should have the rights and freedoms of all people."

Or as Obama put it a bit more candidly a few hours later in front of what he didn't realize was an open mike: "Pretty influential guy. He is a big booster, big promoter of democracy all throughout the Middle East. Reform, reform, reform – you're seeing it on Al Jazeera. Now, he himself is not reforming significantly. There's no big move towards democracy in Qatar. But you know part of the reason is that the per capita income of Qatar is \$145,000 a year. That will dampen a lot of conflict."

Evidently, Al-Thani's enormous oil wealth (and his willingness to host U.S. military bases) gave him a free pass as far as democracy is concerned. But no matter. Qatar is a friend, so what could go wrong? A great deal as it turned out.

A longtime patron of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar turned out to have priorities that were separate and distinct from Washington's. Of the \$400 million that it pumped into Libya, most wound up in the hands of Islamist militias that soon spread anarchy from one side of the country to the other.

Their pockets stuffed with Qatari cash, fundamentalists set about removing "pagan" symbols – i.e. flags of NATO members engaged in driving Gaddafi out – from public squares where daily group prayers were held and encouraging local imams to issue fatwas ordering rape victims not to report such crimes to the police.

A few days after Al-Thani's meeting with Obama in the White House, Qatar organized a secret meeting in Istanbul bringing Libya's Islamist factions together in a united Islamic Front. (For more information, see Ethan Chorin's *Exit the Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution* and Jason Pack's *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*, published in 2012 and 2013 respectively.)

But Secretary Clinton still didn't recognize the dangers. "For the first time we have a NATO-Arab alliance taking action, you've got Arab countries who are running strike actions," Clinton burbled. What she didn't realize was that she and Obama had been outfoxed (or perhaps were more interested in helping out NATO allies which wanted a bigger share of Libyan oil and France which feared that Gaddafi would create a pan-African currency that would supplant the French franc).

Today, Libya is a lawless zone with ISIS controlling miles of coastline around the city of Surt, a scant 300 miles from Europe, and literally thousands of other Islamist militias rampaging across the rest of the country. Three rival governments are now vying for control while vast amounts of weaponry have gone to fuel other conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East.

One might be inclined to call the Libyan mess the worst disaster in the Middle East – except for all the other disasters that Clinton has helped engineer. Concerned about Qatar's role in fueling Libyan chaos, Obama administration officials batted around ideas about how to show Qatar that they were displeased with its support for extremists in Libya. Suggestions were floated to trim military aid or perhaps transfer U.S. military assets to other locations.

According to a major takeout in *The New York Times*: "But Middle East hands at the State Department pushed back, saying that pressuring the gulf monarchy would only backfire. And the Defense Department strongly objected: It had a 20-year history of close cooperation with Qatar, which hosted critical American military bases. In the end, there was no appetite for anything beyond quiet diplomacy... Only last year did President Obama rebuke the nations meddling in Libya, and by then it was too late."

After all, as presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton now says, America must stand by its "friends." Meanwhile, Qatar has contributed more than \$1 million to the Clinton Foundation, which makes it not just a friend of the U.S. but a friend of Bill and Hillary – and thus doubly precious.

As Americans march to the polls on Nov. 8, voters should keep in mind Hillary Clinton's dictum that friends like these are what make America great.

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Why US Politics and Policy Are Adrift

The U.S. system of politics and public policy is in disarray awash with elites trying to manipulate the public and the public drifting away from any factual grounding, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Christopher Preble has given us some interesting thoughts about foreign policy elites and the U.S. public and how the interplay of the two figures into bad foreign policy. He captures accurately some recent patterns of ends being ostensibly pursued without the means being employed to accomplish those ends. But in the course of criticizing elites he probably lets the public off too easily.

Preble and others have argued that leaders can sway the public more easily on national security matters than on domestic issues because members of the public have direct first-hand experience with what is working or not working domestically (e.g., a person has a job or doesn't have a job) while they lack comparable direct contact with the results of foreign policy.

