

Hillary Clinton's Own Petard

In 2008, Hillary Clinton sought to exploit Barack Obama's limited foreign policy experience by claiming she was more fit to answer a 3 a.m. phone call announcing some crisis, but her national security judgments continue to demonstrate serious weaknesses and fail to meet her own standard, writes Bart Gruzalski.

By Bart Gruzalski

Journalist Robert Parry in a recent piece on Hillary Clinton shows us that she has moved to the right of President Barack Obama and is actively courting the support of neocons while operating within the Beltway's foreign policy consensus:

"Clinton is rolling the dice in the belief that most Democrats won't think through the fallacious 'group thinks' of Official Washington or will at least be scared and confused enough to steer away from [Sen. Bernie] Sanders. That way, Clinton believes she can still win the nomination."

Not that this is entirely new. Clinton's attempts to project a commander-in-chief toughness began during her 2008 primary fight against Obama, but her own famous ad from eight years ago gives us a criterion for POTUS that she fails to satisfy.

To underscore doubts about Obama's readiness to be president, Hillary Clinton's team created an ingenious ad that played on the fear factor while emphasizing her experience with military issues and with foreign leaders. As a phone rings in the background, we hear a male voice:

"It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep. But there's a phone in the White House and it's ringing. Something's happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call: Whether it's someone who already knows the world's leaders, knows the military someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world. It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering the phone?"

The visuals begin with the image of a suburban middle-class house, then quickly fades to images of one child after another asleep. A parent opens a door and looks down as the male voice ends with the question above: "Who do you want answering the phone?" The final image is Hillary Clinton wearing a brown business-suit and glasses, picking up the phone: "I'm Hillary Clinton and I approve of this message."

That ad is not running this election cycle, perhaps for good reason. Hillary

Clinton has demonstrated that she is not a person with good enough judgment to answer a 3 a.m. phone call.

Administrative Bad Judgment

For instance, Hillary Clinton has told us that none of her Secretary of State emails were classified. Yet on Jan. 19, the intelligence community's inspector general Charles McCullough responded to inquiries from Senate committees overseeing intelligence matters, saying that some of Clinton's emails contained sensitive information above "top secret."

"Several dozen additional classified emails have been found," he reported, "including ones containing information from so-called 'special access programs.'" The emails about special access programs were so sensitive that "McCullough and some of his aides had to receive clearance" to review the material.

Hillary Clinton's hair-splitting distinction between what was labeled or marked "classified" at the time and what was in fact so sensitive that it deserved a "top secret" stamp (or higher) is irrelevant, for negligence is not a defense when it comes to national security information.

As Secretary of State, Clinton should have realized that some emails sent to her would contain highly sensitive information, even when it was not labeled that way. Her failure to use a secure government server reflects very bad judgment for a person wanting to make decisions about how the U.S. government should respond to 3 a.m. crises "happening in the world."

Jennifer Palmieri, communications director for the Clinton campaign in November, inadvertently confirmed her boss' lousy judgment. Palmieri appeared on Bloomberg TV and said "that Clinton 'didn't really think it through' when she decided to use her personal email account for State Department business."

Political Bad Judgment

But the email brouhaha is not the only significant example of Clinton showing poor judgment. (Arguably far worse, she has admitted to a "mistake" in voting for the Iraq War, which some foreign policy analysts consider the worst foreign policy decision in U.S. history).

Also, on a personal level, seeking to burnish her image as a tough and seasoned player on the world stage, she began a foreign policy address at George Washington University on March 17, 2008, by describing her landing in Bosnia during that country's civil war:

“I remember landing under sniper fire. There was supposed to be some kind of greeting ceremony at the airport, but instead we just ran with our heads down to get into the vehicles to get to our base. There was no greeting ceremony, and we were basically told to run to our cars. Now, that is what happened.”

Clinton later said she misspoke after CBS released the video of her, with daughter Chelsea, greeting dignitaries, receiving flowers, and visiting with a little girl on the tarmac. For Clinton to tell her dramatic tale about her Bosnian tarmac experience when she should have realized that major news agencies had visual records is another instance of very bad judgment.

This also was not a one-off slip-up that Bill Clinton blamed on her being 60 years old and tired (which should raise another red flag since she is now eight years older). She had been repeating versions of the story since December 2007.

So who should answer that urgent 3 a.m. White House phone call? Should it be someone who has exercised seriously bad judgment as a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State as well as verifiably bad judgment in the political arena? Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party’s war candidate, has hoisted herself on her own petard.

Bart Gruzalski, Professor Emeritus Northeastern University Boston, has published three books, over 50 articles, as well as articles online. Prior to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, he traveled the country criticizing the Bush-43 administration’s bellicose position and articulating a nonviolent solution to terrorism based on his book on Gandhi.

A Step Toward Campaign Transparency

President Obama has called government “transparency” vital for a democracy. But, in practice, he has favored secrecy, keeping key foreign-policy facts away from Americans (all the better to manipulate them) and even balking at a rule requiring government contractors to disclose campaign spending, the latter only requiring a stroke of his pen, says Bill Moyers.

By Bill Moyers

Barack Obama once confessed to politics’ original sin but has yet to atone for it. He now has an opportunity to do so. I speak of his promiscuous relationship with money in politics. During his 2008 race for the White House, Obama opted out of the public funding system for presidential campaigns, the first candidate

of a major party to do so since the system was created in 1976, after the Watergate scandals.

His defection chilled hopes that public funding might enable everyday citizens to check the power of the super rich and their super PACs, countering the influence of “dark money”, contributions that cannot be traced to their donors.

A friend of mine, a prominent conservative Republican who champions campaign finance reform (yes, there are some and we get along marvelously!) recently told me he believes Obama’s decision was a significant blow to the cause for reform.

Six years ago, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court tried to finish it off when they ruled for Big Money, unlimited amounts of it, in their *Citizens United* decision.

In his first State of the Union in 2010, President Obama denounced *Citizens United*, saying that it would reverse a century of law and open “the floodgates for special interests.” He was just as blunt last year when he declared flatly that *Citizens United* was “wrong” and had caused “real harm to our democracy.” Right on all counts.

Public-interest advocates Lisa Gilbert of Public Citizen and Stephen Spaulding of Common Cause recently reminded us that since *Citizens United* “special interests have spent over \$500 million from secret, undisclosed sources.”

Think of it as poison poured into the mainstream of democracy, just as toxic as the lead released in Flint, Michigan’s drinking water.

Americans of every stripe know money corrodes our politics. In a poll last year, *The New York Times* and CBS found that 85 percent of us think the system for funding political campaigns should be fundamentally changed or completely rebuilt.

President Obama knows it, too. Despite his own apostasy, he has spoken eloquently over the years against the present system. Unfortunately, he has done nothing about it. He’s gone AWOL in our biggest battle for democracy.

Which brings us back to his confession. During that first campaign for president, the *Boston Globe* reported that “In Obama’s eight years in the Illinois Senate, from 1996 to 2004, almost two-thirds of the money he raised for his campaigns, \$296,000 of \$461,000, came from PACs, corporate contributions, or unions and many other corporate interests”

Confronted with this by Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*, Obama replied: “I have said repeatedly that money is the original sin in politics and I am not

sinless.”

Far from sinless, he has in fact been a serial sinner. From repeated campaigns for the state legislature, through his one campaign for the US Senate, to his last campaign for president in 2012, money from organized interests poured into his coffers. The finance industry, communications industry, the health industry, they all had a piece of him, sometimes a very big piece.

In his defense, Obama said he could not “unilaterally disarm.” So like the young Augustine of Hippo, who prayed, “Lord, grant me chastity but not yet,” Barack Obama was saying that when the time arrived, he would sin no more.

Well, Mr. President, it’s time. You have no more campaigns to wage. With a little less than 12 months left in the White House, you have the opportunity to atone for exploiting a system that you have deplored in words if not deeds. You can restart the engine of reform and even demonstrate that *Citizens United* can be tamed.

Just take out your pen and sign an executive order compelling federal contractors to disclose their political spending. In one stroke you can put an end to a blatant practice of political bribery that would be one small step for you and one giant leap for democracy.

It’s an open-and-shut case. In fewer than five minutes, you could face the cameras and announce your decision:

My fellow Americans. I have today signed an executive order requiring any company with a federal contract to disclose how much they spend on politicians and lobbyists, and who is receiving their money. There are several reasons for this.

First, federal contracting is big business. In 2013 alone, the United States government spent about \$460 billion on contracting, with \$177 billion of that going to just 25 companies. Since the year 2000, the top 10 contractors have raked in \$1.5 trillion in federal contracts.

That’s your money. All of it comes from taxpayers. And as the economic analyst Robert Reich reminds us, you are footing the bill twice over. You pay for these corporations to lobby for those contracts. Then you pay for the stuff they sell us. It’s only fair that you see how much it costs for corporations to buy influence.

Second, there is a direct relationship between what a corporation spends on campaign contributions and the amount it receives back in government spending. Federal contractors have long been banned from contributing to federal

candidates, parties or political committees, but that ban does not apply to their executives, shareholders and political action committees.

In fact, since the Citizens United decision in 2010, contractors have been free to contribute unlimited amounts of undisclosed money to super PACs and the shadowy operations known as "social welfare organizations."

It's now possible for companies that get government contracts to secretly, let me say it again, secretly, spend untold amounts to elect and re-elect the very legislators who are awarding them those contracts. That's wrong. It's a terrible conflict of interest that undermines the integrity of government.

Some of you will remember that I said the Citizens United decision would harm democracy. I wish it were not so, but I was right; this secrecy in influence peddling by federal contractors is a bad thing. It wastes your money. It distorts the relationship between your government and business.

