

Obama's Plea for Validation

President Obama's lengthy interviews with a neocon journalist from an establishment magazine suggest Obama is still searching futilely for Official Washington's blessings on his somewhat "realist" foreign policy, writes Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

The Atlantic has just published a long essay, *The Obama Doctrine*, by their Washington national correspondent, Jeffrey Goldberg. Based in most part on wide-ranging reflective interviews with President Barack Obama, the article makes extensive use of direct quotes from that interview. Considerable space is devoted to the various American engagements in the Middle East along with Obama's views on prospects for the region.

It is a remarkable journalistic event insofar as it represents a preemptive attempt by a sitting president to shape the discourse about his record and his legacy. What he says is revealing – less as analysis and interpretation of actions taken, though, than as an "exhibit" of all that is peculiar about Obama's policy-making style – and what the implications for American diplomacy have been.

Obama's overall stance is one of dissociation from his own administration and its conduct. Throughout, he appears to be referring to himself in the third person. This can be seen as the soon-to-be-memoir writer's attempt to cast himself as detached statesman while distancing himself from errors made.

However, this degree of dissociation by a still incumbent president is odd. It suggests that he has been playing the role of participant-observer while in the Oval Office. Moreover, it conveys his sense that somehow the words he utters are equivalent to actions. Indeed, a feature of his presidency has been a frequent mismatch of words and deeds which never get reconciled. Nor do they in this seemingly candid interview. That raises a cardinal question: is this honest reflection or a characteristic flight from accountability?

Two, this strange attitude is most pronounced in his remarks about the Middle East. For example, he inveighs against allowing the United States to be placed in a position of picking sides in Islam's Sunni-Shi'ite civil war. He is especially adamant about the dangers of American power being used as a tool of the Saudis to advance their cause.

Yet, this is exactly what he has been doing in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Bahrain. Moreover, he never has confronted the Saudi leaders about the promotion of

wahabbism or their concrete support for the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (in Syria and Yemen – where they fight side-by-side with Saudi troops) – either in private or in public.

Let's step back and reflect on this. Barack Obama, President of the United States, in telling a journalist that his most important "ally" in the Middle East has been aiding and abetting America's mortal enemies – and that they should stop. Yet, three years after those hostile actions began he has yet to voice his displeasure directly in numerous meetings.

Instead, he gets an interview published in a magazine that the Saudi leaders might pick up in the waiting room at the Mayo Clinic on their next medical visit. If there is any sense or logic to this, it must conform to a mental process never before encountered.

Obama urges that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran learn to co-exist, "to share space," in the region. Yet, in the wake of the nuclear accord, he's gone overboard in denouncing the Islamic Republic of Iran as the primary source of instability in the Middle East and insists that until they cease and desist, no normalization is possible.

As Goldberg quotes Susan Rice in seconding the President: "The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the U.S. and Iran." In other words, if the U.S. refuses adamantly to "share space" – as in Iraq – on what grounds does he here encourage the Saudis to do so? On Turkey, Obama is similarly mealy-mouthed as regards their tangible contributions to both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front – although he refrains from the same direct criticism of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Finally, Obama strongly criticizes Washington's foreign policy Establishment as being overly rigid in their thinking and imposing their views on American leaders. This is baffling – is not the President the head of the Establishment? Has Obama not stocked his two administrations – to a man and to a woman – with members of the Establishment? Robert Gates, David Petraeus and John Brennan were his appointees.

Gates boasts in his memoir of the scheme he orchestrated to force Obama's hand in escalating in Afghanistan in 2009. With his allies Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Gates planned to expand it further and to make its duration indefinite. Only Gen. Stanley McChrystal's inopportune public insults of the President prevented its success.

Does he not invite Robert Kagan and Thomas Friedman to intimate Camp David deep think sessions? Did Obama not put Victoria Nuland, Dick Cheney's principal

deputy foreign policy adviser (and Kagan's wife), in charge of European policy where she helped foment the Ukrainian coup – and from which post she aggressively runs a belligerent policy toward Russia?

Hasn't he bowed the knee before the Israeli lobby – going so far as to allow himself to be humiliated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before Congress without any rejoinder? Does he not have the authority to address the country directly and to instruct them about world realities?

Yet, he whines to Goldberg that he is somehow caught in a web spun by “the Establishment.” What is a reasonable interpretation of this illogic? Election politics? – but nothing has changed since his 2012 re-election. (Anyway, is starting a new war in the Middle East a sure-fire vote-getter?) Was the President fantasizing for seven years, was he blackmailed, did he lack the conviction to take different paths, or was he simply weak and feckless?

Here is the Obama view of where he fits in Washington's power map of foreign policy-makers/thinkers: “There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses.

“Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.”

The deference and passivity accorded the upholders of the conventional wisdom exposes the critical flaw in Obama's interpretation of his authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief. He is not a constrained Doge of Venice under strict surveillance by the Great Council of aristocrats. He is not just the custodian of some Holy Grail in the sacred custody of a vestal priesthood. He is not the prize student being tested in a simulation exercise by masters of the guild.

The Washington Consensus embodied by the head-nodders of the think tanks and op-ed pages is nothing more than the calcified corpus of failed ideas which have brought the United States nothing but wrack and ruin for (at least) the past 15 years. The Iraq debacle cut the ground from under it – thereby helping to clear the way for Obama's entry into the White House. His historic task was reformation. Instead, he decided that acceptance into the ranks of the Establishment was worth a ritualized surrender.

All of this is baffling. Part of the explanation lies in the President's

singular personality. Despite his high intelligence, he seems to live with a great number of unreconciled contradictions. Some have to do with his background and upbringing. Some are intellectual. The title of The Atlantic article is misleading. There is no "Obama Doctrine." Incoherence is the hallmark of American actions in the Middle East and elsewhere. The interview with Goldberg confirms that.

Seeking Validation

Barack Obama gave Goldberg many, many hours of his time. The President allowed the writer to accompany him on international jaunts, and accorded him entry to his inner circle. Goldberg has thanked the President by concentrating on the supposed historic error of not bombing Syria when Assad allegedly (if factually mistakenly) was accused of crossing the notorious "red line" by using sarin gas.

That is the pivot of the article; it is returned to time after time in positing the hard-line critique of the Obama foreign policy as the one authoritative perspective. That was predictable. Goldberg is an Israeli who started his career at the Likud megaphone *The Jerusalem Post*. Why does a President afford such liberties to a tendentious journalist?

European monarchs of old had court portraitists. American presidencies have Boswells like Bob Woodward and now Jeff Goldberg. Boswells who are not friends but on assignment. The purpose seems similar: to immortalize the ruler at the height of his powers. To show a forceful leader mastering a daunting problem with resolve, sobriety and dedication to the interests of his fellow citizens.

This being America, the subject matter has to be one of action and suspense. Bush the Younger seeking retribution for 9/11. Now Barack Obama in a titanic struggle to escape the coils of stifling dogma.

A narrative account that covers a long span of time, though, does have a few drawbacks. It cannot fix the image at a single moment that will last for eternity. However laudatory, the written account is liable to be viewed differently as time goes by. And Goldberg's portrait is not very becoming.

A picture wings the flying hour; a story is part of the flow of events. There is the further drawback that the chronicler may depict persons and things in ways that are not entirely complimentary to the main protagonist in the drama.

Journalistic talents may be available for lease but they do not come with a money back guarantee. For the exchange currency is not hard cash but access. The White House gets surefire blockbuster publicity – and, in this case, the chance to set in place the first sketch of his Presidential record.

A complication is that while the President is the patron, the commission is loosely written to allow the artist unmonitored access to other members of the court. Their vanities and ambitions are not identical with his. See the quoted remarks of John Kerry and Pentagon officials.

In the light of the ensuing risks, why does Barack Obama enter into such a pact? Our celebrity culture provides part of the answer. Publicity is what it is all about. A public figure whose meteoric rise is a testament to star power must be acutely sensitive to the imperative of how vital to success is mythic imagery and turns in the limelight. The stage lights have the special glow when energized by a graphic account of star performance.

Then there is the simple truth that presidents want to celebrate themselves. They are the ultimate celebrity in a celebrity culture. They in fact feel proud of what they do and how they do it. Reality is clay in my hands. A successful leader must never allow the future to be hostage to history – even yesterday's history. Except where history can be bent better to serve fresh exigencies – or a post-presidency career of 30-35 years.

The selection of a hawk like Goldberg to be his interlocutor demonstrates another truth that also can be inferred from the Obama discourse. Authority on matters of foreign policy is understood to rest with the guardians of the very Establishment that constrains him.

It is the neocons and their hard-line companions in arms who, he believes, are the cynosure of core American beliefs about the world and our place in it. So it ultimately is from them that he must seek validation. This conviction of Obama's, of course, becomes self-confirming – as we have observed for seven years.

Obama is a man of reflection, at least as concerns his own identity and self-image. Maybe, the serial interviews with Goldberg were the first try at coming to terms with himself as director of American foreign policy. So he invited Goldberg to join him in an excursion through the presidential mind – a Virgil exploring his own psyche.

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Putin Shuns Syrian 'Quagmire'

Exclusive: Gambling that President Obama will cooperate in seeking peace for

Syria, Russian President Putin called back much of Russia's military force dispatched to Syria last fall, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Russian President Vladimir Putin's abrupt announcement that Russia would begin "the withdrawal of the main part" of its military "contingent" from Syria has been widely seen not only as a welcome surprise, but also as a hopeful fillip to serious negotiations to end the carnage in what is left of that beleaguered country.