But the domestic-vs.-foreign distinction breaks down because having direct experience with the results of policy is not the same as having a good sense of what particular policies bring good results. In fact, the public often is woefully ignorant about the latter. What is good for an individual or family does not necessarily scale up into what is good at the level of national policy.

Although fiscal restraint is good for family financial health, for example, in a time of insufficient demand it is bad for the health of the national economy (and for creating jobs). Yet many members of the American public mistakenly believe otherwise.

Certainly there are instances of determined elites getting the public to believe certain things so that the elites can achieve foreign policy objectives they have set for themselves; the launching of a major offensive war in Iraq in 2003 is an extreme example of this, just as it is an extreme example of some other things.

But one can also easily point to examples of elites swaying the public in domestic policy as well. The Donald Trump phenomenon has partially unmasked what Republican Party elites have been doing for some time in this regard. They have helped to maintain a constituency by stoking some of the fears and attitudes that Trump is now expressing, while also encouraging the mistaken belief that they are pursuing economic policies that serve the interests of that

constituency rather than the one percent – and then not delivering on that false premise, a fact that Trump also is exploiting.

The disconnect between ends and means in something like the application of military force to countering terrorism in places such as Syria is not primarily a matter of elites determining the ends and the public being stingy about providing the means. The primary disconnect instead comes from the public often being inconsistent and illogical when it comes to matching ends and means. Again, this arises in domestic as well as foreign policy, as in the frequently observed pattern of wanting to maintain popular programs X, Y and Z but not wanting to pay the taxes necessary to finance them.

If there are halfway and ineffective measures currently used against terrorism in Syria or elsewhere, that is not because the Obama administration has established an objective of defeating terrorist groups but is encountering public resistance in mustering the means to do so. It would be more accurate to say that the American public demands that a fearsome terrorist group such as ISIS be defeated – and so the administration has to accept that objective and to do something about it – while a president who takes a more sober and careful approach to assessing costs and benefits is trying to limit the drain on blood and treasure along the way.

Any public claim to having a higher wisdom than elites when it comes to resisting costly and unwise foreign interventions is vitiated by the public's inconsistency in mounting such resistance. The resistance tends to come only (as with now) from the fatigue of prolonged overseas commitments, or even more so after especially costly fiascoes such as the one in Vietnam.

Speaking of the Vietnam War, that is an example of how the misconceptions of elites and the public sometimes exist in tandem. They can arrive at a misconception together, without one necessarily leading the other. On Vietnam, misconceptions about falling dominoes and U.S. credibility being at stake were a widely shared conventional wisdom, not a Saddam-will-give-WMD-to-terrorists manipulation by a particular elite of the public.

There certainly is good reason to agree with Preble in believing that some who currently function as foreign policy elites in the United States should be retired. What President Obama is resisting in trying to limit expenditure of blood and treasure in a place like Syria is pressure not just from public fears about terrorism but also from what his aide Benjamin Rhodes would call the blob. But there is still plenty of blame left over to assign to the public.

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University for security studies. (This article first appeared as [a blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Democrats Are Now the Aggressive War Party

Exclusive: For nearly a half century – since late in the Vietnam War – the Democrats have been the less warlike of the two parties, but that has flipped with the choice of war hawk Hillary Clinton, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Democratic Party has moved from being what you might call a reluctant war party to an aggressive war party with its selection of Hillary Clinton as its presumptive presidential nominee. With minimal debate, this historic change brings full circle the arc of the party's anti-war attitudes that began in 1968 and have now ended in 2016.

Since the Vietnam War, the Democrats have been viewed as the more peaceful of the two major parties, with the Republicans often attacking Democratic candidates as "soft" regarding use of military force.

But former Secretary of State Clinton has made it clear that she is eager to use military force to achieve "regime change" in countries that get in the way of U.S. desires. She abides by neoconservative strategies of violent interventions especially in the Middle East and she strikes a belligerent posture as well toward nuclear-armed Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.