It works against start-up entrepreneurs who can't afford to hire lobbyists or make political contributions while entrenched old-line companies hire former government officials, members of Congress and their staffs in particular, to steer business their way. Let's put an end to these practices, once and for all.

Third, an open democracy is an honest democracy. Disclosure is the foundation of public trust in government and business, while secrecy invites corruption. Even the Supreme Court justice who wrote the majority opinion for Citizens United acknowledged this to be true.

Justice Anthony Kennedy belongs to another party than I. He adheres to a different ideology. But listen to what he wrote: "With the advent of the Internet, prompt disclosure of [political] expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions and supporters. Shareholders can determine whether their corporation's political speech advances the corporation's interest in making profits, and citizens can see whether elected officials are 'in the pocket' of so-called moneyed interests." I agree with Justice Kennedy.

You see, undisclosed money, "dark money", is not "free speech" as its proponents claim. To the contrary. It's a threat to free speech, especially to citizens like you. Even if you believe money is speech, don't you and every other American have a right to know who's speaking?

Secrecy weakens democracy's backbone, causing it to become brittle, so brittle that fractures are now commonplace. That's one reason Washington is broken and dysfunctional. As Justice Kennedy himself, the author of the Citizens United

decision, remember, recently admitted, our system “is not working the way it should.”

The executive order I have signed today is a step toward helping us see why it is not working and giving us a way to start fixing it. We are casting sunshine on a system badly in need of light. Sadly, I must report to you that Republicans in Congress are opposed to sunshine. They prefer government do business in the dark, out of your sight and away from the prying eyes of reporters.

But the Sunlight Foundation has discovered that over one recent five-year period 200 of the most politically active corporations spent a combined \$5.8 billion on federal lobbying and campaign contributions and, in return, got \$4.4 trillion in federal business and support. Yes, \$4.4 trillion, with a “t”. That’s an enormous return on their investment in lobbyists and politicians.

Earlier this month I delivered my last State of the Union address to you. I told you that, “We have to reduce the influence of money in our politics, so that a handful of families or hidden interests can’t bankroll our elections. And if our existing approach to campaign finance reform can’t pass muster in the courts, we need to work together to find a real solution.”

My record on this issue may not inspire confidence, but I offer this executive order as an act of genuine penitence. And I pledge to you that in my remaining months as president I intend to take more steps to put right what I have helped to keep wrong. When I leave this office next January there will be no private citizen in the country more active in the fight to save our public life from the pernicious grip of private greed.

I am not a saint; I am a sinner. But I have been born again, again. And this time I will keep the faith. If you believe in democracy, join me. Thank you and good night.

A note to our readers: Some observers in Washington think President Obama may be about to sign such an order. We are not so sure. He reportedly came close in 2011 when the draft of such an order was leaked.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other lobbyists roared and the President backed down. The only spunk he has shown on the issue since has been rhetorical. So he could once again capitulate. You can help to stiffen his spine by signing the petition sponsored by the non-partisan group Public Citizen.

As the President himself concluded in his most recent State of the Union address: “Changes in our political process will only happen when the American people demand it. It depends on you. That’s what’s meant by a government of, by, and for the people.”

OK, agreed. But in the meantime, let's tell the President to stand tall like a leader and do the right thing. Mr. President, sign the executive order compelling federal contractors to disclose all their political spending, including dark money.

My long-time colleague [Gail Ablow](#) reported and researched this column.

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Is Obama's Drug Clemency a Mirage?

President Obama once promised hope and that is what some non-violent drug offenders have left as they serve draconian "drug war" sentences. But Obama's offer of clemency may be more mirage than reality, says ex-CIA officer John Kiriakou, who himself was imprisoned for telling the truth about illegal torture.

By John Kiriakou

The federal government's program to reduce prison sentences for thousands of federal offenders sentenced under draconian drug laws will fail to help almost anybody without the immediate intervention of the White House. In the meantime, thousands of federal drug offenders are stuck in a rut with no end in sight.

The Justice Department announced the [Clemency Project](#) in 2014 as a way for drug offenders to argue that their sentences are overly long, and that, if their crimes had been committed today, they would have been given significantly less time in prison. For many federal prisoners, this program is the only chance they have to have some semblance of a real life, to die outside prison walls, or to spend whatever time they may have left with family.

The way the program is supposed to operate is that any federal drug offender who meets a strict set of criteria can apply for a sentence reduction. If they meet these criteria, they are assigned an attorney, and that attorney can go before a federal judge and ask for resentencing.

The [criteria](#) are that the prisoner must be currently serving a federal sentence in prison and, by operation of law, likely would have received a substantially lower sentence if convicted of the same offense today; the prisoner must be a non-violent, low-level offender without significant ties to large-scale criminal organizations, gangs, or cartels; the prisoner must have served at least 10 years of his sentence; the prisoner must have no significant criminal history;

he must have demonstrated good conduct in prison; and he must have no history of violence prior to or during his current incarceration.

I spent 23 months in prison after blowing the whistle on the CIA's illegal and immoral torture program. During those 23 months, I made friends, many of whom were doing very long stretches for what seemed to me to be innocuous drug offenses. When the Clemency Project was first announced, it seemed too good to be true. I fear that as the end of the Obama administration nears, it may be.

Let me give you some examples of the people this program is supposed to help. My closest friend in prison was "Mark." Mark is in his mid-40s and is from Philadelphia. Back in the 1990s, Mark's stepfather taught him how to make high quality methamphetamine, which they and a group of cohorts then sold to a crime ring in the city. There were nine people in the conspiracy.

After about six months, Mark decided that this wasn't the life for him, and he voluntarily left the operation. He was the only person to do so. Mark went on to open a successful small business that employed a half dozen people, he got engaged, and he started to build a life for himself.

Years passed. Finally the FBI, DEA, and ATF swooped in and arrested everybody except Mark. He waited another year for the other shoe to drop and, finally, he was arrested, too.

Mark refused to testify against his co-defendants. He didn't realize that they had all agreed to testify against him. Eight of the defendants took pleas and got sentences of five and a half years. Mark went to trial, where he was found guilty of conspiracy to manufacture methamphetamine.

Despite the fact that he was the only defendant to leave the conspiracy, and despite the fact that he had the least involvement in the conspiracy, he was given three consecutive sentences of life without parole. That was later reduced on appeal to 30 years. This was for a first-time, nonviolent drug offender.

Mark has been in prison for more than 16 years. His record has been exemplary. He's earned a variety of certifications, he has a loving and supportive family, and he's never been in trouble. He can and should be a productive member of society. His only hope is the Clemency Project.

Mark's case is not unusual. There are thousands of people in our prisons like him. And many are in even worse situations. The Huffington Post recently reported on the story of Carlos Tapia-Ponce, a 94-year-old serving a life sentence for managing a cocaine warehouse. He has been in prison for 26 years and has twice been denied compassionate release for chronic health problems.

Even though he has also been denied release under the Clemency Project, his attorney is appealing the decision, and the application apparently will be reconsidered. If the Clemency Project is not for Carlos Tapia-Ponce, then who is it for? Is this 94-year-old man that much of a threat?

One question that the Justice Department and sentencing judges ought to ask themselves is, "Is society truly served by keeping these people in prison, in some cases for the rest of their lives?" I would posit that it is not. Society would be better served if these prisoners could work, pay taxes, tend to their families, and lead normal lives. Long sentences are punitive. They don't help "society" in any way.

As for the President, addressing draconian drug sentences is a great idea, even if it doesn't address the sentencing laws themselves. The Clemency Project has the potential to help thousands of people indeed, thousands of families rebuild their lives.

But it will only work if the Justice Department can process the applications. And that hasn't happened. A year after the program was announced, only two out of 30,000 prisoners had had their sentences shortened. By December 2015, the list of those whose sentences were commuted grew by only another 95.

We need presidential action right now. Without it there will be no legacy of justice in drug sentencing. And there's not a lot of time.

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US Abets Saudi War Crimes in Yemen

U.S. officials are quick to decry "human rights violations" in "enemy" states, but different rules apply to "allies" such as Saudi Arabia, which is committing war crimes in Yemen and executing dissidents at home while the Obama administration aids and abets the atrocities, writes Marjorie Cohn for TeleSUR.

By Marjorie Cohn

Saudi Arabia has engaged in war crimes, and the United States is aiding and

abetting them by providing the Saudis with military assistance. In September 2015, Saudi aircraft killed 135 wedding celebrants in Yemen. The air strikes have killed 2,800 civilians, including 500 children. Human Rights Watch charges that these bombings "have indiscriminately killed and injured civilians."

This conflict is part of a regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are bombing Yemen in order to defeat the Houthi rebels, who have been resisting government repression for a long time. Iran has been accused of supporting the Houthis, although Iran denies this. Yemen is strategically located on a narrow waterway that links the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea. Much of the world's oil passes through this waterway.

A United Nations panel of experts concluded in October 2015 that the Saudi-led coalition had committed "grave violations" of civilians' human rights. They include indiscriminate attacks; targeting markets, a camp for displaced Yemenis, and humanitarian aid warehouses; and intentionally preventing the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The panel was also concerned that the coalition considered civilian neighborhoods, including Marra and Sadah, as legitimate strike zones. The International Committee of the Red Cross documented 100 attacks on hospitals.

Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions prohibits the targeting of civilians. It provides that parties to a conflict "shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives."

Saudi Arabia is also engaging in serious individual human rights violations. In January 2016, the Saudi government executed 47 people, including a prominent pacifist Shia cleric, who had been a leader of the 2011 Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. Many of those executed were tortured during their detention and denied due process. Most were beheaded.

This horrifies us when ISIS does it. Yet State Department spokesman John Kirby protested weakly, "We believe that diplomatic engagement and direct conversations remain essential in working through differences."