As always, a modicum of skepticism is warranted the "morning after," but the pledge to pull out the bulk of the Russian force seems genuine and, at this writing, the withdrawal is already under way. Putin's announcement appears to mark the beginning of the end of Russia's key but limited military intervention – the game-changer that started on Sept. 30, 2015, with Russian air strikes that enabled the Syrian army to regain lost ground, sever jihadist supply lines to Turkey, and drive rebels from hundreds of towns and cities.

Putin was clear in noting the Russian military presence that will remain in Syria, but was not so clear on its future use: "Our naval base in Tartus and airbase at Khmeimim will operate 'as usual'. They are to be safely protected from land, sea, and air."

This formulation presumably would allow for continued airstrikes on designated terrorist groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, including during the current "cessation of hostilities" negotiated by the U.S. and Russia. (Putin's phrasing may also be viewed as a warning against Turkey and/or Saudi Arabia not to act on recent threats to invade Syria.)

That said, many knowledgeable observers have expressed surprise that the partial cease-fire that went into effect on Feb. 27 has largely held. Plus, the rate of airstrikes reportedly has plunged since then.

A New Future

With all due respect to Yogi Berra's dictum – "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future" – Putin's withdrawal order constitutes Part II of the game-changer put in play five and a half innings ago last September. Thus, it is now doubly the case that "The future ain't what it used to be." In essence, the ball is now bouncing around in President Barack Obama's infield.

A great deal will depend on whether he will risk incurring the wrath of "allies"-cum-wealthy-arms-customers like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel, as well as unpredictable Turkey – an actual NATO ally (sans-quotation-marks), by

applying unstinting pressure to get them to stop supporting terrorists in Syria.

On Monday, Putin said he considered the tasks given to the Russian defense ministry last September, “as a whole,” fulfilled. He had defined those tasks on Oct. 11, 2015, on Russian TV: “Our objective is to stabilize the legitimate authority [in Syria] and create conditions for a political compromise.”

Russia’s armed intervention did strengthen the position of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but – not surprisingly – political compromise toward peace remains elusive. Still, the altered circumstances have advanced the peace process, in part, because Moscow’s intervention last fall was met with a clear-headed response from President Barack Obama, who chose to see a glass-half-full in Russia’s intervention.

It was no secret that one key Russian aim was to rescue Assad from a possible defeat at the hands of the jihadist “Army of Conquest” freshly armed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, including with U.S.-made TOW missiles. But even benighted White House advisers seemed able to discern that the devil-they-knew (Assad) might be preferable to the cutthroats of Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) or Al Qaeda’s affiliate, Nusra Front.

To his credit, Obama bet on the possibility that Russian airstrikes would also help thwart further ISIS gains and perhaps even help lead to serious negotiations. Thus, Obama instructed Secretary of State John Kerry to (1) forgo the poison-pill “Assad-must-go” precondition to talks on Syria’s future; (2) set a place for Iran at the table; and (3) collaborate closely with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, to “deconflict” airstrikes over Syria and redouble efforts to get serious negotiations under way.

With uncommon speed, a meeting attended by representatives of 19 regional and global powers (including Iran) was held in Vienna on Oct. 30, 2015, one month after the Russian airstrikes began; on Dec. 18, the UN Security Council unanimously approved a road map and timeline for talks on Syria; and on Feb. 1, 2016, indirect talks between Syrian government and opposition leaders took place in Geneva, mediated by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura.

Those Geneva talks made zero progress; they were quickly suspended and resumption was put off for several weeks. They got under way again on Monday, which was not only the day Putin chose to announce the Russian withdrawal, but also the day that unarmed street protests broke out five years ago in Syria and were cruelly crushed by Assad’s security apparatus.

Will Talks Make Progress?

Just as Moscow’s military intervention put Assad back on his feet, the Russian

pullout is likely now to make him wobblier, and Moscow may hope the withdrawal will put additional pressure on him to be more willing to compromise. One positive sign has come from those Syrian opposition leaders who have already voiced cautious praise for the Russian withdrawal.

The telephone conversation between President Obama and President Putin on Monday evening suggests that they remain willing to build on the cessation of hostilities and lean on their respective clients to negotiate in good faith, even though the obstacles remain formidable.

For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov had this to say on Monday about the resumption of the talks in Geneva: "The work is not easy; it is yet to be understood how all these groups [taking part in the intra-Syrian talks] could gather at the same table together ... but the process has gotten under way, and it is in our common interests to make it sustainable and irreversible."

And according to the Russian news agency TASS, President Assad has told President Putin by telephone that he is ready to start a political process in Syria as soon as possible and that he hoped that eventual full-scale UN-mediated talks between Syrian government and opposition representatives in Geneva would produce concrete results.

A Calculated Decision

Putin is gambling that the interested parties – first and foremost, the U.S. – will put the heat on those over whom they have influence to make the cessation of hostilities stick and cooperate in thwarting the aims and actions of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Russia's decision on a troop pullout having been unilateral, Putin retains the option to reinsert Russian forces should the gamble fail. It seems clear that he would prefer not to have to do that. And he is unlikely to do that, short of a rapidly growing threat from terrorists, trained and equipped for violence in Syria, returning to stir up trouble in Russia.

Putin is acutely aware of quagmires. The Soviet Union got bogged down in one in Afghanistan and, of course, he has watched what he calls "partners" get stuck there as well – not to mention Iraq, or Syria, or Libya – much less Vietnam. Last October, when President Obama and Secretary Kerry chose to warn Putin about quagmires, I can imagine the look on the Russian President's face.

The Russian withdrawal bespeaks an understanding that risky gambles are less to be feared than quagmires – the more so since Moscow lacks one of its "partner's" seemingly inexhaustible source of funding for its military escapades that result in quagmires. Indeed, Moscow has already announced a five percent cutback in

military spending for this year.

Typically, when responding to provocations (like the February 2014 coup in Ukraine) from “partners,” as well as to other dangers to Russia’s security interests, Putin has displayed a notable penchant for heeding dicta more contemporary than those of Yogi Berra. One of them seems to be President Obama’s favorite motto: “Don’t do stupid stuff.”

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Risks in Putin’s Syria Withdrawal

Exclusive: After helping Syria’s army push back jihadist rebels, Russian President Putin says he will begin withdrawing Russian forces, raising new questions about Syria’s future, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s surprise announcement to withdraw most Russian war planes and personnel from Syria has left the public in the dark about his motives, raising troubling questions about whether the move will provide an opening for the U.S., Turkey and their Gulf allies to resume their drive towards “regime change” in Damascus.

More than five months of Russian airstrikes and Russia’s reconstitution of the Syrian Army dramatically turned the war in President Bashar al-Assad’s favor and has left the jihadists in disarray. But the liberation of Aleppo was not yet complete. Also, the Islamic State has not been destroyed, although the Syrian army reportedly had entered Palmyra and reached near Raqqa, Islamic State’s capital.

Faced with the loss of territory and Russia’s destruction of much of its oil infrastructure and supply lines to Turkey, Islamic State was forced to cut its fighters’ salaries, spurring increasing numbers of defections, including by a [man](#) from Alexandria, Virginia on Monday.

It is curious then that Russia, having the extremists on the ropes, would withdraw before the mission was accomplished – a mission to destroy terrorism in Syria announced by President Putin at the UN General Assembly in September.

Under the terms of the cessation of hostilities, in place for nearly two weeks, Russia could continue to strike Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State as well as provide air cover to the Syrian Arab Army on the ground against these terrorist forces.

Putin's move has led to widespread speculation that perhaps he has made a deal with the U.S., a grand bargain of sorts. Maybe Washington has offered a major concession on Ukraine, something President Barack Obama may gladly concede given what a disaster the U.S. adventure in that country has become.

Perhaps in a game of chicken with Obama, Putin blinked first. The U.S. has wanted Russia out of the Syrian theater since the moment it entered. Now, with Russia yielding the Syrian skies will the U.S. set up "a no-fly zone" as Turkey and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have desperately wanted?

Will Saudi and Turkish forces invade Syria to secure a partitioned state in eastern Syria – the so-called Plan B – through which they can run a natural gas pipeline from Qatar to Turkey on land now held by the Saudi-Turkish Islamic State proxies? Such a pipeline providing natural gas to Europe would directly undercut Russia, which now provides the majority of gas to the continent.

Some analysts believe the entire Syrian war was instigated when Assad in 2009 rejected a Qatari-Turkish-Saudi proposed gas line through Syrian territory. Two years later those three countries took advantage of a popular uprising to send in foreign jihadists to get rid of Assad. It turned out to be a lot more difficult than they imagined, with the war now five years old and Assad still in power.

With the gains made by the Russian-backed Syrian military in the past five months, a desperate Saudi Arabia and Turkey were poised to invade Syria to at least set up such an eastern Syrian state, if not try to drive towards Damascus to overthrow Assad. But Ankara and Riyadh said they wouldn't invade without U.S. ground forces leading the way. However, such an intervention would have risked a direct U.S. confrontation with nuclear armed Russia, with all that implies.

With Russia still in the skies over Syria, President Obama apparently rejected the Saudi-Turkish invasion plea. But now that the Russian deterrent will be gone, Turkish and Saudi appetites might be whetted (although Obama has indicated a loss of patience with these purveyors of extremism).

Following the Russian withdrawal, even if Obama still continues to defy his

neoconservative (and liberal interventionist) advisers who want to overthrow Assad even at the cost of a U.S.-led invasion, what about the next occupant of the White House?

At a Republican debate last week, three of the four candidates said they would support between 20,000 to 30,000 U.S. troops in Syria and Iraq, supposedly to fight the Islamic State. Once on the ground, however, the troops could easily make a detour towards Damascus.

Curiously, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in the last days offered to divide the task of defeating Islamic State by inviting the U.S. to take Raqqa, an offer the U.S. refused. It is not at all clear why Russia would want the U.S. to control the Islamic State capital unless Moscow is pushing for a federalized Syria, which it has publicly supported. Assad has apparently also agreed.