Amid the celebrations about picking the first woman as a major party's presumptive nominee, Democrats appear to have given little thought to the fact that they have abandoned a near half-century standing as the party more skeptical about the use of military force. Clinton is an unabashed war hawk who has shown no inclination to rethink her pro-war attitudes.

As a U.S. senator from New York, Clinton voted for and avidly supported the Iraq War, only cooling her enthusiasm in 2006 when it became clear that the Democratic base had turned decisively against the war and her hawkish position endangered her chances for the 2008 presidential nomination, which she lost to Barack Obama, an Iraq War opponent.

However, to ease tensions with the Clinton wing of the party, Obama selected Clinton to be his Secretary of State, one of the first and most fateful

decisions of his presidency. He also kept on George W. Bush's Defense Secretary Robert Gates and neocon members of the military high command, such as Gen. David Petraeus.

This "Team of Rivals" – named after Abraham Lincoln's initial Civil War cabinet – ensured a powerful bloc of pro-war sentiment, which pushed Obama toward more militaristic solutions than he otherwise favored, notably the wasteful counterinsurgency "surge" in Afghanistan in 2009 which did little beyond get another 1,000 U.S. soldiers killed and many more Afghans.

Clinton was a strong supporter of that "surge" – and Gates reported in his memoir that she acknowledged only opposing the Iraq War "surge" in 2007 for political reasons. Inside Obama's foreign policy councils, Clinton routinely took the most neoconservative positions, such as defending a 2009 coup in Honduras that ousted a progressive president.

Clinton also sabotaged early efforts to work out an agreement in which Iran surrendered much of its low-enriched uranium, including an initiative in 2010 organized at Obama's request by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey. Clinton sank that deal and escalated tensions with Iran along the lines favored by Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a Clinton favorite.

Pumping for War in Libya

In 2011, Clinton successfully lobbied Obama to go to war against Libya to achieve another "regime change," albeit cloaked in the more modest goal of establishing only a "no-fly zone" to "protect civilians."

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi had claimed he was battling jihadists and terrorists who were building strongholds around Benghazi, but Clinton and her State Department underlings accused him of slaughtering civilians and (in one of the more colorful lies used to justify the war) distributing Viagra to his troops so they could rape more women.

Despite resistance from Russia and China, the United Nations Security Council fell for the deception about protecting civilians. Russia and China agreed to abstain from the vote, giving Clinton her "no-fly zone." Once that was secured, however, the Obama administration and several European allies unveiled their real plan, to destroy the Libyan army and pave the way for the violent overthrow of Gaddafi.

Privately, Clinton's senior aides viewed the Libyan "regime change" as a chance to establish what they called the "Clinton Doctrine" on using "smart power" with plans for Clinton to rush to the fore and claim credit once Gaddafi was ousted. But that scheme failed when President Obama grabbed the limelight after

Gaddafi's government collapsed.

But Clinton would not be denied her second opportunity to claim the glory when jihadist rebels captured Gaddafi on Oct. 20, 2011, sodomized him with a knife and then murdered him. Hearing of Gaddafi's demise, Clinton went into a network interview and declared, "we came, we saw, he died" and clapped her hands in glee.

Clinton's glee was short-lived, however. Libya soon descended into chaos with Islamic extremists gaining control of large swaths of the country. On Sept. 11, 2012, jihadists attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi killing Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American personnel. It turned out Gaddafi had been right about the nature of his enemies.

Undaunted by the mess in Libya, Clinton made similar plans for Syria where again she marched in lock-step with the neocons and their "liberal interventionist" sidekicks in support of another violent "regime change," ousting the Assad dynasty, a top neocon/Israeli goal since the 1990s.

Clinton pressed Obama to escalate weapons shipments and training for anti-government rebels who were deemed "moderate" but in reality collaborated closely with radical Islamic forces, including Al Nusra Front (Al Qaeda's Syrian franchise) and some even more extreme jihadists (who coalesced into the Islamic State).

Again, Clinton's war plans were cloaked in humanitarian language, such as the need to create a "safe zone" inside Syria to save civilians. But her plans would have required a major U.S. invasion of a sovereign country, the destruction of its air force and much of its military, and the creation of conditions for another "regime change."