Also in January 2016, Palestinian artist and poet Ashraf Fayadh, a Saudi citizen whose family is from Gaza, was sentenced to death by beheading. His alleged crimes: "apostasy," or renouncing Islam, and photographing women. "Throughout this whole process," Amnesty International UK found, "Ashraf was denied access to a lawyer, a clear violation of international human rights law."

Both Saudi Arabia and the United States are parties to the Geneva Conventions,

which define as grave breaches willful killing, willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, and torture or inhuman treatment. Grave breaches are considered war crimes.

Also prohibited are “the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.”

Although neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia is party to the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, that statute sets forth standard aider and abettor liability provisions. It says that an individual can be convicted of war crimes if he or she “aids, abets or otherwise assists” in the commission or attempted commission of the crime, “including providing the means for its commission.”

The U.S. government is the primary supplier of Saudi weapons. In November 2015, the U.S. sold \$1.29 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia. It included more than 10,000 bombs, munitions, and weapons parts manufactured by Raytheon and Boeing, as well as bunker busters, and laser-guided and “general purpose” bombs.

A month earlier, the United States had approved a \$11.25 billion sale of combat ships to Saudi Arabia. The U.S. also provides intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition. During the past five years, the U.S. government has sold the Saudis \$100 billion worth of arms. These sales have greatly enriched U.S. defense contractors.

Why has the United States “usually looked the other way or issued carefully calibrated warnings in human rights reports as the Saudi royal family cracked down on dissent and free speech and allowed its elite to fund Islamic extremists,” in the words of *New York Times*’ David Sanger? “In return,” Sanger writes, “Saudi Arabia became America’s most dependable filling station, a regular supplier of intelligence, and a valuable counterweight to Iran.” Saudi Arabia, and close U.S. ally Israel, opposed the Iran nuclear deal.

In April 2015, the U.S. government prevented nine Iranian ships loaded with relief supplies from reaching Yemen. President Barack Obama also sent an aircraft carrier to the area to enforce the Saudi embargo on outside supplies. According to UN estimates, 21 million people lack basic services, and over 1.5 million have been displaced. UNICEF notes that six million people don’t have enough food.

Moreover, the U.S. government seeks to prevent scrutiny of Saudi human rights abuses in Yemen. In October 2015, the United States blocked a UN Security

Council sanctions committee proposal that would have required the committee's chair to contact "all relevant parties to the conflict and stress their responsibility to respect and uphold international humanitarian law and human rights law."

The U.S. government is also violating domestic law by providing the Saudis with military aid. The Leahy Law prohibits U.S. assistance to foreign security forces or military officers "if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, for whom the law was named, told *Foreign Policy*: "The reports of civilian casualties from Saudi air attacks in densely populated areas [in Yemen] compel us to ask if these operations, supported by the United States, violate" the Leahy Law.

Furthermore, 22 U.S.C. section 2304 provides that "no security assistance may be provided to any government which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights."

The Arms Trade Treaty obligates member states to monitor exports of weapons and make sure they do not end up being used to commit human rights abuses. Although the U.S. has not ratified the treaty, we have signed it. Under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, a signatory is prohibited from taking action inconsistent with the object and purpose of the treaty.

The U.S. government should immediately halt arms transfers and military support to Saudi Arabia and support an independent investigation into U.S. arms transfers and war crimes in Yemen. The United States must stop participating in and call for an end to the de facto blockade so that humanitarian assistance can reach those in need, engage in diplomatic efforts to end the conflict, and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty.

In an interesting twist, the Saudis contributed \$10 million to the Clinton Foundation before Hillary Clinton became Secretary of State. In 2011, the year after the State Department had documented myriad serious human rights violations by Saudi Arabia, Hillary Clinton oversaw a \$29 billion sale of advanced fighter jets to the Saudis, declaring it was in our national interest.

The deal was "a top priority" for Secretary Clinton, according to Andrew Shapiro, an assistant secretary of state. Two months before the deal was clinched, Boeing, manufacturer of one of the fighter jets the Saudis sought to acquire, contributed \$900,000 to the Clinton Foundation.

Hillary Clinton now says the U.S should pursue "closer strategic cooperation" with Saudi Arabia.

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[<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Saudi-Arabia-Is-Killing-Civilians-with-US-Bombs-20160125-0004.html>]

Can US Break with Jihadist Allies?

Exclusive: The Obama administration finds itself caught in the contradictions of its Syrian policy, having backed radical jihadists to achieve another “regime change” but now finding that its opportunism is spreading chaos beyond the Mideast into Europe. But can the U.S. adjust course and abandon its jihadist clients, asks Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria (Updated on Jan. 25 with new last two paragraphs)

The passage of a major U.N. Security Council resolution is like a cheap high: the euphoria wears off pretty quickly. Such was last month’s unanimous adoption of a “peace plan” to end nearly five years of Syrian bloodshed.

With Monday’s start date for a planned ceasefire and the launch of negotiations already put off, it’s looking increasingly unlikely that the talks will start any time soon. The major obstacle is deciding who will represent the opposition across the table from the government. And that hinges on the question of who is a terrorist in Syria. It doesn’t help that world governments have failed since the League of Nations to agree on a treaty legally defining terrorism.

Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Geneva on Wednesday and the two were unable to decide who the Syrian terrorists are that should be excluded from the negotiations.

They agree on excluding the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda’s affiliate) who have already been eliminated from participation. But what about the myriad other opposition groups, some of whom collaborate closely with Nusra and other extremists?

A hundred of them were melded together by Saudi Arabia in Riyadh last November. But they want Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down immediately. That’s a complete non-starter as the U.N. plan would allow him to stay on for six

months making way for a transitional government until a new constitution is written and a general election held in 2017. Kerry has been blasted by neoconservatives for agreeing to this compromise and for allowing Assad to run again in that election.

The U.S. compromised on that point after being spurred on by the refugee crisis that is spreading disorder into Europe and by Russia's entry into the war against the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. But there is so far little compromise on the question of terrorism.

Putin's Challenge

Moscow's and Washington's disagreement goes back to the beginning of the Syrian civil war, as I reported more than three years ago. In September, Russian President Vladimir Putin went a step further in accusing the U.S. of supporting terrorists in Syria in his address to the U.N. General Assembly.

"The Islamic State itself did not come out of nowhere," Putin said. "It was initially developed as a weapon against undesirable secular regimes." He said it was irresponsible "to manipulate extremist groups and use them to achieve your political goals, hoping that later you'll find a way to get rid of them or somehow eliminate them."

He made it clear he was speaking of the U.S., when he added: "I'm urged to ask those who created this situation: do you at least realize now what you've done? But I'm afraid that this question will remain unanswered, because they have never abandoned their policy, which is based on arrogance, exceptionalism and impunity."

Putin did not mention clear evidence he was certainly aware of from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. An August 2012 DIA document declassified by a judge says that Washington, Ankara and the Gulf States were helping to establish a Salafist principality in eastern Syria to pressure Assad and that it could team up with extremists on the Iraqi side of the border to form an Islamic State, the document uses that exact phrase. Then DIA chief Gen. Mike Flynn later told Al Jazeera that this was a "willful decision in Washington," not the U.S. merely turning a blind eye to what was happening.

The U.S. has long supported unsavory groups to reach short-term U.S. interests. Washington argues it is vetting what groups it supports, but even the Daily Beast (a big supporter of neoconservative regime-change strategies) has called this into question, reporting that CIA-backed rebels fight in tandem with Al Qaeda.

In his speech Putin called for a coalition similar to the Soviet-U.S. alliance

in the Second World War to fight the most fearsome terrorist force in history, Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Putin argued that Syria's military is the only effective ground force (along with the Kurds) against the Islamic State and that all nations who really want to defeat it should work with Assad's army and fight the groups trying to overthrow him.

"Similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of parties willing to stand firm against those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind," Putin said.

Russia presented a draft resolution at the Security Council that would have authorized such a grand coalition. But the U.S. flatly rejected it because it still plots Assad's overthrow with groups that Russia says are terrorists. It wasn't a surprise then that two days after Putin spoke that Russia launched its first airstrike was against a CIA-backed group threatening the Assad government. It was a strong message from Moscow to Washington: if you keep supporting extremists in Syria we will strike them.

The U.S. government and its corporate media accused Russia of hitting "moderate" groups instead of the Islamic State (which Russia has repeatedly also targeted). Washington leveled the tired charge that Putin is trying to reestablish the Soviet Empire and takeover the Middle East from the U.S.: a duplicitous case of projecting imperial designs onto another. Perhaps Russia really is worried about terrorism spreading from Syria and really wants to do something to stop it.

Defining Terrorism

Having an international agreement legally defining terrorism would be useful in this circumstance, but coming up with one codified in a treaty has long bedeviled governments. The League of Nations tried and failed. A month after 9/11 the U.N. General Assembly met to agree on an international convention against terrorism, but failed because it couldn't agree on defining terrorism.

Terrorism is only a tactic. But governments seem to conflate it with a cause. It's okay when their side uses it, but not when their enemy does. This has spawned the cliché, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

If you can objectively isolate the tactic from the cause, an agreed definition may be possible. It would be along the lines of terrorism is an act of violence carried out by non-state actors, targeting civilians for any cause, whether just or not.

The cause of the Palestinians under occupation is just, for instance, but blowing up Israeli civilians in a bus is terrorism. The cause of the Islamic State, as an occupying force, is clearly unjust, and it commits terrorism when

it targets civilians. The target is essential to the definition. A non-state actor, even the Islamic State, attacking military targets is using guerilla tactics not terrorism. Some groups, like ISIS, use both.

