

# The Orwellian War on Skepticism

**Special Report:** Official Washington's rush into an Orwellian future is well underway as political and media bigwigs move to silence Internet voices of independence and dissent, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Under the cover of battling "fake news," the mainstream U.S. news media and officialdom are taking aim at journalistic skepticism when it is directed at the pronouncements of the U.S. government and its allies.

One might have hoped that the alarm about "fake news" would remind major U.S. news outlets, such as The Washington Post and The New York Times, about the value of journalistic skepticism. However, instead, it seems to have done the opposite.

The idea of questioning the claims by the West's officialdom now brings calumny down upon the heads of those who dare do it. "Truth" is being redefined as whatever the U.S. government, NATO and other Western interests say is true. Disagreement with the West's "group thinks," no matter how fact-based the dissent is, becomes "fake news."

So, we have the case of Washington Post columnist David Ignatius having a starry-eyed interview with Richard Stengel, the State Department's Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, the principal arm of U.S. government propaganda.

Entitled "The truth is losing," [the column](#) laments that the official narratives as deigned by the State Department and The Washington Post are losing traction with Americans and the world's public.

Stengel, a former managing editor at Time magazine, seems to take aim at Russia's RT network's slogan, "question more," as some sinister message seeking to inject cynicism toward the West's official narratives.

"They're not trying to say that their version of events is the true one. They're saying: 'Everybody's lying! Nobody's telling you the truth!'," Stengel said. "They don't have a candidate, per se. But they want to undermine faith in democracy, faith in the West."

## No Evidence

Typical of these recent mainstream tirades about this vague Russian menace, Ignatius's column doesn't provide any specifics regarding how RT and other

Russian media outlets are carrying out this assault on the purity of Western information. It's enough to just toss around pejorative phrases supporting an Orwellian solution, which is to stamp out or marginalize alternative and independent journalism, not just Russian.

Ignatius writes: "Stengel poses an urgent question for journalists, technologists and, more broadly, everyone living in free societies or aspiring to do so. How do we protect the essential resource of democracy – the truth – from the toxin of lies that surrounds it? It's like a virus or food poisoning. It needs to be controlled. But how?"

"Stengel argues that the U.S. government should sometimes protect citizens by exposing 'weaponized information, false information' that is polluting the ecosystem. But ultimately, the defense of truth must be independent of a government that many people mistrust. 'There are inherent dangers in having the government be the verifier of last resort,' he argues."

By the way, Stengel is not the fount of truth-telling, as he and Ignatius like to pretend. Early in the Ukraine crisis, Stengel delivered a rant against RT that was full of inaccuracies or what you might call "fake news."

Yet, what Stengel and various mainstream media outlets appear to be arguing for is the creation of a "Ministry of Truth" managed by mainstream U.S. media outlets and enforced by Google, Facebook and other technology platforms.

In other words, once these supposedly responsible outlets decide what the "truth" is, then questioning that narrative will earn you "virtual" expulsion from the marketplace of ideas, possibly eliminated via algorithms of major search engines or marked with a special app to warn readers not to believe what you say, a sort of yellow Star of David for the Internet age.

And then there's the possibility of more direct (and old-fashioned) government enforcement by launching FBI investigations into media outlets that won't toe the official line. (All of these "solutions" have been advocated in recent weeks.)

On the other hand, if you do toe the official line that comes from Stengel's public diplomacy shop, you stand to get rewarded with government financial support. Stengel disclosed in his interview with Ignatius that his office funds "investigative" journalism projects.

"How should citizens who want a fact-based world combat this assault on truth?" Ignatius asks, adding: "Stengel has approved State Department programs that teach investigative reporting and empower truth-tellers."

## Buying Propaganda

After reading Ignatius's column on Wednesday, I submitted a question to the State Department asking for details on this "journalism" and "truth-telling" funding that is coming from the U.S. government's top propaganda shop, but I have not received an answer.

But we do know that the U.S. government has been investing tens of millions of dollars in various media programs to undergird Washington's desired narratives.

For instance, in May 2015, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) issued a fact sheet summarizing its work financing friendly journalists around the world, including "journalism education, media business development, capacity building for supportive institutions, and strengthening legal-regulatory environments for free media."

USAID estimated its budget for "media strengthening programs in over 30 countries" at \$40 million annually, including aiding "independent media organizations and bloggers in over a dozen countries," In Ukraine before the 2014 coup ousting elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installing a fiercely anti-Russian and U.S.-backed regime, USAID offered training in "mobile phone and website security," skills that would have been quite helpful to the coup plotters.

USAID, working with currency speculator George Soros's Open Society, also has funded the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which engages in "investigative journalism" that usually goes after governments that have fallen into disfavor with the United States and then are singled out for accusations of corruption. The USAID-funded OCCRP collaborates with Bellingcat, an online investigative website founded by blogger Eliot Higgins.