Not quite a partition, a federal Syria could consist of an eastern province centered on Raqqa and Deir al-Zor , now under Islamic State control; a Kurdish province in the north; and an Alawite-Christian rump Syria, from Damascus to Aleppo.

But will the U.S. and its Gulf allies agree to this compromise or seize the opening to invade and remove Assad once and for all? Another question is whether Turkey would accept a federal Kurdish state on its borders?

A federation would retain power for the central government, something the Turks and Gulf Arabs would not easily accept. If they can't have Assad's head they might go for an independent Sunni state in the east – a different creature than a federal state.

An invasion to grab such a state would bring bloodshed and possibly Russia back into the conflict. A federation instead can be set up through negotiation – and indeed the U.S. and Russia may have already agreed on this. It would be up to the U.S. to bring the Gulf and its insurgents along.

These will be the hottest topics at U.N. peace talks that have resumed in Geneva. Will the talks yield a peace deal in which Assad stays at least six more months until a transitional government takes over, writes a new constitution and 18 months from now holds a general election over a Federal Syria?

The Saudi-led opposition still wants Assad removed immediately, something Russia, the U.S. and the United Nations reject. If some of the less extreme rebels can be brought around to accept a peaceful settlement, the talks might go somewhere.

Putin says the Russian intervention was a success because it stabilized the

government and made a diplomatic solution possible. That remains to be determined.

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Kerry's Secret War Plan for Syria

Secretary of State Kerry urged President Obama to launch secret missile attacks inside Syria without admitting the U.S. role, a plan that Obama rejected, according to a new report cited by Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Jeffrey Goldberg's newly published [book-length article](#) on Barack Obama and the Middle East includes a major revelation that brings Secretary of State John Kerry's Syrian diplomacy into sharper focus: it reports that Kerry has sought on several occasions without success over the past several months to get Obama's approval for cruise missile strikes against the Syrian government.

That revelation shows that Kerry's strategy in promoting the Syrian peace negotiations in recent months was based on much heavier pressure on the Assad regime to agree that President Bashar al-Assad must step down than was apparent. It also completes a larger story of Kerry as the primary advocate in the administration of war in Syria ever since he became Secretary of State in early 2013.

Goldberg reports that "on several occasions" Kerry requested that Obama approve missile strikes at "specific regime targets," in order to "send a message" to Assad – and his international allies – to "negotiate peace." Kerry suggested to Obama that the U.S. wouldn't have to acknowledge the attacks publicly, according to Goldberg, because Assad "would surely know the missiles' return address."

Goldberg reports that Kerry had "recently" submitted a "written outline of new steps to bring more pressure on Assad." That is obviously a reference to what Kerry referred to in Senate testimony in February as "significant discussions" within the Obama administration on a ["Plan B"](#) to support the opposition that would be more "confrontational." Kerry made no effort in his testimony to hide the fact that he was the chief advocate of such a policy initiative.

But Goldberg's account makes it clear that Obama not only repeatedly rejected Kerry's requests for the use of force, but also decreed at a National Security Council meeting in December that any request for the use of military force must come from his military advisers in an obvious rebuff to Kerry. Immediately after Kerry had suggested that a "Plan B" was under discussion in the administration, it was a senior Pentagon official who dismissed the idea that any confrontational move was under consideration, including the well-worn idea of a "no-fly zone."

Kerry's campaign for cruise missile strikes actually began soon after he became secretary in February 2013. At that point Assad was consolidating his military position, while al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda's affiliate) and its extremist allies were already in a dominant position within the armed opposition, according to U.S. intelligence. It was hardly a favorable situation for trying to build an opposition force that could be the instrument of the negotiated settlement he had in mind.

At Kerry's urging Obama signed a secret presidential "finding" in May 2013 for a covert CIA operation the objective of which was to provide enough support to the rebels so they wouldn't lose, but not enough so they would win. But that was a compromise measure that Kerry believed would be inadequate to support a negotiated settlement.

He wanted much more, an urgent program of aid to the opposition, and he resorted to a shady bureaucratic tactic to advance his aim. Beginning in March 2013 and throughout that spring, the armed opposition accused the Assad regime of using Sarin gas against opposition population centers on several occasions. The evidence for those accusations was highly doubtful in every case, but Kerry seized on them as a way of putting pressure on Obama.

In June 2013, he went to the White House with a paper assuming the truth of the accusations and arguing that, if the United States did not "impose consequences" on Assad over his supposed use of chemical weapons, he would view it as "green light" to continue using them. At a National Security Council meeting that month, Kerry urged shipments of heavy weapons to the rebels as well as U.S. military strikes, but Obama still said no.

After the Aug. 21, 2013 Sarin attack in the Damascus area, Kerry was the leading figure on Obama's national security team arguing that Obama had to respond militarily. But after initially agreeing to a set of U.S. missile strikes on regime targets, Obama decided against it. One of the reasons was that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged to him privately that the intelligence was not a "slam dunk," according to Goldberg's account.

In lieu of a missile strike, however, Obama agreed in October 2013 to a very risky major escalation of military assistance to the Syrian opposition. That fall the Pentagon sold 15,000 U.S. TOW anti-tank missiles to the Saudis, and throughout 2014, the Saudis doled them out to armed groups approved by the United States. Dispensing anti-tank missiles was a reckless policy, because it was recognized by then that many of the groups being armed were already fighting alongside Nusra Front in the northwest. The missiles were crucial to the capture of all of Idlib province by the Nusra-led "Army of Conquest" in April 2015.

Kerry was ready to take a risk on Nusra Front and its allies becoming unstoppable in order to jump-start his strategy of diplomatic pressure on Assad. But Kerry overplayed his hand. The Assad regime and Iran feared that the newly strengthened military force under Nusra Front control might break through to take over the Alawite stronghold of Latakia province. They prevailed on Russian President Vladimir Putin to intervene with Russian airpower.

As the Russian campaign of airstrikes began to push back the extremist-led military forces and even threaten their lines of supply, Kerry's strategy to pressure the Assad regime to make a major diplomatic concession became irrelevant.

Kerry's demands for U.S. cruise missile strikes became even more insistent. Without them, he argued, he couldn't get the Russians to cooperate with his peace negotiations plan. Goldberg quotes a "senior administration official" as saying, "Kerry's looking like a chump with the Russians, because he has no leverage."

Obama, who had already succumbed in 2014 to domestic political pressure to begin bombing the Islamic State, saw no reason to get into even deeper war in Syria in support of Kerry's plan – especially under the new circumstances. Assad was not likely to step down, and in case, the war would only end if Nusra Front and its Salafist-jihadi allies were no longer able to get the heavy weapons they need to fight the regime.

The real origin of the present Syrian peace negotiations is thus Kerry's ambition to pursue the illusory aim of winning a diplomatic victory in Syria by much greater pressure on the Assad regime. Ironically, in setting in motion the military build-up of an Al-Qaeda-dominated armed opposition, Kerry sowed the seeds of the military reversal that ensured the failure of his endeavor. As a result he became the rather pathetic figure shown in Goldberg's account pleading in vain for yet another US war in Syria.

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published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This article originally appeared in Middle East Eye at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/kerry-sought-missile-strikes-force-syrias-assad-step-down-1087172884#sthash.oK5k5IX9.dpuf>]

What's the Matter with John Kerry?

From the Archive: As a young warrior and senator, John Kerry stood up to politicians who spread propaganda that got people killed. But, as a Secretary of State in his 70s, Kerry has become what he once challenged, Robert Parry reported in 2014.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on April 14, 2014)

On Feb. 1, 2013, when John Kerry replaced Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, there might have been some reason to hope that the former Vietnam veteran against the war and the man who conducted serious investigations of U.S. national security crimes in the 1980s would bring some integrity and maturity to U.S. foreign policy, especially the need to avoid exaggerations and deceptions in pursuit of American interests.

After all, Kerry personally experienced the horrors of a war fought on false pretenses as a young Navy officer patrolling the rivers of South Vietnam. After winning the Silver Star, he returned home from the war and spoke eloquently against it, making his first significant mark as a public figure.

I got to know Kerry when I was an Associated Press reporter covering President Ronald Reagan's secret operations in Central America and found Kerry to be one of the few members of Congress with the courage to follow the facts into some very dark corners of U.S. government actions, including complicity with death squads, terrorists and drug traffickers.

But Kerry soon learned there was a political price to pay for courage and honesty. For his efforts to get at hard truths, such as Reagan's tolerance for cocaine smugglers in his beloved Nicaraguan Contra operation, Kerry was targeted by the right-wing press, especially The Washington Times, but also by smug mainstream outlets. For his investigative efforts, Newsweek's Conventional Wisdom Watch dubbed Kerry a "randy conspiracy buff." [For details, see Robert Parry's [*Secrecy & Privilege*](#).]

So, when Kerry was eying a run for the White House in 2002, his political handlers persuaded him to vote to give President George W. Bush the authority to

invade Iraq. And, after Kerry won the Democratic nomination in 2004, he chose to airbrush out of his résumé all his honorable actions against the Vietnam War and in standing up to Reagan's crimes. When he accepted the nomination, he snapped off a corny salute and declared, "reporting for duty."

After losing to Bush partly because Kerry shied away from confronting the ugly smears against his war record, including Republicans passing out "Purple Heart Band-Aids" to mock his war wounds Kerry retreated back to the Senate where he repackaged himself as a bipartisan figure who cultivated Republican friends, such as neocon Sen. John McCain, a fellow Vietnam vet and – after 2008 – another failed nominee for President.

Which Kerry?