The lack of a definition has helped states to continue sponsoring terrorism, though they do not directly commit acts of terrorism themselves, as many people contend. States commit war crimes, which is worse. Only non-state actors employ terrorism, which is not under the jurisdiction of the war-crimes International Criminal Court and could only in some instances be considered a war crime.

Without a common understanding of what terrorism is, it is difficult to imagine agreement between Moscow and Washington to get the Syrian talks started without some extremely deft diplomatic maneuvering. That may still happen amid reports that the U.N. will invite two sets of opposition groups to satisfy both the U.S. and Russia.

Without such a compromise to get talks started, however slim the chance they will succeed, there is no prospect in sight of an end to the Syrian war until one side wins it militarily.

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Learning to Love – and Use – the Bomb

Exclusive: The endless demonizing of Russian President Putin is the new fun game in Official Washington as neocons dream about “regime change” in Moscow and military contractors drool over huge profits from “modernizing” America’s nuclear arsenal, with few thoughts about the heightened risk of nuclear annihilation, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

At a time when America’s public sector is apparently too strapped financially even to provide safe drinking water for some of its residents, the Obama administration plans to commit the nation to spending at least \$1 trillion over the next three decades to improve our ability to fight a nuclear war. That’s right, an almost unthinkable war that would end up destroying much of the habitable portion of the globe.

That wasn't the message President Obama conveyed in April, 2009 when he declared in Prague, "The existence of thousands of nuclear weapons is the most dangerous legacy of the Cold War. Generations lived with the knowledge that their world could be erased in a single flash of light. Just as we stood for freedom in the Twentieth Century, we must stand together for the right of people everywhere to live free from fear in the Twenty-first Century.

"And as . . . the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."

How times change. Today, warns former U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, "we are now on the verge of a new nuclear arms race" based on a return to Cold War thinking. "Moreover, I believe that the risk of a nuclear catastrophe today is greater than it was during the Cold War – and yet our public is blissfully unaware of the new nuclear dangers they face."

Russia shares some of the blame, with its ostentatious talk of developing new weapons like a giant nuclear-tipped torpedo designed to "cause guaranteed devastating damage to the country's territory by creating wide areas of radioactive contamination."

But a far greater risk to global security is the Obama administration's so-called nuclear "modernization" program, which the Pentagon is promoting at the same time U.S. policymakers are incessantly demonizing Russia as the chief threat to the United States and its allies.

In theory, the administration aims merely to ensure that America's nuclear deterrent remains "robust", that is, credible enough to dissuade any other nuclear power from contemplating an attack on U.S. forces, or installations, or cities.

But U.S. nuclear forces are currently sized with only one potential enemy in mind: Russia. The United States has an estimated 1,900 nuclear weapons deployed, versus 1,780 for Russia. The next largest nuclear power is France, with just 290 deployed weapons. The total U.S. nuclear stockpile of 7,200 warheads is 28 times bigger than China's.

Apparently all that isn't enough to let top Pentagon officials sleep at night. President Obama's new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, told the Senate Armed Services Committee last year that he believes Russia poses the greatest threat to U.S. national security, "an existential threat" no less. "If you look at their behavior, it's nothing short of

alarming," he declared.

Curtis LeMay Redux

Lest Russia launch an all-out attack, for reasons unknown, the Obama administration proposes building 12 new nuclear-armed submarines, 100 long-range strategic bombers armed with a new class of bombs, 400 silo-based ballistic missiles, and 1,000 nuclear-tipped cruise missiles. It's almost as if Air Force General Curtis LeMay were still running the show.

An authoritative study by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies estimates the full cost of this program over 30 years at more than \$1 trillion, with no allowance for cost overruns, delays, or clean-up and decommissioning costs.

But cost may be the least of the problems with Obama's agenda. One common if disguised element of these "modernization" programs is their ability to make nuclear "war-fighting" more, not less, conceivable by increasing the targeting flexibility of these weapons and, in some cases, reducing their yield so they resemble very large conventional weapons rather than the all-or-nothing nukes of old.

For example, as the *New York Times* reported, the recently tested B61 Model 12 nuclear bomb has steerable fins that permit pin-point accuracy and configurable yields to as little as two percent of the "Little Boy" bomb dropped on Hiroshima. General James E. Cartwright, retired vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former head of the United States Strategic Command, said "what going smaller does is to make the weapon more thinkable."

Similarly, the proposed new Long-Range Stand-Off weapon, a vastly upgraded nuclear cruise missile, "is designed for nuclear warfighting," states Stephen Young, a senior analyst in the Global Security Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. "Unfortunately, for that very reason, deploying this weapon will actually make the United States less secure."

Moving to a nuclear war-fighting capability violates the official U.S. policy outlined in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, which called for steps to "reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attack, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons."

Once policymakers start seriously considering "limited war" scenarios in which nuclear weapons might come in handy, the risk of war shoots way up. At the same time, the acquisition of war-fighting capabilities will prompt the other side to follow suit.

Easing into Nuclear War

As James Doyle, a former nonproliferation analyst at Los Alamos National Laboratory, put it, “Lowering the threshold of nuclear war poses the very real threat of rapid escalation in a conflict potentially resulting in the use of many, more destructive nuclear weapons.”

Russia certainly views the Obama administration’s current nuclear program as upsetting the stability of traditional deterrence. Following a recent test of the new B61-12 bomb, Russia’s deputy defense minister, Anatoly Antonov, denounced it as “irresponsible” and “openly provocative.”

Russia is also gravely concerned about another development that could, in theory, make the United States contemplate a “limited” nuclear war: the expansion of the U.S. ballistic missile defense network in Europe. President Vladimir Putin called that “an attempt to undermine the existing parity in strategic nuclear weapons and essentially to upset the whole system of global and regional stability.”

The biggest risk from all these developments isn’t a planned nuclear war, but an unplanned nuclear exchange triggered by a false alarm in an atmosphere of mutual paranoia. Both the United States and Russia have hundreds of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, ready to “launch on warning” lest they be destroyed in a sneak attack. Our survival thus far is thanks in part to luck; scholars have documented at least 20 accidents that might have started an accidental nuclear war in years past.

There’s no guarantee that our luck will hold out, however. Thanks to growing fears of being wiped out without warning by stealthy U.S. weapons, “Russia has *shortened* the launch time from what it was during the Cold War,” according to Bruce Blair, a nuclear security expert at Princeton. “Today, top military command posts in the Moscow area can bypass the entire human chain of command and directly fire by remote control rockets in silos and on trucks as far away as Siberia in only 20 seconds.”

The priority of U.S. nuclear policy today should not be investing in staggeringly expensive new technology that makes us *less* secure by making nuclear war more thinkable and thus more unpredictable. It should be overwhelmingly focused on nuclear risk reduction: lowering the threats perceived by each nuclear power, eliminating launch-on-warning policies, and exploring other confidence-building measures. Our greatest security task is to modernize our thinking about nuclear weapons, not our nuclear weapons technology.

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Hillary Clinton Seeks Neocon Shelter

Special Report: Stunned by falling poll numbers, Hillary Clinton is hoping that Democrats will rally to her neocon-oriented foreign policy and break with Bernie Sanders as insufficiently devoted to Israel. But will that hawkish strategy work this time, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In seeking to put Sen. Bernie Sanders on the defensive over his foreign policy positions, ex-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is embracing a neoconservative stance on the Middle East and gambling that her more hawkish approach will win over Democratic voters.

Losing ground in Iowa and New Hampshire in recent polls, the Clinton campaign has counterattacked against Sanders, targeting [his sometimes muddled comments](#) on the Mideast crisis, but Clinton’s attack line suggests that Sanders isn’t adequately committed to the positions of Israel’s right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his American neocon acolytes.

Clinton’s strategy is to hit Sanders for seeking a gradual normalization of relations with Iran, while Clinton has opted for the neocon position of demonizing Iran and siding with [Israel and its quiet alliance with Saudi Arabia](#) and other Sunni states that share Israel’s animosity toward Shiite-ruled Iran.

By attaching herself to this neocon approach of hyping every conceivable offense by Iran while largely excusing the human rights crimes of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni-run states, Clinton is betting that most Democratic voters share the neocon-dominated “group think” of Official Washington: “Iran-our-enemy, Israel/Saudi Arabia-our-friends.”

She made similar calculations when she voted for and supported President George W. Bush’s invasion and occupation of Iraq; when she sided with the neocons in pushing President Barack Obama to escalate the war in Afghanistan; and when she instigated “regime change” in Libya all policies that had dubious and dangerous

outcomes. But she seems to still believe that she will benefit politically if she continues siding with the neocons and their “liberal interventionist” side-kicks.

On Thursday, the Clinton campaign put Sanders’s suggestion of eventual diplomatic relations with Iran in the context of his lack of ardor toward defending Israel.

“Normal relations with Iran right now?” said Jake Sullivan, the campaign’s senior policy adviser. “President Obama doesn’t support that idea. And it’s not at all clear why it is that Senator Sanders is suggesting it. Many of you know Iran has pledged the destruction of Israel.”

Actually, the Clinton campaign is mischaracterizing Sanders’s position as expressed in last Sunday’s debate. Sanders opposed immediate diplomatic relations with Tehran.

“Understanding that Iran’s behavior in so many ways is something that we disagree with; their support of terrorism, the anti-American rhetoric that we’re hearing from their leadership is something that is not acceptable,” Sanders said. “Can I tell you that we should open an embassy in Tehran tomorrow? No, I don’t think we should.”

Standing with the Establishment

But the Clinton campaign’s distortions aside, there is the question of whether or not the Democratic base has begun to reject Official Washington’s whatever-Israel-wants orthodoxy.