Higgins has spread misinformation on the Internet, including discredited claims implicating the Syrian government in the sarin attack in 2013 and directing an Australian TV news crew to what appeared to be the wrong location for a video of a BUK anti-aircraft battery as it supposedly made its getaway to Russia after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014.

Despite his dubious record of accuracy, Higgins has gained mainstream acclaim, in part, because his "findings" always match up with the propaganda theme that the U.S. government and its Western allies are peddling. Higgins is now associated with the Atlantic Council, a pro-NATO think tank which is partially funded by the U.S. State Department.

Beyond funding from the State Department and USAID, tens of millions of dollars more are flowing through the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for

Democracy, which was started in 1983 under the guiding hand of CIA Director William Casey.

NED became a slush fund to help finance what became known, inside the Reagan administration, as “perception management,” the art of controlling the perceptions of domestic and foreign populations.

### **The Emergence of StratCom**

Last year, as the New Cold War heated up, NATO created the Strategic Communications Command in Latvia to further wage information warfare against Russia and individuals who were contesting the West’s narratives.

As veteran war correspondent Don North reported in 2015 regarding this new StratCom, “the U.S. government has come to view the control and manipulation of information as a ‘soft power’ weapon, merging psychological operations, propaganda and public affairs under the catch phrase ‘strategic communications.’”

“This attitude has led to treating psy-ops – manipulative techniques for influencing a target population’s state of mind and surreptitiously shaping people’s perceptions – as just a normal part of U.S. and NATO’s information policy.”

Now, the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress are moving to up the ante, passing new legislation to escalate “information warfare.”

On Wednesday, U.S. congressional negotiators approved \$160 million to combat what they deem foreign propaganda and the alleged Russian campaign to spread “fake news.” The measure is part of the National Defense Authorization Act and gives the State Department the power to identify “propaganda” and counter it.

This bipartisan stampede into an Orwellian future for the American people and the world’s population follows a shoddily sourced Washington Post article that relied on a new anonymous group that identified some 200 Internet sites, including some of the most prominent American independent sources of news, as part of a Russian propaganda network.

Typical of this new McCarthyism, the report lacked evidence that any such network actually exists but instead targeted cases where American journalists expressed skepticism about claims from Western officialdom.

Consortiumnews.com was included on the list apparently because we have critically analyzed some of the claims and allegations regarding the crises in Syria and Ukraine, rather than simply accept the dominant Western “group thinks.”

Also on the “black list” were such quality journalism sites as Counterpunch, Truth-out, Truthdig, Naked Capitalism and ZeroHedge along with many political sites ranging across the ideological spectrum.

### **The Fake-News Express**

Normally such an unfounded conspiracy theory would be ignored, but – because The Washington Post treated the incredible allegations as credible – the smear has taken on a life of its own, reprised by cable networks and republished by major newspapers.

But the unpleasant truth is that the mainstream U.S. news media is now engaged in its own fake-news campaign about “fake news.” It’s publishing bogus claims invented by a disreputable and secretive outfit that just recently popped up on the Internet. If that isn’t “fake news,” I don’t know what is.

Yet, despite the Post’s clear violations of normal journalistic practices, surely, no one there will pay a price, anymore than there was accountability for the Post reporting as flat fact that Iraq was hiding WMD in 2002-2003. Fred Hiatt, the editorial-page editor most responsible for that catastrophic “group think,” is still in the same job today.

Two nights ago, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews featured the spurious Washington Post article in a segment that – like similar rehashes –didn’t bother to get responses from the journalists being slandered.

I found that ironic since Matthews repeatedly scolds journalists for their failure to look skeptically at U.S. government claims about Iraq possessing WMD as justification for the disastrous Iraq War. However, now Matthews joins in smearing journalists who have applied skepticism to U.S. and Western propaganda claims about Syria and/or Ukraine.

While the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament begin to take action to shut down or isolate dissident sources of information – all in the name of “democracy” – a potentially greater danger is that mainstream U.S. news outlets are already teaming up with technology companies, such as Google and Facebook, to impose their own determinations about “truth” on the Internet.

Or, as Ignatius puts it in his column reflecting Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Stengel’s thinking, “The best hope may be the global companies that have created the social-media platforms.

“‘They see this information war as an existential threat,’ says Stengel. ... The real challenge for global tech giants is to restore the currency of truth. Perhaps ‘machine learning’ [presumably a reference to algorithms] can identify

falsehoods and expose every argument that uses them. Perhaps someday, a human-machine process will create what Stengel describes as a ‘global ombudsman for information.’”