In the case of Syria, however, Obama resisted the pressure from Clinton and other hawks inside his own administration. The President did approve some covert assistance to the rebels and allowed Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf states to do much more, but he did not agree to an outright U.S.-led invasion to Clinton's disappointment.

Parting Ways

Clinton finally left the Obama administration at the start of his second term in 2013, some say voluntarily and others say in line with Obama's desire to finally move ahead with serious negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program and to apply more pressure on Israel to reach a long-delayed peace settlement with the Palestinians. Secretary of State John Kerry was willing to do some of the politically risky work that Clinton was not.

Many on the Left deride Obama as “Obomber” and mock his hypocritical acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. And there is no doubt that Obama has waged war his entire presidency, bombing at least seven countries by his own count. But the truth is that he has generally been among the most dovish members of his administration, advocating a “realistic” (or restrained) application of American power. By contrast, Clinton was among the most hawkish senior officials.

A major testing moment for Obama came in August 2013 after a sarin gas attack outside Damascus, Syria, that killed hundreds of Syrians and that the State Department and the mainstream U.S. media immediately blamed on the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

There was almost universal pressure inside Official Washington to militarily enforce Obama’s “red line” against Assad using chemical weapons. Amid this intense momentum toward war, it was widely assumed that Obama would order a harsh retaliatory strike against the Syrian military. But U.S. intelligence and key figures in the U.S. military smelled a rat, a provocation carried out by Islamic extremists to draw the United States into the Syrian war on their side.

At the last minute and at great political cost to himself, Obama listened to the doubts of his intelligence advisers and called off the attack, referring the issue to the U.S. Congress and then accepting a Russian-brokered deal in which Assad surrendered all his chemical weapons though continuing to deny a role in the sarin attack.

Eventually, the sarin case against Assad would collapse. Only one rocket was found to have carried sarin and it had a very limited range placing its firing position likely within rebel-controlled territory. But Official Washington’s conventional wisdom never budged. To this day, politicians and pundits denounce Obama for not enforcing his “red line.”

There’s little doubt, however, what Hillary Clinton would have done. She has been eager for a much more aggressive U.S. military role in Syria since the civil war began in 2011. Much as she used propaganda and deception to achieve “regime change” in Libya, she surely would have done the same in Syria, embracing the pretext of the sarin attack – “killing innocent children” – to destroy the Syrian military even if the rebels were the guilty parties.

Still Lusting for War

Indeed, during the 2016 campaign – in those few moments that have touched on foreign policy – Clinton declared that as President she would order the U.S. military to invade Syria. “Yes, I do still support a no-fly zone,” she said during the April 14 debate. She also wants a “safe zone” that would require

seizing territory inside Syria.

But no one should be gullible enough to believe that Clinton's invasion of Syria would stop at a "safe zone." As with Libya, once the camel's nose was into the tent, pretty soon the animal would be filling up the whole tent.

Perhaps even scarier is what a President Clinton would do regarding Iran and Ukraine, two countries where belligerent U.S. behavior could start much bigger wars.

For instance, would President Hillary Clinton push the Iranians so hard – in line with what Netanyahu favors – that they would renounce the nuclear deal and give Clinton an excuse to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran?

In Ukraine, would Clinton escalate U.S. military support for the post-coup anti-Russian Ukrainian government, encouraging its forces to annihilate the ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine and to "liberate" the people of Crimea from "Russian aggression" (though they voted by 96 percent to leave the failed Ukrainian state and rejoin Russia)?

Would President Clinton expect the Russians to stand down and accept these massacres? Would she take matters to the next level to demonstrate how tough she can be against Russian President Vladimir Putin whom she has compared to Hitler? Might she buy into the latest neocon dream of achieving "regime change" in Moscow? Would she be wise enough to recognize how dangerous such instability could be?