Hillary Clinton seems to be betting that rank-and-file Democrats remain enthralled to Israel and afraid to challenge the powerful neocon propaganda machine that controls the U.S. establishment’s foreign policy by dominating major op-ed pages, TV political chat shows and leading think tanks. The neocons also maintain close ties to the “liberal interventionists” who hold down key jobs in the Obama administration.

Clinton’s gamble assumes that progressives and foreign-policy “realists” have failed to develop their own infrastructure for examining and debunking many of the neocon/liberal-hawk propaganda themes and thus any politician who deviates too far from those “group thinks” risks getting marginalized.

In other words, Clinton is counting on the establishment structure holding through Election 2016 despite the populist anger that is evident from the surge of support for democratic socialist Bernie Sanders on the left and for billionaire nativist Donald Trump on the right.

In effect, this election is asking American voters if they want incremental changes to the current system represented by establishment candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush or if they want to shake the system up with insurgent candidates like Sanders and Trump.

Though most neocons are supporting Republican establishment candidates who have sworn allegiance to the Israeli/neocon cause, the likes of Sen. Marco Rubio, some prominent neocons have made clear that they would be happy with Hillary Clinton as president.

For instance, neocon superstar Robert Kagan told The New York Times in 2014 that he hoped that his neocon views which he now prefers to call “liberal interventionist” would prevail in a possible Hillary Clinton administration. After all, Secretary of State Clinton named Kagan to one of her State Department advisory boards and promoted his wife, neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw the provocative “regime change” in Ukraine in 2014.

According to the Times’ article, Clinton “remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes.”

Kagan is quoted 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.”

Though Clinton recently has sought to portray herself as an Obama loyalist especially in South Carolina where she is counting on strong African-American support she actually has adopted far more hawkish positions than the President, both when she was a senator and as Obama’s first secretary of state.

‘Team of Rivals’ Debacle

Arguably, Obama’s most fateful decision of his presidency occurred shortly after the 2008 election when he opted for the trendy idea of a “team of rivals” to run his foreign policy. He left Bush family loyalist Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, retained a neocon-dominated senior officer corps led by the likes of Gen. David Petraeus, and picked hawkish Sen. Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State. Thus, Obama never took control of his own foreign policy.

The troika of Clinton-Gates-Petraeus challenged Obama over his desire to wind down the Afghan War, bureaucratically mouse-trapping him into an ill-advised “surge” that accomplished little other than getting another 1,750 U.S. soldiers killed along with many more Afghans. Nearly three-quarters of the 2,380 U.S. soldiers who died in Afghanistan were killed on Obama’s watch.

Ironically, it was Gates who shed the most light on Clinton's neocon-oriented positions in his memoir, *Duty*, written after he left the Pentagon in 2011. While generally flattering Clinton for her like-minded positions, Gates also portrays Clinton as a pedestrian foreign policy thinker who is easily duped and leans toward military solutions.

Indeed, for thoughtful and/or progressive Democrats, the prospect of a President Hillary Clinton could represent a step back from some of President Barack Obama's more innovative foreign policy strategies, particularly his readiness to cooperate with the Russians and Iranians to defuse Middle East tensions and his willingness to face down the Israel Lobby when it is pushing for heightened confrontations and war.

Based on her public record and Gates's insider account, Clinton could be expected to favor a neoconservative approach to the Mideast, one more in line with the dominant thinking of Official Washington and the belligerent dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Standing with Israeli Bigots

As a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State, Clinton rarely challenged the conventional wisdom on the Mideast or resisted the use of military force to solve problems. She famously voted for the Iraq War in 2002 falling for President George W. Bush's bogus WMD case and remained a war supporter until her position became politically untenable during Campaign 2008.

Representing New York, Clinton avoided criticizing Israeli actions. In summer 2006, as Israeli warplanes pounded southern Lebanon, killing more than 1,000 Lebanese, Sen. Clinton shared a stage with Israel's bigoted Ambassador to the United Nations Dan Gillerman who had said, "While it may be true and probably is that not all Muslims are terrorists, it also happens to be true that nearly all terrorists are Muslim."

At a pro-Israel rally with Clinton in New York on July 17, 2006, Gillerman proudly defended Israel's massive violence against targets in Lebanon. "Let us finish the job," Gillerman told the crowd. "We will excise the cancer in Lebanon" and "cut off the fingers" of Hezbollah.

Responding to international concerns that Israel was using "disproportionate" force in bombing Lebanon and killing hundreds of civilians, Gillerman said, "You're damn right we are." [NYT, July 18, 2006]

Sen. Clinton did not protest Gillerman's remarks, since doing so would presumably have offended an important pro-Israel constituency, which she has continued to cultivate.

In November 2006, when President Bush nominated Gates to be Defense Secretary, Clinton gullibly misread the significance of the move. She interpreted it as a signal that the Iraq War was being wound down when it actually presaged the opposite, that an escalation or “surge” was coming.

From her seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Clinton failed to penetrate the smokescreen around Gates’s selection. The reality was that Bush had ousted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in part, because he had sided with Generals John Abizaid and George Casey who favored shrinking the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. Gates was privately onboard for replacing those generals and expanding the U.S. footprint.

On with the Surge

After getting blindsided by Gates over what became a “surge” of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, Sen. Clinton sided with Democrats who objected to the escalation, but Gates quotes her in his memoir as later telling President Obama that she did so only for political reasons.

Gates recalled a meeting on Oct. 26, 2009, to discuss whether to authorize a similar “surge” in Afghanistan, a position favored by both Defense Secretary Gates and Secretary of State Clinton, who supported an even higher number of troops than Gates did. But the Afghan “surge” faced skepticism from Vice President Joe Biden and other White House staffers.

Gates wrote that he and Clinton “were the only outsiders in the session, considerably outnumbered by White House insiders. Obama said at the outset to Hillary and me, ‘It’s time to lay our cards on the table, Bob, what do you think?’ I repeated a number of the main points I had made in my memo to him [urging three brigades].

“Hillary agreed with my overall proposal but urged the president to consider approving the fourth brigade combat team if the allies wouldn’t come up with the troops.”

In *Duty*, Gates cited his collaboration with Clinton as crucial to his success in getting Obama to agree to the Afghan troop escalation and the expanded goal of counterinsurgency. Referring to Clinton, Gates wrote, “we would develop a very strong partnership, in part because it turned out we agreed on almost every important issue.”

The hawkish Gates-Clinton tandem helped counter the more dovish team including Vice President Biden, several members of the National Security Council staff and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who tried to steer President Obama away from this deeper involvement.

Gates wrote, "I was confident that Hillary and I would be able to work closely together. Indeed, before too long, commentators were observing that in an administration where all power and decision making were gravitating to the White House, Clinton and I represented the only independent 'power center,' not least because, for very different reasons, we were both seen as 'un-fireable.'"

Political Expediency

Gates also reported on what he regarded as a stunning admission by Clinton, writing: "The exchange that followed was remarkable. In strongly supporting the surge in Afghanistan, Hillary told the president that her opposition to the surge in Iraq had been political because she was facing him in the Iowa primary [in 2008]. She went on to say, 'The Iraq surge worked.'

"The president conceded vaguely that opposition to the Iraq surge had been political. To hear the two of them making these admissions, and in front of me, was as surprising as it was dismaying." (Obama's aides disputed Gates's suggestion that the President indicated that his opposition to the Iraq "surge" was political, noting that he had always opposed the Iraq War. The Clinton team did not challenge Gates's account.)

But the exchange, as recounted by Gates, indicates that Clinton not only let her political needs dictate her position on an important national security issue, but that she accepts as true the superficial conventional wisdom about the "successful surge" in Iraq.

While that is indeed Official Washington's beloved interpretation in part because influential neocons believe the "surge" rehabilitated their standing after the WMD fiasco and the disastrous Iraq War the reality is that the Iraq "surge" never achieved its stated goal of buying time to reconcile the country's sectarian divides, which remain bloody to this day and helped create the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic State, which began as "Al Qaeda in Iraq."

The truth that Hillary Clinton apparently doesn't recognize is that the "surge" was only "successful" in that it delayed the ultimate American defeat until President Bush and his neocon cohorts had vacated the White House and the blame for the failure could be shifted, at least partly, to President Obama.

Other than sparing "war president" Bush the humiliation of having to admit defeat, the dispatching of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in early 2007 did little more than get nearly 1,000 additional Americans killed almost one-quarter of the war's total U.S. deaths along with what certainly was a much higher number of Iraqis.

For example, WikiLeaks's "Collateral Murder." video depicted one 2007 scene during the "surge" in which U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters news staffers, walking down a street in Baghdad. The attack helicopters then killed a Good Samaritan, when he stopped his van to take survivors to a hospital, and severely wounded two children in the van.

The Unsuccessful Surge

A more rigorous analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 apparently beyond Hillary Clinton's abilities or inclination would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the "surge" and were implemented in 2006 by Generals Casey and Abizaid.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid deployed a highly classified operation to eliminate key Al Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward Al Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the so-called "Awakening" in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the *de facto* ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves, thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the "surge" or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military's occupation indeed was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki insisted on and got a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush.

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that praised Bush's early war judgments, concluded that the "surge" was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence.

In his book, *The War Within*, Woodward wrote, "In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge."

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of Al Qaeda extremists in Anbar province and the surprise decision of

al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

However, in Washington, where the neocons remained very influential, the myth grew that Bush's "surge" had brought the violence under control. Gen. Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as the military genius who achieved "victory at last" in Iraq (as Newsweek declared).

Buying Fallacies

Even the inconvenient truths that the United States was unceremoniously ushered out of Iraq in 2011 and that Iraq's Shiite-Sunni divide widened into a chasm that has since spread divisions into Syria and even into Europe did not dent the cherished conventional wisdom about the "successful surge."