## **Ministry of Truth**

An organization of some 30 mainstream media companies already exists, including not only The Washington Post and The New York Times but also the Atlantic Council-connected Bellingcat, as the emerging arbiters – or ombudsmen – for truth, something Orwell described less flatteringly as a “Ministry of Truth.”

The New York Times has even editorialized in support of Internet censorship, using the hysteria over “fake news” to justify the marginalization or disappearance of dissident news sites.

It now appears that this 1984-ish “MiniTrue” will especially target journalistic skepticism when applied to U.S. government and mainstream media “group thinks.”

Yet, in my four decades-plus in professional journalism, I always understood that skepticism was a universal journalistic principle, one that should be applied in all cases, whether a Republican or a Democrat is in the White House or whether some foreign leader is popular or demonized.

As we have seen in recent years, failure to ask tough questions and to challenge dubious claims from government officials and mainstream media outlets can get lots of people killed, both U.S. soldiers and citizens of countries invaded or destabilized by outsiders.

To show skepticism is not the threat to democracy that Undersecretary Stengel and columnist Ignatius appear to think it is.

Whether you like or dislike RT’s broadcasts – or more likely have never seen one – a journalist really can’t question its slogan: “question more.” Questioning is the essence of journalism and, for that matter, democracy.

[In protest of the Post’s smearing of independent journalists, RootsAction has undertaken a petition drive, which can be found here.]

**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).**

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# The 'Hybrid War' of Economic Sanctions

U.S. politicians love the “silver bullet” of economic sanctions to punish foreign adversaries, but the weapon’s overuse is driving China and Russia to develop countermeasures, as British diplomat Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told a large group of people in the holy city of Mashhad on Sunday that “The Americans did not act on what they promised in the [Iranian] nuclear accord [the JCPOA]; they did not do what they should have done. According to Foreign Minister [Javad Zarif], they brought something on paper but prevented materialization of the objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran through many diversionary ways.”

This statement during the Supreme Leader’s key *Nowruz* (New Year) address should be understood as a flashing amber light: it was no rhetorical flourish. And it was not a simple dig at America (as some may suppose). It was perhaps more of a gentle warning to the Iranian government to “take care” of the possible political consequences.

What is happening is significant: for whatever motive, the U.S. Treasury is busy emptying much of the JCPOA sanctions relief of any real substance (and their motive is something which deserves careful attention). The Supreme Leader also noted that Iran is experiencing difficulties in repatriating its formerly frozen, external funds.

U.S. Treasury officials, since “implementation” day, have been doing the rounds, warning European banks that the U.S. sanctions on Iran remain in place, and that European banks should not think, even for a second, of tapping the dollar or euro bond markets in order to finance trade with Iran, or to become involved with financing infrastructure projects in Iran.

Banks well understand the message: touch Iranian commerce and you will be whacked with a billion dollar fine – against which there is no appeal, no clear legal framework – and no argument countenanced. The banks (understandably) are shying off. Not a single bank or financial lending institution turned up when Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Paris to hold meetings with the local business élite.

The influential *Keyhan* Iranian newspaper wrote on March 14 on this matter that: “Speaking at the UN General Assembly session in September, Rouhani stated: ‘Today a new phase of relations has started in Iran’s relations with the world.’”

He also stated in a live radio and television discussion with the people on 23 *Tir*: 'The step-by-step implementation of this document could slowly remove the bricks of the wall of mistrust.'

*Keyhan* continues: "These remarks were made at a time when the Western side, headed by America, does not have any intention to remove or even shorten the wall of mistrust between itself and Iran. ... Moreover, they are delaying the implementation of their JCPOA commitments. Lifting the sanctions has remained *merely as a promise on a piece of paper*, so much so that it has roused the protest of Iranian politicians.

"The American side is promoting conditions in such a way that today even European banks and companies do not dare to establish financial relations with Iran – since all of them fear America's reaction in the form of sanctions [imposed on those same banks]. Actually, the reason for the delay in the commencement of the European banks' financial cooperation with the Iranian banks and the failure to facilitate banking and economic transactions, is because many of the American sanctions are still in place, and Iranian banks' financial transactions are [still] facing restrictions. Moreover, given their continuing fear of the biting legislations and penalties for violations of the Americans' old sanctions, European financial institutions are concerned about violating the American sanctions that continue to be in force ...

"It is pointless to expect the US administration to cooperate with Iran given the comments of the US officials, including [National Security Advisor] Susan Rice, since the Americans' comments and behaviour reveal their non-compliance with their obligations and speak of the absence of the US administration's political will to implement even its minimum obligations."

Here *Keyhan* is specifically referring to Susan Rice's observation to Jeffrey Goldberg in *the Atlantic* that, "The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the US and Iran. The aim was very simply to make a dangerous country less dangerous. No one had any expectation that Iran would be a more benign actor."