Of course, one would expect that all of Clinton's actions would be clothed in the crocodile tears of "humanitarian" warfare, starting wars to "save the children" or to stop the evil enemy from "raping defenseless girls." The truth of such emotional allegations would be left for the post-war historians to try to sort out. In the meantime, President Clinton would have her wars.

Having covered Washington for nearly four decades, I always marvel at how selective concerns for human rights can be. When "friendly" civilians are dying, we are told that we have a "responsibility to protect," but when pro-U.S. forces are slaughtering civilians of an adversary country or movement, reports of those atrocities are dismissed as "enemy propaganda" or ignored altogether. Clinton is among the most cynical in this regard.

Trading Places

But the larger picture for the Democrats is that they have just adopted an extraordinary historical reversal whether they understand it or not. They have replaced the Republicans as the party of aggressive war, though clearly many

Republicans still dance to the neocon drummer just as Clinton and “liberal interventionists” do. Still, Donald Trump, for all his faults, has adopted a relatively peaceful point of view, especially in the Mideast and with Russia.

While today many Democrats are congratulating themselves for becoming the first major party to make a woman the presumptive nominee, they may soon have to decide whether that distinction justifies putting an aggressive war hawk in the White House. In a way, the issue is an old one for Democrats, whether “identity politics” or anti-war policies are more important.

At least since 1968 and the chaotic Democratic convention in Chicago, the party has advanced, sometimes haltingly, those two agendas, pushing for broader rights for all and seeking to restrain the nation’s militaristic impulses.

In the 1970s, Democrats largely repudiated the Vietnam War while the Republicans waved the flag and equated anti-war positions with treason. By the 1980s and early 1990s, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush were making war fun again – Grenada, Afghanistan, Panama and the Persian Gulf, all relatively low-cost conflicts with victorious conclusions.

By the 1990s, Bill Clinton (along with Hillary Clinton) saw militarism as just another issue to be triangulated. With the Soviet Union’s collapse, the Clinton-42 administration saw the opportunity for more low-cost tough-guy/gal-ism – continuing a harsh embargo and periodic air strikes against Iraq (causing the deaths of a U.N.-estimated half million children); blasting Serbia into submission over Kosovo; and expanding NATO to the east toward Russia’s borders.

But Bill Clinton did balk at the more extreme neocon ideas, such as the one from the Project for the New American Century for a militarily enforced “regime change” in Iraq. That had to wait for George W. Bush in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. As a New York senator, Hillary Clinton made sure she was onboard for war on Iraq just as she sided with Israel’s pummeling of Lebanon and the Palestinians in Gaza.

Hillary Clinton was taking triangulation to an even more acute angle as she sided with virtually every position of the Netanyahu government in Israel and moved in tandem with the neocons as they cemented their control of Washington’s foreign policy establishment. Her only brief flirtation with an anti-war position came in 2006 when her political advisers informed her that her continued support for Bush’s Iraq War would doom her in the Democratic presidential race.

But she let her hawkish plumage show again as Obama’s Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013 – and once she felt she had the 2016 Democratic race in hand (after

her success in the southern primaries) she pivoted back to her hard-line positions in full support of Israel and in a full-throated defense of her war on Libya, which she still won't view as a failure.

The smarter neocons are already lining up to endorse Clinton, especially given Donald Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party and his disdain for neocon strategies that he views as simply spreading chaos around the globe. As The New York Times has reported, Clinton is "the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes."

Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the neocon Project for the new American Century, has endorsed Clinton, saying "I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy. 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." [See Consortiumnews.com's "Yes, Hillary Clinton Is a Neocon."]

So, by selecting Clinton, the Democrats have made a full 360-degree swing back to the pre-1968 days of the Vietnam War. After nearly a half century of favoring a more peaceful foreign policy – and somewhat less weapons spending – than the Republicans, the Democrats are America's new aggressive war party.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "Would a Clinton Win Mean More Wars?"]

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).