So, it wasn't clear which John Kerry would be "reporting for duty" when he got his "dream job" as Secretary of State. Would we see a return of the brave and honest John Kerry of the 1970s and 1980s, or would it be the political weather vane that swung to the prevailing winds as we saw since the 1990s?

When Kerry took over at Foggy Bottom, there was a desperate need for adult supervision of U.S. diplomacy globally. President Barack Obama's disastrous decision to staff much of his national security team with "a team of rivals" including Bush holdover Robert Gates at Defense, Hillary Clinton (a neocon-lite) at State and military officers like neocon-favorite Gen. David Petraeus meant that U.S. foreign policy deviated little from the broad outlines of Bush's neocon interventionism.

Though some of the big-name neocons had left government to work at influential think tanks or write op-ed articles for the Washington Post, there was a substantial stay-behind force, especially at State where Hillary Clinton shielded them and even promoted some, like Victoria Nuland who became department spokesperson.

The rhetoric changed a bit. The phrase "war on terror" was "out," but much of its substance remained "in," including drone killings. There was also a subtle change in how to justify "regime change" wars. It would be "democracy promotion" and "responsibility to protect," not "preemptive wars" and claims about WMD.

Indeed, perhaps the most significant evolution in U.S. foreign policy in Obama's first term was the merger between the neocons and the liberal "humanitarian" interventionists. In effect, the ever-skillful neocons forged an alliance with these liberal hawks, the likes of Samantha Power and Susan Rice who were key advisers to Obama.

The chief tactical change was to rely on U.S.-funded "non-governmental

organizations” to stir up disruptive protests against a target government. Then, when security forces struck back often clumsily and even brutally the “regime changers” could assert a “responsibility to protect” or “R2P.”

The new battlefield of this global propaganda warfare would be the release of YouTube videos showing (or purporting to show) atrocities committed by some embattled government against “innocent civilians.” The competition was to make these videos “go viral” and stir up emotional reactions that would prompt demands from average people to “do something.”

Hawkish Clinton

Clinton’s State Department had been unapologetically hawkish. In 2009, Clinton joined with Gates and Petraeus to mousetrap Obama into a “surge” of 30,000 troops for Afghanistan, what turned out to be a pointless “counterinsurgency” campaign that got about 1,000 more U.S. troops killed without changing the conflict’s strategic arc toward failure.

In 2009-2010, Clinton also joined in ratcheting up the confrontation with Iran in line with the interests of Israel and the neocons. Clinton’s aggressiveness was encouraged, in part, by her State Department secretly engineering the elevation of Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano to head the International Atomic Energy Agency. The malleable Amano was in the U.S. government’s back pocket, ready to be pulled out as necessary to “prove” Iran’s bad faith regarding its nuclear program.

With Amano securely in place, Clinton spiked a solution to the Iranian nuclear dispute that had been arranged by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey at Obama’s urging. Instead of that deal which called for Iran surrendering most of its nuclear material in exchange for processed nuclear plates for medical research, Clinton opted for more sanctions against – and more tensions with – Iran, just as the neocons wanted.

But the clearest example of this new strategy was Libya where the forces of Muammar Gaddafi responded to violent protests, spearheaded by Islamic extremists based in the east around Benghazi, by launching a counteroffensive aimed at eliminating the “terrorist” threat.

However, guided by Secretary of State Clinton and foreign policy advisers Power and Rice, Obama was persuaded to commit U.S. and European forces supposedly to protect the civilian population in eastern Libya. But this “R2P” became just another excuse to undertake “regime change” against Gaddafi.

The West’s widespread bombing campaign, combined with covert military support for the rebels, devastated Gaddafi’s military and paved the way for a rebel

victory. After being captured, Gaddafi was tortured and murdered, while Secretary Clinton was caught on video happily receiving the news of Gaddafi's demise.

The Libyan "victory" was short-lived, however, as the country fell into chaos and under the sway of extremists. On Sept. 11, 2012, Islamic terrorists overran the U.S. consulate in Benghazi (housing a large CIA station) and killed four Americans including Ambassador Christopher Stevens. Clinton called the incident her worst moment as Secretary of State.

Kerry: Old vs. New

So, when John Kerry replaced Hillary Clinton on Feb. 1, 2013, the State Department was in need of a responsible adult who would rein in the department's penchant for stirring up trouble and then looking on helplessly as the chaos spun out of control.

But which Kerry would show up? The young Kerry who recognized how belligerent talk and playing with facts could end up getting lots of innocent people killed or the older Kerry who had trimmed his sails and learned to go with the prevailing winds, regardless of the dangers to the world?

There are times at the end of a politician's career when the person reverts back to an earlier, more idealistic self, though more often a deeply compromised politician just continues doing what's been learned over the decades of political survival.

It's now clear that John Kerry fell into the latter approach. He did undertake a quixotic pursuit of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, perhaps hoping that success in such an impossible undertaking would be the "crown jewel" of his career, compensating for his 2004 defeat.

But Kerry also let himself be turned into a hand puppet for the neocons and R2Pers who had gained bureaucratic control of State and were set on escalating confrontations with Syria and Iran by essentially following the "regime change" blueprint designed by Vice President Dick Cheney and the neocons in the Bush-43 administration.

Influential neocons and R2Pers took command of key positions in 2013, as Kerry moved from Capitol Hill to Foggy Bottom and Obama entered his second term. Neocon Victoria Nuland was promoted from State Department spokesperson to Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. Susan Rice became National Security Adviser, and Samantha Power took over as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

The Sarin Attack

So, when a mysterious Sarin attack occurred outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, the State Department was eager to jump to the conclusion that the Syrian government was responsible. Despite doubts among U.S. intelligence analysts, Kerry chose not to ask too many questions or press for hard evidence.

Like a replay of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident that gave President Lyndon Johnson an excuse to escalate the war in Vietnam which a few years later put Kerry on a Swift Boat in rivers slicing through Vietnamese jungles Kerry hyped the case against Syria.

Kerry's Aug. 30 speech bordered on the hysterical in its tone as he repeatedly insisted that "we know" the Syrian government was responsible for the Sarin attack, though he refused to release any evidence that could be independently evaluated.

His speech was accompanied by a four-page "Government Assessment" that also offered no verifiable proof and looked to be an attempt to evade a more formal National Intelligence Estimate, a consensus view of the U.S. intelligence community which would have had to reveal any dissents from analysts. The "Government Assessment" simply ignored any challenges to the emerging "group think."

Kerry then took his belligerent message to Congress, where at one hearing his wife, heiress Teresa Heinz, sat behind him as he urged a military assault on Syria. Accompaniment by a spouse is usually reserved for confirmation hearings and is virtually unheard of when an official is seeking something as grave as launching a war.

Yet, while Kerry's wife was there, no one from the U.S. intelligence community was sitting near Kerry, presumably because a senior intelligence representative might have drawn a question about whether all U.S. analysts were onboard in blaming the Syrian government for the attack. The inconvenient answer would have been no.

Such a presence also might have stirred memories of CIA Director George Tenet sitting behind Secretary of State Colin Powell on Feb. 5, 2003, as Powell delivered his deceptive speech on Iraq's WMD.

While Kerry pounded the war drums, the two other witnesses at the table with him, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, were much more circumspect and somber. The tableau suggested that the Pentagon was less enthusiastic about war than Kerry and his diplomats.

Putin's Interference

The U.S. bombing campaign against Syria was finally averted when President Obama accepted a deal proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin that called for Syria surrendering its chemical weapons even as President Bashar al-Assad continued to deny any involvement in the Aug. 21 attack.

Obama's decision not to bomb Syria was treated as a betrayal by the neocons and the R2Pers. The editorial pages of the Washington Post and other leading newspapers were filled with criticism of Obama's lack of resolve.

But Obama seemed, briefly at least, to be working cooperatively with Putin to resolve some dangerous crises in the Middle East. Putin also helped arrange an interim agreement with Iran to impose constraints on its nuclear program but not eliminate its ability to use nuclear technological for peaceful purposes.

That move, too, infuriated the American neocons as well as Saudi Arabia and Israel which have long been trying to enlist the U.S. military in a massive bombing campaign against Iran, with hopes that the devastation could lead to more "regime change."

In November 2013, Kerry again showed up as an abettor of more confrontation with Iran. Dispatched to Geneva to sign the interim accord, Kerry consulted with the French, who were carrying water for their wealthy patrons in Saudi Arabia, and inserted some last-minute language which derailed the signing agreement. I'm told Obama then instructed Kerry to return to Geneva and sign the deal, which Kerry finally did.

These twin defeats infuriated the neocons who escalated their op-ed campaign against Obama's foreign policy of "appeasement." Key neocons also took aim at Putin by putting in their sights a country of particular sensitivity to Russia, neighboring Ukraine.

Aiming at Ukraine

In late September, as the neocon drive for bombing Syria was petering out, neocon Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), penned a Washington Post op-ed that called Ukraine "the biggest prize" and expressed hope that "Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

NED was founded in 1983 essentially to carry out the sorts of activities that traditionally were done by the CIA, i.e., supporting activists, "journalists" and other operatives who would be useful in destabilization campaigns against troublesome governments, all in the name of "democracy promotion." NED's annual

report listed a staggering 65 projects in Ukraine.

By fall 2013, Kerry's State Department was committed to prying Ukraine loose from Russia's orbit, all the better to weaken Putin (and drive a wedge between him and Obama). At the forefront of this effort was Victoria Nuland, the wife of prominent neocon Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century which famously pushed the case for invading Iraq.

The Kagans are not just neocons but neocon royalty who can place op-eds in major newspapers at the snap of a finger. I've known Robert Kagan since he headed the Reagan administration's State Department propaganda office on Central America. He was the guy who told me that my skeptical reporting on the Reagan administration's claims could lead to me being "controversialized."