Yet, it is one thing for neocon pundits to promote such fallacies; it is another thing for the alleged Democratic front-runner for President in 2016 to believe this nonsense. And to say that she only opposed the "surge" out of a political calculation could border on disqualifying.

But the pattern fits with Clinton's previous decisions. She belatedly broke with the Iraq War during Campaign 2008 only when she realized that her hawkish stance was damaging her political chances against Obama, who had opposed the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Yet, as Secretary of State, Clinton sought to purge officials seen as insufficiently hawkish. After Obama hesitantly approved the Afghan "surge" and reportedly immediately regretted his decision Clinton took aim at Eikenberry, a retired general who had served in Afghanistan before being named ambassador.

Pressing for his removal, "Hillary had come to the meeting loaded for bear," Gates wrote. "She gave a number of specific examples of Eikenberry's insubordination to herself and her deputy. She said, 'He's a huge problem.'

"She went after the NSS [national security staff] and the White House staff, expressing anger at their direct dealings with Eikenberry and offering a number of examples of what she termed their arrogance, their efforts to control the civilian side of the war effort, their refusal to accommodate requests for meetings.

"As she talked, she became more forceful. 'I've had it,' she said, 'You want it [control of the civilian side of the war], I'll turn it all over to you and wash

my hands of it. I'll not be held accountable for something I cannot manage because of White House and NSS interference.'”

However, when the protests failed to get Eikenberry and General Douglas Lute, a deputy national security adviser, fired, Gates concluded that they had the protection of President Obama and reflected his doubts about the Afghan War policy:

“It had become clear that Eikenberry and Lute, whatever their shortcomings, were under an umbrella of protection at the White House. With Hillary and me so adamant that the two should leave, that protection could come only from the president.”

The Libya Fiasco

In 2011, Secretary of State Clinton also was a hawk on military intervention in Libya to oust (and ultimately kill) Muammar Gaddafi. However, on Libya, Defense Secretary Gates sided with the doves, feeling that the U.S. military was already overextended in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and another intervention risked further alienating the Muslim world.

This time, Gates found himself lined up with Biden “urging caution,” while Clinton joined with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and NSC aides Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power in “urging aggressive U.S. action to prevent an anticipated massacre of the rebels as Qaddafi fought to remain in power,” Gates wrote. “In the final phase of the internal debate, Hillary threw her considerable clout behind Rice, Rhodes and Power.”

President Obama again ceded to Clinton’s advocacy for war and supported a Western bombing campaign that enabled the rebels, including Islamic extremists with ties to Al Qaeda, to seize control of Tripoli and hunt down Gaddafi, who was tortured and executed on Oct. 20, 2011.

Clinton expressed, delight when she received the news of Gaddafi’s murder. “We came. We saw. He died,” she chortled, paraphrasing Julius Caesar’s boast after a victory by Imperial Rome.

After Clinton’s “victory,” Libya became a major source for regional instability, including an assault on the U.S. mission in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. personnel, an incident that Clinton has called the worst moment in her four years as Secretary of State. The Islamic State also gained a foothold inside Libya, chopping off the heads of Coptic Christians.

Gates retired from the Pentagon on July 1, 2011; Petraeus resigned as CIA

director on Nov. 9, 2012, amid a sex-and-secrets scandal; and Clinton stepped down at the State Department on Feb. 1, 2013, after Obama's reelection.

In 2013, with Clinton gone, Obama charted a more innovative foreign policy course, collaborating with Russian President Vladimir Putin to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs on Syria and Iran, rather than seeking military solutions. In both cases, Obama had to face down hawkish sentiments in his own administration and in Congress, as well as Israeli and Saudi opposition.

But the neocon empire struck back in 2014, with Assistant Secretary Nuland orchestrating a "regime change" in Ukraine on Russia's border and with the neocon-dominated opinion circles of Official Washington placing the blame for the Ukraine crisis on President Putin's "aggression."

Faced with this new "group think" and still influenced by liberal interventionist advisers such as Susan Rice and Samantha Power Obama joined the chorus of hate-talk against Putin, ratcheting up tensions with Russia and agreeing to escalate covert U.S. support for Syrian rebels seeking the long-held neocon goal of "regime change" in Syria.

However, Obama continued to collaborate behind the scenes with Russia to achieve an agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear program – to the dismay of the neocons who wanted instead to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran on their way to seeking another "regime change."

Bashing Iran

As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton was a hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue. In 2009-2010, when Iran first indicated a willingness to compromise, she led the opposition to any negotiated settlement and pushed for punishing sanctions.

To clear the route for sanctions, Clinton helped sink agreements tentatively negotiated with Iran to ship most of its low-enriched uranium out of the country. In 2009, Iran was refining uranium only to the level of about 3-4 percent, as needed for energy production. Its negotiators offered to swap much of that for nuclear isotopes for medical research.

But the Obama administration and the West rebuffed the Iranian gesture because it would have left Iran with enough enriched uranium to theoretically refine much higher up to 90 percent for potential use in a single bomb, though Iran insisted it had no such intention and U.S. intelligence agencies agreed.

Then, in spring 2010, Iran accepted another version of the uranium swap proposed by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey, with the apparent backing of President Obama. But that arrangement came under fierce attack by Secretary Clinton

and was derided by leading U.S. news outlets, including editorial writers at the New York Times who mocked Brazil and Turkey as being “played by Tehran.”

The ridicule of Brazil and Turkey as bumbling understudies on the world stage continued even after Brazil released Obama’s private letter to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva encouraging Brazil and Turkey to work out the deal. Despite the letter’s release, Obama didn’t publicly defend the swap and instead joined in scuttling the deal, another moment when Clinton and administration hardliners got their way.

That set the world on the course for tightened economic sanctions on Iran and heightened tensions that brought the region close to another war. As Israel threatened to attack, Iran expanded its nuclear capabilities by increasing enrichment to 20 percent to fill its research needs, moving closer to the level necessary for building a bomb.

Clinton’s Course

Ironically, the nuclear deal reached in late 2013 and solidified in 2015 essentially accepts Iran’s low-enrichment of uranium for peaceful purposes, pretty much where matters stood in 2009-2010. But the Israel Lobby quickly set to work, again, trying to torpedo the new Iran agreements by getting Congress to approve new sanctions on Iran.

Clinton remained noncommittal for several weeks as momentum for the sanctions bill grew, but she finally declared her support for President Obama’s opposition to the new sanctions. In a Jan. 26, 2014 [letter](#) to Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, she wrote:

“Now that serious negotiations are finally under way, we should do everything we can to test whether they can advance a permanent solution. As President Obama said, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed, while keeping all options on the table. The U.S. intelligence community has assessed that imposing new unilateral sanctions now ‘would undermine the prospects for a successful comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran.’ I share that view.”

One key question for a Clinton presidential candidacy has been whether she would build on the diplomatic foundation that Obama has laid regarding Iran and Russia, or dismantle it and return to a neocon foreign policy focused on “regime change” and catering to the views of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In her campaign’s latest comments, Hillary Clinton has made clear that she has little interest in deviating further from the Israeli-neocon prescribed hostility toward Iran by letting her campaign accuse Sanders of softness on Tehran.

So, with her once-solid polls numbers softening, she has decided to appeal to hawkish Democrats and the muscular support of the Israel Lobby to help her fend off the Sanders surge.

Clinton is rolling the dice in the belief that most Democrats won't think through the fallacious "group thinks" of Official Washington or will at least be scared and confused enough to steer away from Sanders. That way, Clinton believes she can still win the nomination.

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 Flack for Unsavory Saudis

Exclusive: Since Israel decided that Iran was its big enemy "[and made Saudi Arabia its quiet ally](#)" American neocons have fallen in line, demanding that the U.S. government punish Iran and coddle the Saudis whatever their unsavory behavior, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Bret Stephens, the deputy editorial page editor who writes *The Wall Street Journal's* weekly "Global View" column, is not really a bad prose stylist, and his logic is not always unsound. But his unexamined assumptions lead him astray.

His latest [installment](#) is typical. Entitled "Why the U.S. Should Stand by the Saudis Against Iran," it begins with not one premise, but two. The first, as the title suggest, is that the U.S. should stand by Riyadh in its time of woes. The second is that if the kingdom stumbles, only one person is to blame, President Obama.

The article opens on a promising note: "There is so much to detest about Saudi Arabia," Stephens writes. It bans women from driving, it shuts its doors to Syrian refugees, it promotes "a bigoted and brutal version of Sunni Islam," and it has "increased tensions with Iran by executing a prominent radical Shiite cleric, i.e., Nimr al-Nimr."

So why continue siding with a kingdom "that Israeli diplomat Dore Gold once called 'Hatred's Kingdom,'" Stephens asks, "especially when the administration

is also trying to pursue further opening [sic] with Tehran?"

It's a question that a lot of people are asking especially now that the collapse in oil prices means that the Saudis are less economically important than they once were. But Stephens says it would be wrong to abandon the kingdom "especially when it is under increasing economic strain from falling oil prices."□

Get that? It would be wrong to abandon the kingdom when oil is scarce and prices are high – because that's when we need the Saudis the most – and it's wrong to abandon the monarchy when oil is plentiful and prices are low when we need them the least. Oil, in other words, has nothing to do with it. It's wrong because it's wrong.

But Stephens thinks it's wrong for another reason as well: because Saudi Arabia "feels acutely threatened by a resurgent Iran." Why is Iran resurgent? Because the nuclear deal that it recently concluded with the U.S. has set it free from punishing economic sanctions.