America Excels in Business of Death

America may lag behind the developed world in many categories, but it is No. 1 in the "merchant of death" business, experiencing a boom in the commerce of boom, especially in areas destabilized by U.S. invasions, notes JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

Who says nothing is made in the USA anymore? Certainly not the well-heeled denizens of the State Department's diplomatic corps. And they should know. That's because they're stationed on the frontlines of the ongoing battle to preserve Uncle Sam's dominant market share of the global weapons trade.

Luckily for the Military-Industrial Complex, it turns out that “Made in the USA” inspires a lot of brand loyalty, even if *actual* loyalty is often a harder sell (paging Saudi Arabia). To wit, not only was America the world’s leading arms dealer in 2014 with \$36.2 billion in sales, but it topped that 35 percent surge in sales over 2013 with yet another profitable spike to \$46.6 billion in 2015.

As Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) determined in its recent report on the global arms trade, the United States maintains a commanding “33% share of total arms exports” and is the world’s top seller for five years running. And its customer base includes “at least” 96 countries, which is nearly half of the world’s nations.

A robust 40 percent of those exports end up in the Middle East. Perhaps that’s why the State Department is so darn bullish on the prospects of Uncle Sam’s booming business of selling things that go “boom!”

That’s the takeaway from a recent report in Defense News highlighting the marketing push by “Commercial Officers” stationed at the U.S. embassy in Jordan. They worked the crowd at the kingdom’s eleventh bi-annual Special Operations Forces Exhibition and Conference (SOFEX). Like many of the nearly 100 military-themed “trade shows” held around the world ***this year alone***, SOFEX offered the profiteers of doom an opportunity to display their merchandise and to cut deals with bellicose browsers ready to pull the trigger on a deadly impulse buy.

Some of the bigger, “glitzy” trade shows – like the International Defence Exposition and Conference (IDEX) held yearly in Abu Dhabi – are full-on one-stop-shopping destinations for the up-and-coming military power on the move, the newly-minted pro-Western junta eager to armor-up, and the forward-thinking “Coalition Partner” looking for the latest in “kinetic warfare.”

If nothing else, trade shows offer defense contractors a chance to give out “promotional tchotchkes” to potential future customers who might be swayed to double-back by a branded camouflage carryall or a Digi Camo Military Bert Stress Reliever. No doubt it’s a tedious affair, but the presenters toiling behind the displays are not alone on the battlefield of commerce.

That certainly was the case at SOFEX, where the U.S. Embassy deployed Senior Commercial Officer Geoffrey Bogart and Regional Safety and Security chief Cherine Maher to act as sale-force multipliers for America’s military moneymakers.

The Mideast Arms Bazaar

As Jen Judson detailed, Bogart and Maher tracked down sales leads throughout a region gripped by chaos since America wantonly destroyed a bystander nation

under false pretenses (a.k.a. Iraq). Here are Judson's highlights from Bogart and Maher's magical misery tour of the profitable market forces currently shaping America's recently reshaped Middle East:

JORDAN: "We are very high on the safety and security market in Jordan," Geoffrey Bogart, a commercial officer at the U.S. Embassy said. Bogart said there is an abundance of market prospects for U.S. companies to do business in Jordan, including in border security, cyber security, command and control centers, telecommunications equipment, military vehicles, artillery, tactical equipment, bomb and metal detectors, and closed circuit television (CCTV) and access control.

EGYPT: "Egypt is facing a lot of challenges especially in terms of border control and whether it's from the West or the East or the North or the South, so the main project that is going on is border and perimeter control," Maher said, which means the country really wants bomb detection, jammers and improvised explosive device diffusers.

LIBYA: The current instability in Libya has led to challenges for U.S. firms, according to Maher; however, U.S. companies' products are in high demand there. "The trick is how to enter the market, who to sell to, and making sure of export license," she said, adding some products that had been permitted to be sold to Libya now have restrictions.

TUNISIA: There is continuous growth in Tunisia's defense market, Maher said. Tunisia plussed up its security forces budget in 2016 due to growing terrorist threats in the region. The country wants to build up its force capacity to deter regional threats, strengthen defensive capabilities and support counterterrorism operations.