Robert's brother, Frederick, was an architect of both the Iraq War "surge" and the Afghan War "surge." Indeed, in his memoir, *Duty*, former Defense Secretary Gates says Frederick Kagan was the one who sold him on the Afghan "surge," which was then essentially imposed on Obama by his willful "team of rivals" Gates, Clinton and Petraeus in 2009.

By late 2013, Nuland, aided and abetted by Kerry's chum Sen. John McCain, was encouraging western Ukrainian protesters to challenge Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich over his refusal to sign a deal with Europe that would have included harsh austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Yanukovich had opted for a more generous \$15 billion aid package from Moscow.

Stirring Up Discontent

On Dec. 13 in a speech at the National Press Club, Nuland reminded Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested more than \$5 billion in Ukraine's "European aspirations" with the goal of taking "Ukraine into the future that it deserves," i.e., out of the Russian orbit and into a Western one.

Why the United States should be spending such large sums of money to create political turmoil in Ukraine has never been fully explained, short of the emotional appeals based on YouTube videos of attractive young people who took part in mass and sometimes violent demonstrations in Kiev's Maidan square against Yanukovich.

Clearly, it is true that all the Ukrainian governments that have held power since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 have been marred by corruption, but much of that was driven by the U.S.-prescribed "shock therapy" of "free market" extremism that allowed a handful of well-connected "oligarchs" to plunder the nation's wealth.

Yet, the U.S. policy prescription is to apply IMF “austerity,” which further punishes the average citizen while leaving the “oligarchs” largely untouched.

As Nuland, McCain and other neocons stoked the fires of protest against Yanukovich, Ukrainian neo-Nazis moved to the front of the demonstrations, engaging in increasingly violent clashes with police. On Feb. 20, another murky incident occurred in which snipers opened fire and killed a number of protesters and police. The U.S. government and Western media immediately put the blame on Yanukovich although he denied giving such an order.

The Coup

On Feb. 21, Yanukovich sought to tamp down the violence by agreeing to an accord brokered by three European countries in which he agreed to reduce his powers, accept an early election so he could be voted out of office, and withdraw police forces. That last concession, however, prompted the neo-Nazi militias to overrun government buildings and force Yanukovich to flee for his life.

Then, without following constitutional procedures and with neo-Nazi storm troopers patrolling the buildings a rump parliament immediately “impeached” Yanukovich and elected Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who had been Nuland’s choice to run the country. Far-right parties also were given four ministries in recognition of their crucial role in providing the armed militias who carried out the coup.

Rather than provide any objective coverage of events, the U.S. news media, led by the New York Times and Washington Post, behaved more as state propaganda organs, pushing the U.S. government’s version and especially playing down the role of the neo-Nazis from Svoboda and the Right Sektor. Since the presence of swaggering neo-Nazis in the Maidan clashed with the preferred image of idealistic democratic youth, the brown shirts were essentially whited-out of the picture.

Only occasionally, in passing, do the major U.S. newspapers find themselves forced to mention the neo-Nazis: either while mocking “Russian propaganda” or when interviewing some of these rightists in other context. For instance, on April 6, the New York Times published a human-interest profile of a Ukrainian hero named Yuri Marchuk who was wounded in clashes around Kiev’s Maidan square in February.

If you read deep into the story, you learn that Marchuk was a Svoboda leader from Lviv, which if you did your own research you would discover is a neo-Nazi stronghold where Ukrainian nationalists hold torch-light parades in honor of World War II Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera. Without providing that context,

the Times does mention that Lviv militants plundered a government arsenal and dispatched 600 militants a day to do battle in Kiev.

Marchuk also described how these well-organized militants, consisting of paramilitary brigades of 100 fighters each, launched the fateful attack against the police on Feb. 20, the battle where Marchuk was wounded and where the death toll suddenly spiked into scores of protesters and about a dozen police.

Marchuk later said he visited his comrades at the occupied City Hall. What the Times doesn't mention is that City Hall was festooned with Nazi banners and even a Confederate battle flag as a tribute to white supremacy.

The Times touched on the inconvenient truth of the neo-Nazis again on April 12 in an article about the mysterious death of neo-Nazi leader Oleksandr Muzychko, who was killed during a shootout with police on March 24. The article quoted a local Right Sektor leader, Roman Koval, explaining the crucial role of his organization in carrying out the anti-Yanukovych coup.

"Ukraine's February revolution, said Mr. Koval, would never have happened without Right Sector and other militant groups," the Times wrote. Yet, whenever that reality is mentioned by independent journalists it is denounced as "Russian propaganda."

New Cold War?

As tensions ratcheted up between the United States and Russia amid talk of a new Cold War there was a desperate need for a mature voice on the American side who would acknowledge some of the legitimate concerns of Moscow and the Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the east and south who had just witnessed neo-Nazis spearhead a coup against a democratically elected president from their region.

Kerry – who witnessed first-hand in Vietnam the kind of bloodbath that can result when the United States locks itself in to a one-sided propagandistic view of another country's complex reality – could have been that person. Instead, Kerry behaved like a neocon adolescent.

When the people of Crimea voted understandably and overwhelmingly to bail out of the failed Ukrainian state and rejoin Russia, Kerry insisted that it was a case of Russian aggression, declaring "you just don't in the 21st Century behave in 19th Century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext."

Kerry, of course, voted in 2002 to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq in pursuit of hidden WMD stockpiles that didn't exist, but the mainstream U.S. press corps politely left out that troubling fact while reporting Kerry's

denunciation of Russia.

President Obama joined in with a slap at the Crimean referendum, calling it "sloppily organized." But he made no mention of the "sloppily organized" impeachment of Yanukovich, which is what precipitated the secession by the people of Crimea.

Also not surprisingly, with the coup regime in Kiev nearly bankrupt and unable to fund pensions and other social services, Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the Donetsk area have begun to mount their own resistance to the imposition of undemocratic authority from Kiev. Of course, in this case, the U.S. news media treats the protesters as either delusional clowns or puppets of Moscow.

Again, someone like the young Kerry might have spoken up about the danger from unintended consequences when arrogant U.S. officials interfere in the internal affairs of another country. The young Kerry might have pondered how the Nuland-Gershman strategy of destabilizing Ukraine actually helps either the Ukrainians or the American people.

So far, the scheme holds the possibility of civil war in Ukraine, disastrous economic trouble for Europe (with fallout for the U.S. economy, too) and another splurge of U.S. military spending as bellicose politicians cut back even more on domestic priorities.

The younger Kerry might have been wise enough to cool the rhetoric and redirect the narrative into a realistic discussion that could resolve the crisis. For instance, it wouldn't have been very hard to insist that the Feb. 21 agreement be enforced with Yanukovich possibly serving in a ceremonial capacity until new elections could select a new president, rather than the U.S. and the EU immediately embracing a neo-Nazi-led coup.

But the older Kerry is behaving much like the older generation of Cold Warriors did in the 1960s when they insisted that there was no choice other than a U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, that the lives of tens of thousands of young American men and millions of Vietnamese was a small price to pay to stop some imaginary dominoes from toppling. South Vietnam had to be kept in the "free world."

Yet, rather than the dovish warrior of his youth, Kerry has become a hawkish diplomat in his old age, refusing to see the other side's case and eager to take extreme positions that are sure to get more young people killed. John Kerry in his 20s was a much wiser man than John Kerry in his 70s.

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](#)).

Obama, the Hesitant 'Realist'

President Obama has come partially out of the closet as a foreign policy "realist," but he hesitates in the face of Official Washington's neocon establishment, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Jeffrey Goldberg's [long article](#) in the *Atlantic* about Barack Obama's thinking on America's foreign relations, an article derived from a series of interviews that Goldberg had with the President, ought to be required reading for this year's presidential candidates and those who wish to advise the next president on foreign policy.

It ought to be so because it lays out some splendidly clear and well-grounded realist principles, expressed by Mr. Obama more directly and in more complete form than we customarily hear or read, and that would form the core of sound foreign policy for the United States to the extent that the U.S. political milieu would permit them to be put into practice.

Also emerging from the interviews, besides the realist approach, is deep substantive insight by Mr. Obama into the nature of some of the principal security problems of the day and a disciplined and unemotional approach toward analyzing those problems, both of which also are critical ingredients to the formulation of sound foreign policy.

The article is not a puff piece written in return for extraordinary access given to the journalist, and Goldberg does not write such puff pieces anyway. Some of what Goldberg writes in this piece exhibits aspects of common Washington thinking that President Obama has been trying to get away from. But Goldberg deserves credit for letting the President's thinking come through fully, mostly in the President's own words, and for assembling in one place a portrait of a presidential outlook of which we usually only get fragments in press conferences.

The overall realist direction of that outlook is reflected in Mr. Obama's professed admiration for the approach toward foreign policy of George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft. Goldberg tells of how when then-Senator Obama was writing the book that would become a campaign manifesto, his adviser Susan Rice had to

urge him to include some complimentary words about Bill Clinton's foreign policy to balance the praise for Bush and Scowcroft. The principal tenets that can be described as realist principles and that come across most clearly in the interviews with Goldberg are the following.

Deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it were. The first step to being a realist is to be realistic. In the discussion of current front-burner issues that dominate the interviews with Goldberg, this principle certainly applies to the wishful and what-if thinking that is all too common regarding the civil war in Syria, and specifically to the myth that only if the United States had done something more earlier, Syria wouldn't be such a mess.

The President points out that this war pitted from the beginning a professional army that was well armed and supported by two outside allies against a fractured and ragtag rebellion. He correctly observes, "The notion that we could have – in a clear way that didn't commit U.S. military forces – changed the equation on the ground there was never true."