He then goes on to list all the bad things Iran has done thanks to the power that the Obama administration has just handed it on a silver platter."Despite fond White House hopes that the nuclear deal would moderate Iran's behavior," Stephens says, "Tehran hard-liners wasted no time this week disqualifying thousands of moderate candidates from running in next month's parliamentary elections, and an Iranian-backed militia appears to be responsible for the recent kidnapping of three Americans in Iraq."□

Loaded Dice

Scary, eh? Yes, until one considers how Stephens has loaded the dice. His statement about Iran's hardliners is accurate as far as it goes. But he might have pointed out that while Iran's theocratic rulers certainly hobble democracy, they at least allow some sort of parliamentary elections to take place whereas Saudi Arabia, the regime he is now leaping to defend, allows exactly none. (Sorry, but last month's meaningless municipal-council elections don't count.)

In the Saudi kingdom, political parties, protests, even seminars in which intellectuals get to sound off are all *verboden*. Since March 2014, Saudis have been expressly forbidden to do anything that might undermine the status quo, including advocating atheism, criticizing Islam, participating in any form of political protest, or even joining a political party.

Stephens's statement about the three kidnapped Americans is equally misleading. While Iran does indeed back such militias, Reuters cited U.S. government sources saying that "Washington had no reason to believe Tehran was involved in the

kidnapping and did not believe the trio were being held in Iran.”

Plus, to follow Stephens’s logic, if Iran is responsible for specific actions like these, then Saudi Arabia is responsible for specific actions of the Sunni Salafist forces that it funds in Syria, which include lopping off the heads of Shi’ites and committing many other such atrocities.

Stephens says that the U.S.-Iranian accord “guarantees Iran a \$100 billion sanctions windfall,” a figure that the Council on Foreign Relations, no slouch when it comes to Iran bashing, describes as roughly double the true amount. He says Iran now enjoys “the protection of a major nuclear power” thanks to Russia’s intervention in Syria and agreement to supply Tehran with high-tech weaponry.

As a result, “Iranian proxies are active in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, and dominate much of southern Iraq. Restive Shiite populations in Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province and neighboring Bahrain provide further openings for Iranian subversion on the Arabian peninsula.”

Possibly so, except that Stephens might have noted that Saudi proxies, up to and including Al Qaeda, are active in the same countries and that Shi’ites in Bahrain and the Eastern Province might be a little less restive if Saudi repression were a little less savage.

Obama’s Fault

Then Stephens gets to his main point, which is the nefarious role of Obama:

“Add to this an American president who is ambivalent about the House of Saud the way Jimmy Carter was about the Shah of Iran, and no wonder Riyadh is acting the way it is. If the administration is now unhappy about the Saudi war in Yemen or its execution of Shiite radicals, it has only itself to blame.

“All this means that the right U.S. policy toward the Saudis is to hold them close and demonstrate serious support, lest they be tempted to continue freelancing their foreign policy in ways we might not like. It won’t happen in this administration, but a serious commitment to overthrow the Assad regime would be the place to start.”

In other words, if the Saudi monarchy chops off the heads of dissident Shi’ites and sentences liberal blogger Raif Badawi to a thousand lashes, it’s because Obama doesn’t show enough love. Ditto Yemen. If Saudi air raids have killed some 2,800 civilians according to the latest UN estimates, including more than 500 children, it’s because Obama has allowed his affections to flag for the Saudi royals. If only he would hug the Saudi princes a little closer, they wouldn’t

feel so lonely and bereft and would therefore respond more gently to their neighbors in the south. No blame should be cast on the Saudi leaders. Their behavior can't be blamed on the contradictions between their playboy lifestyles and the ascetic extremes of Wahhabism or the baleful effects of raking in untold oil riches while doing no work in return. No, everything's the fault of Obama and his yuppie ways.

What can one say about reasoning like this? Only that it makes Donald Trump and Ted Cruz seem like paragons of mental stability. But given that *The Wall Street Journal* has long filled its editorial pages with such swamp gas, why dwell on the feverish exhalations of just one right-wing columnist?

The answer is that Stephens speaks not just for himself, but for an entire neocon establishment that is beside itself over the mess in the Persian Gulf and desperate to avoid blame for the chaos (which is now spreading into Europe). So, talking points must be developed to shift responsibility.

The Lost Saudi Cause

But the Saudis may be beyond saving. With Iran preparing to put a million more barrels on the world oil market per day, prices, down better than 75 percent since mid-2014, can only go lower. The Saudis, hemorrhaging money at the rate of \$100 billion a year, know that when the foreign currency runs out, their power runs out too. Hence, they fear winding up as yet another failed Middle Eastern state like Syria.

"Islamic State and other jihadist groups would flourish," Stephens observes, this time correctly. "Iran would seek to extend its reach in the Arabian peninsula. The kingdom's plentiful stores of advanced Western military equipment would also fall into dangerous hands."□

It's not a pretty picture, which is why the neocons are pointing the fingers at others, Obama first and foremost. As Jim Lobe recently observed, all the usual suspects are pitching in in behalf of their Saudi friends, Elliott Abrams, Bill Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and so on. All are furious at what Obama administration has done to their beloved petro-sheiks.

As neocon theorist Max Book put it at the *Commentary Magazine* website: "The American policy should be clear: We should stand with the Saudis, and the Egyptians, and the Jordanians, and the Emiratis, and the Turks, and the Israelis [sic], and all of our other allies, to stop the new Persian Empire. But the Obama administration, morally and strategically confused, is instead coddling Iran in the vain hope that it will somehow turn Tehran from enemy into friend."

Something else is also at work, however, the I-word. As Lobe notes, neocons have

done an about-face with regard to the Saudis. Where Richard Perle once called on the Bush administration to include Riyadh on his post-9/11 hit list, the neocons are now firmly on the Saudis' side.

Why? The reason is Israel, which has decided since tangling with Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon War that the Shi'ites are its chief enemy and the Sunni petro-monarchies, comparatively speaking, its friend. Like Communists responding to the latest directive from Moscow, the neocons have turned on a dime as a consequence, churning out reams of propaganda in support of Arab countries they once loathed.

A Saudi Makeover

In the neocon domain, Saudi Arabia has undergone a wondrous makeover, transformed from a bastion of reaction and anti-Semitism to a country that is somehow peace-loving and progressive. Formerly an enemy of Washington, or at best a distasteful gang of business associates supplying lots of oil and buying lots of guns, Saudi Arabia has been re-invented as America's dearest friend in the Arab world.

People like Bret Stephens have done their bit in behalf of the cause, turning out article after article whose real purpose is hidden from view. Where neocons formerly scorned anyone who spoke well of the Saudis, they now denounce anyone who speaks ill.

The funny thing is that Obama *is* to blame for the disaster in the Middle East, not because he disregarded the latest *diktat* from the Washington neocon-dominated foreign-policy establishment, but because he has accepted its priorities all too dutifully. He stood by as Qatar steered hundreds of millions of dollars to Salafist jihadis in Libya and while the Saudis, Qataris, and other Gulf states did the same to Sunni fundamentalists in Syria.

Obama's response to Saudi Arabia's repression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain was muted, he refused to condemn the beheading of al-Nimr – the best the State Department could come up with was a statement declaring that the execution risked “exacerbating sectarian tensions at a time when they urgently need to be reduced” – and Obama has even given military support to the kingdom's air assault on Yemen.

Yet now the neocons blame him for not doing enough to keep the Saudis happy.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

Toward a More Subtle US Foreign Policy

Largely because Israel's right-wing government now considers Iran the great enemy and has a fonder view of Saudi Arabia, U.S. politicians and media have followed that lead, decrying Iranians and tolerating Saudis, but such simplistic thinking does not serve American interests well, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The dramatic and fast-moving events in U.S.-Iranian relations over the past few days underscore, among other lessons, the following two. One is that results matter. No matter how hard the naysayers have striven to say nay, they have offered no alternative to actual U.S. policy that could have yielded results as favorable.

And it's not as if there hasn't been ample experience to test what alternatives might have done. With regard to Iran's nuclear program, years of nothing but pressure and sanctions brought only years of an expanding program with ever more centrifuges spinning. It was only through engagement, negotiation and compromise that the most strenuous restrictions on, and monitoring of, a national nuclear program that have ever been negotiated were achieved.

As for Iranian-Americans who were unjustly imprisoned, they and perhaps others as well would have been imprisoned whether or not U.S.-Iranian relations were in a deep freeze. (A couple of the men just released by Iran had been arrested before the nuclear negotiations even began.) They were freed only because the relationship thawed.

As for the naval encounter in the Persian Gulf, despite the erroneous attempts by critics of the administration to depict as an Iranian provocation an incident that instead consisted of U.S. Navy craft making a still not fully explained incursion into Iranian territorial waters, it is hard to imagine an outcome as favorable as the one that ensued if there were not the diplomatic channel, established in the course of the nuclear negotiations, to achieve that outcome. Again, past experience strongly suggests that with a frozen relationship the outcome would have been worse.

A second major lesson concerns the mistake of treating relations with any country customarily labeled as an adversary as if the entire relationship were zero-sum, leading to policies that try to oppose the other country at every turn, no matter what that country is doing and no matter how what it is doing

actually does or does not relate to U.S. interests.

This mistake has arisen regarding U.S. policies toward some other countries besides Iran. Joshua Kurlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations makes a thoughtful argument in a recent [article](#) that the Obama administration has committed this mistake in its policy toward China, in which the administration's "Asia strategy has been to fear and combat nearly every move by China to flex its muscles."

The ill-advised nature of such a strategy is illustrated by the feckless U.S. attempt to dissuade other states from participating in the new China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. A better strategy, says Kurlantzick, would be to save opposition to China for those issues on which Beijing's behavior really does run up against important U.S. interests, such as the unjustified Chinese attempt to stake vast territorial claims in the South China Sea.