LEBANON: Lebanon is interested in border security; however, it's particularly interested in securing public buildings and providing for civilian protection due to ongoing insecurity in some towns and cities near Beirut, Maher said.

IRAQ: Maher said Iraq has a particularly "dynamic" market valued in 2014 at about \$7.6 billion, which is about 3.44 percent of its GDP. With the ongoing war against the Islamic State group, it is anticipated that Iraq will soon spend around \$19 billion, which would make up about 18 to 20 percent of its GDP. Like all the other countries in the region, Iraq is investing heavily in safety and security equipment, and also wants personal protective gear and security systems for residential and commercial buildings, according to Maher.

Kicking Back a Share

A "dynamic" market is right ... that is, if you're General Dynamics. Or Lockheed

Martin. Or Boeing. Or any of the big six defense contractors who together took home \$90.29 billion of the over \$175 billion worth of taxpayer dollars doled out last year to the top 100 military contractors. Not coincidentally, seven of the top eight U.S. Government contractors are defense companies, with only health care services provider McKesson making it past a phalanx of defense wheelers and dealers.

It's a rarified world greased last year by \$127.39 million of lobbying largesse and another \$32.66 million spent so far this year, according to OpenSecrets.org. Of course, lobbying offers a great bang for the buck when it comes to stoking sales. A MapLight analysis earlier this year found that "major U.S. government contractors have received \$1,171 in taxpayer money for every \$1 invested in lobbying and political action committee contributions during the last decade."

Now that's some serious ROI! Still, nothing quite compares to the breeder reactor effect that comes from using expensive military hardware to destroy regimes in a never-ending global war against a tactic. Regime change touched off civil war in Iraq. That spread to Syria which, in turn, sent over 660,000 refugees into Jordan and over one million refugees into Lebanon ... all of which explains why Bogart and Maher are so bullish on the sale of security-related products to those two nations and why the entire region is in the midst of a military buying spree.

Then there is the chaotic aftermath of regime change in Libya, which threatens to spill over to two more booming markets – Tunisia and Egypt. Of course, Egypt had its own U.S.-endorsed internal regime change at the hands of a loyal customer and longtime recipient of American "aid" – the Egyptian military. It was really a "coup," but U.S. law would've prevented selling Egypt's military junta tear gas canisters marked "Made in USA" (among other things) if it was officially a coup d'etat, so the Obama Administration simply didn't call it a coup.

Now, according to Ms. Maher, Egypt's military is in the market for yet more military hardware that, according to a new GAO report detailed by The Intercept, is not being properly or legally vetted by the State Department. Those purchases are easily funded by the \$6.4 billion in U.S. aid since the coup in 2011. And (go figure) Egypt's wish list is justified, in part, by the sudden need to ward off interlopers from regime-changed Libya, which, according to the aforementioned Ms. Maher, is still a red-hot market for U.S. arms dealers ... if they can get the export licenses.

A Circular Business Model

And so the dynamic market churns onward – with tax dollars paying the salaries

of State Department “Commercial Officers” who work for the heavily-subsidized U.S. defense industry as salespeople in overseas markets destabilized by taxpayer-funded wars fought by taxpayer-supported American soldiers armed with weaponry purchased from that self-same defense industry with – you guessed it – more tax dollars.

The “diplomats” in the State Department act as important go-betweens in the process, helping “customers” navigate the military-industrial complexities of end-user certificates, export licenses, and human rights restrictions so they can spend taxpayer-funded U.S. “aid” that invariably ends up back in the coffers of Lockheed, Boeing, Raytheon, and so on.

Once the money makes it back home to the defense industry, those companies invest some of their windfalls into lobbying, into SuperPACS, into both political parties, and directly into campaigns of the Congressional cronies who dutifully rubber-stamp the defense budget that enriches the defense industry. So far this year, they’ve poured over \$17 million into those efforts and, in turn, they’ve provided the fuel to run the “dynamic” perpetual machine in which the State Department is a vital cog.

And this is why the folks at the State Department know full-well that, in fact, America still actually makes something – it is the world’s leading manufacturer of war.

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