Address specific problems and avoid specific mistakes, rather than subordinating everything under general labels. The strong urge among the commentariat and foreign policy cognoscenti in Washington to talk about foreign policies in terms of a "doctrine" attached to the name of a particular leader or a single "organizing principle" is an unhelpful oversimplification.

Even what is usually called grand strategy, although it has its role, tends to get used and overused in unhelpful ways. Goldberg's article itself reflects the labeling urge by being misleadingly titled "The Obama Doctrine." The world is complicated, and any foreign policy approach that can be simplified to a label or even to a strategy expressed in a single sentence is an oversimplification. Not doing stupid stuff is one (but not the only one) important thing to remember in making foreign policy, bearing in mind how severely U.S. interests have been damaged in the past because stupid stuff was done.

The preceding two concepts are related to a third: *adapt to the differences in different situations.* Not every troublesome dictator is a Hitler, and not every conflict in which civilians die is a Rwandan genocide. The tendency that has to be countered here is perhaps best represented within the Obama administration by Samantha Power, who sometimes does seem to think that every conflict with civilian casualties is another Rwanda and was one of those who argued especially hard for the mistaken intervention in Libya. (Goldberg writes of how during one meeting in which Power was pushing her theme the President had to shush her, saying "I've read your book, Samantha.")

In his comments to Goldberg, the President accurately contrasted Rwanda, where

he said “it’s probably easier to make an argument that a relatively small force inserted quickly would have resulted in averting genocide,” with Syria, where “the degree to which the various groups are armed and hardened fighters and are supported by a whole host of external actors with a lot of resources requires a much larger commitment of forces.”

Pay heed to geopolitics. This is closely related to the specific need to take full account of how other states view their interests and the relative priority they place on those interests – and thus to what extent those states are or are not amenable to changing their policies.

As basic a variable as geographic distance has a lot to do with how interests are defined. This applies to Mr. Obama’s analysis of Middle Eastern problems, in which Middle Easterners themselves have a bigger stake than anyone else. It also applies to his perspective on Ukraine; he understands that Ukraine involves core Russian interests but not core American ones, and therefore Russia will always have escalatory dominance there.

Recognizing a problem is not the same as being able to solve it. The all-too-common notion that must be resisted here is one that flows from overoptimistic American exceptionalism. It is a notion that often leads to assumptions that if a situation is identified as a problem then that means it must be “the policy” of the United States to eliminate it somehow.

It is the notion that, in President Obama’s words, “if we use our moral authority to say ‘This is a brutal regime, and this is not how a leader should treat his people,’ once you’ve said that, once you do that, you are obliged to invade the country and install a government you prefer.” As the President correctly observes, “There are going to be times where we can do something about innocent people being killed, but there are going to be times where we can’t.”

Solving a problem does not necessarily mean it is the United States that should do most of the work in solving it. This is another tendency rooted in American exceptionalism. It is a tendency that causes free-rider problems, which Mr. Obama explicitly wants to avoid. It does not serve U.S. interests for, as he says, the Europeans and Arab states to be “holding our coats” while the United States does “all the fighting.”

Trade-offs and hard choices are unavoidable. Not all good things go together, not all important U.S. interests will be well-served by any one policy option, and not all problems can be solved with the same resources. In defining himself as a realist the President said, “we have to choose where we can make a real impact.”

States have no permanent friends or allies, only permanent interests. Lord Palmerston's dictum applies just as much to the United States of today as it did to the Britain of his day. President Obama rightly looks beyond the usual ways, sustained by habit and political lobbies, of categorizing other states as allies or adversaries and considers what each state is actually doing for or against U.S. interests, while recognizing that each state is likely to present a mixture of both.

Not being stuck in the usual habit means not needlessly taking sides in other people's quarrels. He says, for example, that the Saudis need to "share" the Middle East with their Iranian rivals. As he explains, "An approach that said to our friends 'You are right, Iran is the source of all problems, and we will support you in dealing with Iran' would essentially mean that as these sectarian conflicts continue to rage and our Gulf partners, our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East."

Besides realist principles for addressing any set of problems, the President's interviews with Goldberg demonstrate a sound substantive understanding of leading current problems. This is partly a matter of accurately perceiving relative importance – that "ISIS is not an existential threat to the United States," for example, while "climate change is a potential existential threat to the entire world if we don't do something about it."

It also is a matter of insight into the underpinnings of any one problem. When Goldberg asked the President a question, having to do with ISIS and insecurity in the Middle East, that made reference to Thomas Hobbes, Goldberg acknowledged that he probably would get laughed out of the room by his fourth estate colleagues if he were to ask the same question at a presidential press conference, where the more accepted way to address such subjects would be – to quote a question actually asked at one such recent press conference – "Why can't we get the bastards?"

Mr. Obama responded fully to Goldberg's version of the question with a reply that touched among other things on trends in social order, what causes order to break down, the influence of tribal affiliations, the stresses associated with globalization, and how extremist groups take advantage of such stresses. It was an answer that indicated profound understanding of the roots of much of what constitutes security problems in the Middle East today.

The interviews with Goldberg also indicate a commitment to careful, rigorous analysis of policy decisions – also essential to sound foreign policy – and a

rejection of more emotional approaches. What this means, in the President's words, "is that you care so much that you want to get it right and you're not going to indulge in either impetuous or, in some cases, manufactured responses that make good sound bites but don't produce results. The stakes are too high to play those games."

Goldberg writes that part of what he wanted to find out in his interviews with the President was stimulated by an early speech by Mr. Obama opposing the Iraq War. "I wanted to learn," says Goldberg, "how an Illinois state senator, a part-time law professor who spent his days traveling between Chicago and Springfield, had come to a more prescient understanding of the coming quagmire than the most experienced foreign-policy thinkers of his party ... not to mention, of course, most Republicans and many foreign-policy analysts and writers, including me."

The workings of the mind revealed in these interviews – a dispassionate, well-informed, realist mind – are enough to provide the explanation Goldberg was seeking.

Impressive though that mind is, we are quickly led to seek explanations for the connection, or what some may consider a disconnect, between the mental processes in the presidential head and foreign policies over the past seven years that have been subject to so much criticism.

Criticism has come not only from the purveyors of attitudes and habits that Mr. Obama explicitly and with good reason rejects, but also from some who would not necessarily disagree with what he is saying but would argue that many of his policies do not reflect what he is saying.

One obvious explanation is that the United States is not a presidential dictatorship. The most glaring current limitation on Mr. Obama's ability to implement policies as prudent as he would like them to be is control of Congress by a political opposition determined to oppose virtually his every move. Even in the instances where he somehow is able to overcome that opposition, such as with the survival (so far) of the agreement to limit Iran's nuclear program, the President has to expend much political capital and to offer "compensation" that goes directly against some of what his realist perspective would say is an unwise way of handling "allies" in the region.

The resistance comes from more than just the reflexive obstructionists. The realist perspective Mr. Obama holds is contrary to a conventional wisdom that is more widely and deeply held, across both parties, in the Washington foreign-policy establishment. The President describes this conventional wisdom in his interviews with Goldberg as a "playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow."

The playbook “prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses.” The effects of the playbook have been felt within Mr. Obama’s administration and among his own advisers, most noticeably in the influence that some advisers had in leading to the intervention in Libya.

Going beyond the establishment and to the general American public, most of that public simply does not subscribe to the realist perspective. Most of the American public oversimplifies foreign policy problems, has an exceptionalist faith in the American ability to solve the world’s problems, sticks to traditional views of friends and foes, and does not delve into the intricacies of geopolitics.

Most Americans also think much more in terms of why we can’t get certain sets of bastards than in terms of Hobbesian interpretations of social order, and would quickly tune out any explanation that sounds like the latter. And most Americans are swayed more by emotion-rousing rhetoric than by careful, cool-headed analysis.

Given these attributes of the public mindset, there always will be opposition politicians eager and able to exploit that mindset to score political points and gain political office, and to frustrate the efforts of those who think differently. That is a political reality that even the most diligent and cool-headed realist must contend with.

Any president, even in a second term, must constantly worry about how what he or she does on any one issue will affect the president’s influence and ability to get things done on other issues. This means compromises inevitably are made. It also means the president must pick which battles to fight and which not to fight. In that respect a realist president’s perspective in dealing with conflict in Washington must parallel the perspective applied to conflicts abroad.

The president does, of course, have the ability to use the prominence and prestige of the office to try to educate the public and to change the public mindset. One is entitled to ask why, as we read the wisdom that President Obama dispenses in his conversations with Goldberg, we haven’t been receiving more of a steady diet of such wisdom, featuring as much candor and directness, in a series of presidential statements from Mr. Obama’s first days in office.

Part of the answer lies with this particular president’s strengths and weaknesses and comfort levels; he acknowledged to Goldberg that “there are times when I have not been attentive enough to feelings and emotions and politics in communicating what we’re doing and how we’re doing it.” Part of the answer concerns the political necessity of doing the sail-trimming, compromising, and

battle-picking to cope with conflict in Washington.

Also pertinent is that the persuasive potential of even a communication-skilled president is less than sometimes assumed to be, and probably less today than it has been in the past. Particularly given the reach and variety of modern mass media, today's president has a harder time commanding attention than Theodore Roosevelt with his bully pulpit or Franklin Roosevelt with his fireside chats.

For FDR's listeners, huddled around the radio in the parlor or the kitchen, the President's words were apt to have been about the only thing relevant to public affairs that they heard that evening, despite some competition at other times from communicators with a following such as Father Coughlin. For many listeners and viewers today, a presidential speech may not claim much more of their consciousness than a commentator on Fox News.