On Iran, the corresponding mistake has been made not by the Obama administration but instead by its critics who believe that Iran ought to be opposed everywhere, all the time, no matter what it is doing, thus treating anything in Iran's interests as if it were by definition against U.S. interests.

Some of the chief underpinnings of this posture have to do with idiosyncrasies of current American politics: the influence of the right-wing Israeli government, which wants to keep Iran forever ostracized [for reasons that do not correspond to U.S. interests](#); and the impulse in the Republican Party to oppose anything Obama proposes.

Also underlying the posture, however, is a more general American tendency to view the outside world in black-and-white terms with a rigid division between foes and friends. The Obama administration has pushed back against these tendencies with its nuclear diplomacy on Iran, but the tendencies are so strong that the administration still has had to bow to some of the Iran-is-always-bad mindset as a way of husbanding its political capital and protecting its most important achievements.

The oppose-an-adversary-everywhere approach is harmful to U.S. interests in several respects, starting with the fostering of a mistaken view of exactly what those interests are. They are not really zero-sum vis-a-vis China, Iran or any other country. The first step in upholding U.S. interests is to have a clear and undistorted view of the interests themselves.

The zero-sum approach impedes fruitful cooperation with the other country in question. This means not only the big initiatives (such as the Shanghai Communiqué with China and the nuclear agreement with Iran) but much else

besides. The Obama administration, despite being overeager to counterpunch Beijing in Asia, has gotten some useful cooperation from China on climate change and the negotiation of the Iran agreement.

But there is plenty more such cooperation that is needed; the handling of North Korea probably tops the list. With Iran, beyond nuclear matters the most prominent current area of shared interest where cooperation is important is opposition to ISIS and similar violent Sunni extremism.

The inclination to oppose the other state across the map gets the United States into costly and disadvantageous commitments. Kurlantzick mentions, for example, some questionable U.S. policies in Southeast Asia that stem from the inclination to oppose Chinese influence everywhere.

In the Middle East, the often-asserted and very incorrect theme that Iran is “destabilizing the region” and that its influence must be countered everywhere has led to such mistakes as U.S. support for the ineffective and destructive (and deplorable on humanitarian grounds) Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.

Economic sanctions, as a favorite tool of those who want to take a uniformly negative approach to a country labeled as an adversary, have come to be treated as if they were a positive thing in their own right. It is as if schadenfreude were a U.S. national interest. It isn't.

The United States gains no benefit from economic weakness in Iran, China or elsewhere. (For a reminder, check what your stock portfolio has done since the start of the year.) In important respects the United States has an interest in healthy economies in those and other places. And U.S.-imposed sanctions inflict direct harm on the United States itself.

Lost sight of long ago in many discussions in the United States about sanctions against Iran is that they are of no good to the United States at all except insofar as they shape Iranian motivations to do something such as agree to major restrictions on Iran's nuclear program.

The prisoner exchange needs to be seen in this light. The men released by the United States were charged with no offense other than violation of U.S.-imposed economic sanctions against Iran, and in particular the nuclear-related sanctions, which have served their purpose with implementation of the nuclear agreement and are no longer of use. In this respect what the United States gave up in the swap was minimal indeed.

The zero-sum approach of opposing everything the other country does fails to take account of internal political competition in that country. Such disregard of the other side's domestic politics tends to work to the disadvantage of U.S.

objectives.

In this respect, the prisoner release is an important statement about the state of play of political contests inside the Iranian regime. Strong forces that for their own reasons resist a thawing of the relationship with the United States are still part of that regime.

Those hardline elements, which have largely had control of the Iranian judiciary, were responsible for the original incarceration of the prisoners who were freed. Release of those prisoners indicates that the more moderate and progressive elements in the regime, including President Rouhani, have gained enough influence and won enough internal arguments to bring about the release. Rouhani and his allies will be able to retain such influence only as long as they can demonstrate that cooperation with the United States rather than confrontation pays off for Iran.

If U.S. policy were to change in a direction that made it harder for the moderates to win such arguments, then we would see Iran taking more dual-national prisoners and releasing fewer of them.

Currently there does not appear to be a comparable internal political dynamic in China. Control and stifling of dissent seem to be watchwords of the regime under Xi Jinping. But perhaps someday, if political pressures in China catch up with economic change, the issue may be germane there, too. U.S. policy can matter, not in stoking counterrevolution but in helping to shape political evolution.

The black-and-white approach to foes and friends makes it seem easy to think about relationships that actually are complicated. And some primal urge gets satisfied by sticking it to someone we've decided we don't like. But that's a poor way to advance our own nation's interests.

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.)

Turning Change into Chaos

Early U.S. presidents warned that foreign entanglements could endanger the Republic, but it turns out that modern U.S. interventions are hazardous to the rest of the world as well, achieving neither democracy nor human rights, while spreading chaos and death, a tragic turn addressed by ex-CIA official Graham E.

Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

A renowned Arab religious scholar in the Fourteenth Century, ibn Taymiyya, is sometimes quoted as saying, *Al-zulm afdal 'ala al-fawda*, "oppression is to be favored over anarchy."

Although ibn Taymiyya was no establishment figure in his time, this perspective was welcomed by all rulers since it provided explicit religious justification in support of arbitrary and often oppressive authority.

Maybe there's not a lot new here: all rulers at all times and all places like to wrap themselves in the robes of religious, ethnic or patriotic legitimacy in order to maintain power.

But there's something else: ibn Taymiyya lived in a period when the holocaust of the Mongol invasions was sweeping across Asia and into the Middle East sowing destruction. It was a time of fear, widespread violence and war, calling for political caution. Sound familiar?

Is this thought, then, the product of a political reactionary? Or does it represent a fundamental insight into basic human psychology? Which of us, when confronted with anarchy in the streets, possibly getting murdered or kidnapped while simply going out to buy a loaf of bread, might not prefer authoritarian crackdown to unbridled chaos; where just staying alive is the best we can hope for in a precarious political and social environment?

Ask Iraqis who got liberated from Saddam Hussein, or Libyans liberated from Gaddafi. Or Syrians today. Might the ugliness of the earlier dictatorships not look better, where at least if you stayed totally out of politics your lives were fairly safe and predictable?

After all, when life, family, the social order and survival are at stake, our basic political values can get pretty rock-bottom conservative.

Sadly, these words from the Fourteenth Century Muslim world may be disturbingly relevant to today. It's part of a political debate that reverberates through all of human history.

At the level of states, great powers tend to prefer order, virtually any kind of order, to chaos in the world in which they operate. That's how dictators thrive and gain external support; even democratic states value foreign dictators who can keep the lid on.

The U.S. has rarely shrunk from supporting ugly dictators or regimes if it believed it to be “in the national interest.” (Unless that specific regime happens to be directly anti-American in which case terror, destabilization, or overthrow is welcomed.)

The U.S. is not especially worse than other major powers in this respect, but its global reach means that it engages in this particular kind of hypocrisy more widely and frequently than most other states.

But the chaos that flowed out of the U.S. overthrow of Saddam in Iraq, Gaddafi in Libya, and efforts to overthrow Assad in Syria, has not only inflicted massive suffering on the populations of those countries, but has left Washington (and the European Union) worse off than before, and spawned ISIS out of Iraqi and Syrian turmoil.

President Obama wisely decided not to go that same route a fourth time in recently deciding that likely alternatives to Bashar al-Assad would be worse than Assad himself. (Obama’s “liberal interventionist” advisors were not happy.)

So, is oppression more tolerable than anarchy? And for whom? It seems even European and American publics, hardly experiencing anything at home that could remotely be called anarchy, are still willing now to ratchet up the level of police, military and intelligence surveillance powers to avoid even the possibility of any kind of terror incident.

People will pay nearly any price if they believe it might make them safer. You don’t have to be a Fourteenth Century Muslim cleric to make that observation. So what is the message here, then?

One message is that liberalism is a delicate flower. We are disinclined to be more generous, open, tolerant or broad-minded when conditions are dangerous. We see this clearly in Western politics today, in the U.S. presidential debates, or in the mood of European societies in the face of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. Multi-culturalism and tolerance become unwelcome words.

It’s not just Muslims who think this way. It’s Chinese as well who have gone through political, economic and social hell for half a century of communist experimentation before emerging into the present era of relative prosperity and order under a Chinese government that runs a tight ship.

Nobody wants to hear suggestions for an overthrow of the neo-communist order there. Don’t rock the boat, let’s cherish and preserve what we have painfully gained and work for political progress, if any, only through baby steps. Few will risk known stability in the hope of gaining some abstract and untested improvements.

Along similar lines, why don't Muslims call for huge overhaul of their interpretations of Islam in contemporary Middle Eastern states? When bullets are flying, calls for social and theological change is unthinkable; it's safer not to address such volatile issues.

These arguments about order are fundamental to the philosophic conservative vision, the true conservative vision and not the grotesque caricature of conservatism that has hijacked most of the Republican Party in the U.S. today.

In the end almost all of us embrace this conservative principle to some extent: don't rock the boat if you have a lot to lose. What we disagree about is how to interpret "rocking the boat" or "having a lot to lose." It's all a matter of degree. What risks will we take, what experiments will we undertake, for what putative gain?

I write these words with some trepidation since this conservative political philosophy has been exploited and used to justify atrocious policies on the part of all kinds of dictators around the world, as well as justifying unacceptable foreign policies of the U.S.

Looking at the world around us today, it looks like we are entering a new conservative age globally, driven by fear of chaos and the increasing spread of violence across so much of the world. Ibn Taymiyya would have recognized this phenomenon immediately.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is "Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan." (Amazon, Kindle)

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