The Goldberg interviews reveal a president who, certainly for anyone with a realist perspective, is a wise steward of U.S. foreign policy – wiser than the American political system and political milieu will ever allow him to get credit for.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Neocons Red-Faced Over 'Red Line'

Exclusive: Official Washington's neocons love to condemn President Obama for not enforcing his "red line" after a sarin attack in Syria in 2013, even though one neocon now admits that U.S. intelligence lacked the proof, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic has penned an opus on President Barack Obama's foreign policy which starts with a long segment dissecting Obama's supposed failure to enforce his "red line" against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad using sarin gas to kill hundreds of civilians outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. For Official Washington's foreign-policy elite, Obama's flinching from a bombing campaign against Assad was a historical inflection point for which Obama deserves hearty condemnation.

But if you read far enough into this story of Obama's "feckless" behavior, you

encounter a curious admission from Goldberg: that U.S. intelligence was unsure whether Assad was responsible for the attack.

As Goldberg writes, “Obama was ... unsettled by a surprise visit early in the week from James Clapper, his director of national intelligence, who interrupted the President’s Daily Brief, the threat report Obama receives each morning from Clapper’s analysts, to make clear that the intelligence on Syria’s use of sarin gas, while robust, was not a ‘slam dunk.’

“He chose the term carefully. Clapper, the chief of an intelligence community traumatized by its failures in the run-up to the Iraq War, was not going to overpromise, in the manner of the onetime CIA director George Tenet, who famously guaranteed George W. Bush a ‘slam dunk’ in Iraq.”

What I was told by intelligence sources at the time was that the evidence against Assad was anything but a slam dunk. It was not even “robust,” as Goldberg insists. There were serious doubts among intelligence professionals about many of the “certainties” that Official Washington’s neocon-dominated foreign policy establishment had quickly accepted as true about the sarin attack, blaming Assad.

In the face of that “group think,” Clapper surely did not want to go too much against the grain – he’s far too timid a bureaucrat for that – but his analysts were balking at once again being pushed into justifying another hasty war.

This resistance from the U.S. intelligence community should have been easy to spot, except that the neocons were whipping Official Washington into another war stampede. They saw the sarin attack as the catalyst for another “regime change,” so the last thing they wanted was a sober analysis of the evidence. They wanted a “group think” to take hold and to bait a reluctant Obama into action by portraying him as a wimp if he didn’t start bombing right away.

Rush to War

The neocon strategy almost worked. Across Official Washington and the mainstream U.S. news media, there was a classic rush to judgment. However, when Secretary of State John Kerry made a bellicose case for war on Aug. 30, 2013, and released a supporting “government assessment,” what was most remarkable to me was that there was not a shred of verifiable evidence implicating Assad.

Indeed, it made little sense that Assad would have launched a sarin attack when United Nations inspectors had just arrived in Damascus to examine suspected chemical weapons cases that Assad was blaming on jihadist rebels.

The fact that Kerry had to rely on a new confection, called a “government

assessment” prepared by political operatives rather than the traditional “intelligence assessment” expressing the consensus judgment of the 16 intelligence agencies, was a further tip-off that the U.S. intelligence community was not onboard. After Kerry’s speech, I reported on the startling lack of evidence in the “dodgy dossier.”

So, on Aug. 31, 2013, when Obama began to back away from the rush to war, the President deserved praise for showing reasonable caution. After all, what sense would it make to punish the Syrian government for launching a sarin attack if, in reality, the atrocity was carried out by someone else, in this case, one of the radical jihadist groups trying to trick the U.S. government into intervening in the war on their side?

It’s now clear that if Obama had launched a major bombing campaign against the Syrian military, he might have inadvertently cleared a path for Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front or the Islamic State to seize control of Damascus, touching off an even more devastating human catastrophe. But “regime change” in Syria was a neocon obsession, even if it carried the risk of terrorist groups gaining control of a major Middle Eastern nation.

In the weeks and months after the sarin attack, the case against Assad continued to crumble. The U.N. inspectors recovered only one rocket carrying sarin and it was incapable of traveling the distance that would have indicated that it was fired by the Syrian military. Then, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh reported in 2014 that intelligence officials had traced the attack to radical jihadists in apparent collaboration with Turkish intelligence. More recently, I’ve been told that U.S. intelligence now agrees with Hersh’s reporting.

In other words, Clapper’s recognition that there was no “slam dunk” case implicating Assad has been vindicated by subsequent evidence. But Official Washington’s foreign-policy elite simply can’t accept these findings, instead maintaining the myth that Assad flouted Obama’s “red line” and that Obama lost his nerve and thus undermined U.S. “credibility.” This myth is so beloved among neocons and their liberal-interventionist allies that it can’t be surrendered regardless of its lack of evidentiary support.

After all, admitting that another neocon “group think” was dangerously misguided – after the Iraq War WMD fiasco – might finally topple some of these self-important pundits from their endowed think-tank chairs. Americans might finally recognize that these pompous know-it-alls are really just vacuous know-nothings.

So, instead of an article praising Obama for his realism and restraint – for demanding hard evidence before launching another U.S. war in the Middle East – we get Jeffrey Goldberg’s opus analyzing why Obama chickened out on the “red

line” and how that failure has impaired U.S. foreign policy.

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](#)).

Neocons Sulk over Iran Nuke Deal

Official Washington’s neocons, who wanted so much to “bomb-bomb-bomb” Iran, are now sulking as the nuclear agreement isn’t producing the horrors that they predicted, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

One of the arguments recited most frequently by those wanting to keep Iran ostracized in perpetuity – so frequently that it has achieved the status of cliché – has been that the partial sanctions relief provided for in the agreement to limit Iran’s nuclear program would lead to increased “nefarious” and “destabilizing” behavior by Iran in the Middle East because it would have more financial resources for such activity.

(The public discourse about Iran is surely responsible for one of the biggest increases in usage of the adjective *nefarious*.)

It is easy to see why those determined to defeat the agreement came to rely so heavily on this argument (while ignoring the fact that the sanctions to be relieved were always intended to help induce Iranian concessions on nuclear matters, which they did). Much of the other rhetoric that the anti-agreement forces voiced, about centrifuges and uranium stockpiles and breakout times and the like, concerned subjects on which it was clear, upon even the most casual reflection, that the agreement was superior to the alternative of not having the agreement.

So opponents clung tenaciously to the notion of sanctions relief not only making bad behavior more financially feasible but also automatically leading to such behavior. Still hoping either to sabotage the agreement or at least to limit any rapprochement with Iran, the opponents continue to cling to that argument.

The argument was never valid, for multiple reasons. The supposedly “destabilizing” Iranian regional policies actually have been [reactive to what others have been doing](#) much more than destabilizing. The amount of money said to

be involved in the sanctions relief gets routinely overstated. Most of the funds that had been frozen are already committed to settling accounts elsewhere rather than being available for any new endeavors in the Middle East.

Political imperatives will require the regime to give overwhelming priority, in using whatever resources are left, to repairing domestic economic damage and shortfalls, not running up new bills overseas. Most important, the argument rests on the fallacy that Iranian regional policy is determined by how many rials the Iranian regime has in its bank account, rather than by the political, diplomatic, and security considerations that normally lead a regime to conclude that a particular activity beyond its borders either is or is not in its interests.

The argument assumes that senior Iranian policymakers routinely call in the finance minister and central bank governor and ask, "How much money do we have this month for nefarious behavior in the Middle East?" and then proceed to max out their account by indulging in such behavior. No other regime operates that way, and there is no reason to believe the Iranian regime does either.

If the argument were at all valid, then we should have expected to see a *decrease* in costly Iranian regional activity when the sanctions were imposed in the first place, and perhaps a further decrease when oil prices plunged. After all, if the Iranians did not ratchet down their activity when their financial resources went down, there is no reason to expect them to ratchet the activity up when resources increase.

But no one has painted such a picture of decreased Iranian activity because there simply is not evidence for such a correlation between financial resources and regional activism. The pro-ostracism, anti-agreement forces certainly have not painted such a picture, which, however logically necessary it is for their argument about increasing nefarious behavior, would go against the thrust of most of the other negative things those forces routinely voice about Iran. (Logical consistency across their many arguments was never a strong point of the anti-agreement forces.)

Now the nuclear agreement is in force, and we can look for any evidence of changes in Iranian regional activity. What certainly should count as significant evidence is the [recent report](#) that Iran is withdrawing from Syria a significant portion of the Revolutionary Guard Corps forces that it had deployed there. That's right: this is Iranian regional activity – violent activity, involving combat – that is going down, not up.

Surely those observers who can be expected to be watching like a hawk whatever Iran is doing in the region would have noticed. It's not as if the report was

confined to inconspicuous places. The report first appeared on Israeli television and was replayed in other Israeli news outlets.

The Israeli report, according to which Iran is withdrawing all of a 2,500-strong fighting force while leaving 700 military advisers in Syria, is consistent with a brief comment by Secretary of State John Kerry in a Congressional hearing less than two weeks ago that Iran had withdrawn a “significant number” of its Revolutionary Guard Corps troops from Syria. But from the people who have said so much about financial windfalls from sanctions relief and how that would lead to Iran doing more destabilizing things in the region, we get no comment. Radio silence.

It is easy to imagine what we would be hearing right now from our friends at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Israel Project, and other prominent anti-agreement, pro-ostracism voices if the report had instead been about an *increase* in Iranian troops in Syria. It would be shouted from the rooftops that this was strong evidence that the much-warned-about, post-agreement surge in nefarious Iranian behavior was under way.

Those determined to keep shining a negative light on Iran have not had a good fortnight. Besides the reporting about the withdrawal from Syria, there was the strong showing by moderate supporters of President Hassan Rouhani in the Iranian elections. Typical of the way the pro-ostracism people are couching the news right now is an opinion piece by Dennis Ross titled “Why the Nuclear Deal Hasn’t Softened Iran’s Hard-Line Policies.”

Most of the piece rehearses familiar facts about the shortcomings of the Iranian electoral system and the internal influence that hardline elements exert through certain institutions that they control. As far as external Iranian behavior is concerned, there is an all-too-familiar reliance on catchphrases, firmly in the “nefarious and destabilizing” tradition, that are thrown at the reader as if we should take them for granted, with no effort to match them with any evidence of what Iran actually is or is not doing.

Ross’s piece refers, for example, to “continued regional aggression” by Iran. My dictionary defines aggression as “an unprovoked attack or invasion.” You know – such as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, or the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Where’s the Iranian aggression?

Then there is reference to Iran “employing terror” and “using the Shiite militias to subvert and coerce its neighbors.” In Syria, what Iranian forces and their Hezbollah allies have been doing is helping to prop up the incumbent regime after it came under an armed revolt, with terrorist groups prominent among the opposition.

In Iraq, Iranian forces and Shiite militias also have been supporting the incumbent regime and opposing ISIS – which puts them on the same side of that conflict as the United States. Ross says we should “make the Iranians pay a high price for bad behaviors” while offering them a way out that rejects their “demand” for “regional dominance,” and he suggests that pressure could work in the same way it did with the nuclear negotiations.

But it strains one’s imagination to think of any way such a vague bill of particulars, so divorced from what is actually transpiring on the ground, ever could be translated into a meaningful demand at a negotiating table, let alone a clause in a negotiated agreement. It’s just a recipe for punishment in perpetuity, no matter what Iran does.

And what does Ross say about the new development concerning the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria? Not a word.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as [a blog post](#) at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)

Why McConnell Blocks Scalia Replacement

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

By Michael Winship

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

As he mucked out a barn and his faithful horse whinnied, the farmer declared, “Maybe Hollenbach ought to have my job, because in my business, I deal with that

kind of stuff every day." Then he threw a shovel of manure right at the camera. Hollenbach lost to the candidate who approved this message: Mitch McConnell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not that it was always so. McConnell began his political life as a liberal Republican remember them?, interning for legendary Kentucky senator and statesman John Sherman Cooper. He supported the Equal Rights Amendment and collective bargaining. Friends say he was pro-Planned Parenthood and he even wrote an op-ed piece in the Louisville *Courier-Journal* favoring campaign finance reform.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tailoring his positions to adjust to the shifting seasons, what sets Mitch McConnell apart is that his motives aren’t really ideological but so baldly about holding onto personal power. His opposition to Obama’s naming of a Scalia replacement puts the majority leader in solid with the far-right Republicans he purportedly so dislikes but who have threatened his job security over the last few years, both at home and in DC.

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

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

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

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

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

Neocon Kagan Endorses Hillary Clinton

Exclusive: Hillary Clinton's cozy ties to Washington's powerful neocons have paid off with the endorsement of Robert Kagan, one of the most influential neocons. But it also should raise questions among Democrats about what kind of foreign policy a President Hillary Clinton would pursue, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Prominent neocon Robert Kagan has endorsed Democrat Hillary Clinton for president, saying she represents the best hope for saving the United States from populist billionaire Donald Trump, who has repudiated the neoconservative cause of U.S. military interventions in line with Israel's interests.

In a Washington Post op-ed published on Thursday, Kagan excoriated the Republican Party for creating the conditions for Trump's rise and then asked, "So what to do now? The Republicans' creation will soon be let loose on the land, leaving to others the job the party failed to carry out."

Then referring to himself, he added, "For this former Republican, and perhaps for others, the only choice will be to vote for Hillary Clinton. The [Republican] party cannot be saved, but the country still can be."

While many of Kagan's observations about the Republican tolerance and even encouragement of bigotry are correct, the fact that a leading neocon, a co-founder of the infamous Project for the New American Century, has endorsed Clinton raises questions for Democrats who have so far given the former New York senator and Secretary of State mostly a pass on her pro-interventionist policies.

The fact is that Clinton has generally marched in lock step with the neocons as they have implemented an aggressive "regime change" strategy against governments and political movements that don't toe Washington's line or that deviate from Israel's goals in the Middle East. So she has backed coups, such as in Honduras (2009) and Ukraine (2014); invasions, such as Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011); and subversions such as Syria (from 2011 to the present) all with various degrees of disastrous results.

Yet, with the failure of Republican establishment candidates to gain political traction against Trump, Clinton has clearly become the choice of many neoconservatives and "liberal interventionists" who favor continuation of U.S. imperial designs around the world. The question for Democrats now is whether they wish to perpetuate those war-like policies by sticking with Clinton or should switch to Sen. Bernie Sanders, who offers a somewhat less aggressive (though vaguely defined) foreign policy.

Sanders has undermined his appeal to anti-imperialist Democrats by muting his criticism of Clinton's "regime change" strategies and concentrating relentlessly on his message of "income inequality" for which Clinton has disingenuously dubbed him a "single-issue candidate." Whether Sanders has the will and the time to reorient his campaign to question Clinton's status as the new neocon choice remains in doubt.

A Reagan Propagandist

Kagan, who I've known since the 1980s when he was a rising star on Ronald Reagan's State Department propaganda team (selling violent right-wing policies in Central America), has been signaling his affection for Clinton for some time,

at least since she appointed him as an adviser to her State Department and promoted his wife Victoria Nuland, a former top aide to Vice President Dick Cheney, to be the State Department's chief spokesperson. Largely because of Clinton's patronage, Nuland rose to assistant secretary of state for European affairs and oversaw the provocative "regime change" in Ukraine in 2014.

Later in 2014, Kagan told The New York Times that he hoped that his neocon views which he had begun to call "liberal interventionist" would prevail in a possible Hillary Clinton administration. The Times reported that Clinton "remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes" and quoted Kagan as 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."

Now, Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century wrote the blueprint for George W. Bush's disastrous Iraq War, is now abandoning the Republican Party in favor of Hillary Clinton.

Though Kagan's Post op-ed is characteristically erudite with references to Greek mythology and the French Revolution, it presents a somewhat skewed account of how the Republican Party lost its way. In Kagan's telling, the problem emerged from its blind hatred of Barack Obama's 2008 victory, "a racially tinged derangement syndrome that made any charge plausible and any opposition justified."

The truth is that the Republican Party has harbored ugly tendencies for decades, including the red-baiting McCarthy era of the 1950s, Barry Goldwater's hostility to civil rights laws in the 1960s, Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" in 1968, Ronald Reagan's appeal to racial bigotry in the 1980s, George H.W. Bush's race-baiting "Willie Horton commercials" of 1988, and the GOP's more recent support for a New Jim Crow era hostile to black voting and to social programs along with the party's anti-Latino bigotry and hostility to immigrants.

As a Reagan apparatchik who continued to rise with the neocon tide in the 1990s and early 2000s, Kagan doesn't take the Republican exploitation of American fears and prejudices back that far. Instead, he starts the clock with Obama's election, writing, "there was the party's accommodation to and exploitation of the bigotry in its ranks. No, the majority of Republicans are not bigots. But they have certainly been enablers.

"Who began the attack on immigrants, legal and illegal, long before Trump

arrived on the scene and made it his premier issue? Who was it who frightened Mitt Romney into selling his soul in 2012, talking of 'self-deportation' to get himself right with the party's anti-immigrant forces?

"Who was it who opposed any plausible means of dealing with the genuine problem of illegal immigration, forcing Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) to cower, abandon his principles, and his own immigration legislation, lest he be driven from the presidential race before it had even begun?"

"It was not Trump. It was not even party yahoos. It was Republican Party pundits and intellectuals, trying to harness populist passions and perhaps deal a blow to any legislation for which President Obama might possibly claim even partial credit. What did Trump do but pick up where they left off, tapping the well-primed gusher of popular anger, xenophobia and, yes, bigotry that the party had already unleashed?"

In that sense, Kagan argues that "Trump is no fluke. Nor is he hijacking the Republican Party or the conservative movement, if there is such a thing. He is, rather, the party's creation, its Frankenstein monster, brought to life by the party, fed by the party and now made strong enough to destroy its maker."

An Issue for Democrats

While Kagan's op-ed surely makes some accurate points about Republicans, his endorsement of Hillary Clinton raises a different issue for Democrats: Do they want a presidential candidate who someone as savvy as Kagan knows will perpetuate neocon strategies around the world? Do Democrats really trust Hillary Clinton to handle delicate issues, such as the Syrian conflict, without resorting to escalations that may make the neocon disasters under George W. Bush look minor by comparison?

Will Clinton even follow the latest neocon dream of "regime change" in Moscow as the ultimate way of collapsing Israel's lesser obstacles – Iran, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian resistance? Does Clinton have the wisdom to understand that neocon schemes are often half-baked (remember "the cakewalk" in Iraq) and that the risk of overthrowing Vladimir Putin in Moscow might lead not to some new pliable version of Boris Yeltsin but to a dangerous Russian nationalist ready to use the nuclear codes to defend Mother Russia? (For all Putin's faults, he is a calculating adversary, not a crazy one.)

The fact that none of these life-and-death foreign policy questions has been thoroughly or intelligently explored during the Democratic presidential campaign is a failure of both the mainstream media moderators and the two candidates, Sanders and Clinton, neither of whom seems to want a serious or meaningful

debate about these existential issues.

Perhaps Robert Kagan's endorsement of Hillary Clinton and what that underscores about the likely foreign policy of a second Clinton presidency might finally force war or peace to the fore of the campaign.

[For more on the powerful Kagan family, see Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"]

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](#)).