*Keyhan* continues: "Any action on the international scene calls for suitable and appropriate reaction. Therefore, we cannot expect a government like the US administration that seizes every single opportunity to restrict our country, to lift the sanctions. Rice's recent comments are only a small part of the increasing anti-Iranian rhetoric of the American officials in recent months. These remarks should actually be regarded as a sign ... that the dream of the JCPOA is nothing but wishful thinking and far from reality." (Emphasis added).

The Supreme Leader's nudge therefore was intended for the ears of the



government: Do not build too much politically on this accord: beware its foundations may turn out to be built on sand.

### **'Silver Bullet' Worries**

Recently U.S. Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew gave a talk at *Carnegie*, on the Evolution of Sanctions and Lessons for the Future, on which David Ignatius commented: "Economic sanctions have become the 'silver bullet' of American foreign policy over the past decade, because they're cheaper and more effective in compelling adversaries than traditional military power. But Jack Lew warns of a 'risk of overuse' that could neuter the sanctions weapon and harm America. His caution against overuse comes as some Republican members of Congress are fighting to maintain U.S. sanctions on the Iranian nuclear program despite last year's deal limiting that Iranian threat."

So what is going on here? If Lew is warning against sanction overreach, why is it that it is precisely his department that is the one that is so assiduously undermining sanctions relief for Iran – "particularly since Lew's larger point is that sanctions won't work if countries don't get the reward they were promised – in the removal of sanctions – once they accede to U.S. Demands", in the paraphrase by Ignatius himself?

One reason for this apparent contradiction implicit in Lew's remarks probably is China: Recall that when China's stock markets were in freefall and hemorrhaging foreign exchange, as it sought to support the Yuan – China blamed the U.S. Fed (U.S. Reserve Bank) for its problems – and promptly was derided for making such an "outlandish" accusation.

Actually, what the Fed was then doing was stating its intent to raise interest rates (for the best of motives naturally!) – just as those, such as Goldman Sachs, have been advising. U.S. Corporate and bank profits are sliding badly, and in "times of financial depletion," as the old adage goes, "bringing capital home becomes the priority" – and a strong dollar does exactly that.

But the Peoples' Bank of China (PBOC) did a bit more than just whine about the Fed actions, it reacted: *It allowed the Yuan to weaken*, which induced turmoil across a global financial world (already concerned about China's economic slowing); then raised the Yuan value to squeeze out speculation, betting on further falls in the Yuan; then let it weaken again as the Fed comments started to slide in favor of interest rate hikes, and a strong dollar – until finally, as *Zero Hedge* has noted:

"It appeared the messaging from The People's Bank Of China to The Fed was heard loud and understood. Having exercised its will to weaken the Yuan (implying

turmoil is possible), Janet Yellen (Fed Chair) delivered the dovish goods [i.e. indicated that global conditions trumped the advice of the likes of Goldman Sachs to strengthen the dollar], and so China ‘allowed’ the Yuan to rally back. In a double-whammy for everyone involved, the biggest 3-day strengthening of the Yuan fix since 2005 also pushed the Yuan forwards, back to their richest relative to spot since Aug 2014 – once again showing their might against the dastardly speculative shorts.”

In short, the Ignatius’s “silver bullet” of foreign policy (the U.S. Treasury Wars against any potential competitor to U.S. political or financial hegemony) is facing a growing “hybrid” financial war, just as NATO has been complaining that it is having to adjust to “hybrid” conventional war – from the likes of Russia.

So, as the U.S. tries to expand its reach, for example by claiming legal jurisdiction over the Bank of China, and by blacklisting one of China’s largest telecom companies, thus forbidding any U.S. company from doing business with China’s ZTE, China is pushing back. It has just demonstrated convincingly that U.S. Treasury “silver bullets” can fall short.

This, we think, may have been Lew’s point – one directed, possibly, at Congress, which has become truly passionate about its new-found “neutron bomb” (as a former Treasury official described its geo-financial warfare).

In respect to Russia, this is important: Russia and America seem to be edging towards some sort of “grand bargain” over Syria (and possibly Ukraine too), which is likely to involve the Europeans lifting, in mid-2016, their sanctions imposed on Russia. But again, the U.S. is likely nonetheless to maintain its own sanctions (or even add to them, as some in the U.S. Congress are arguing).

So, if Russia, like Iran and China become disenchanted with promises of U.S. sanctions relaxation – then, as the *Keyhan* author noted, a suitable and appropriate (i.e. adverse) reaction, will ensue.

### **Boomerang Effect**

What the Fed and Lew seem to have assimilated is that the U.S. and European economies are now so vulnerable and volatile that China and Russia can, as it were, whack-back at America – especially where China and Russia co-ordinate strategically. Yellen specifically signaled “weakening world growth” and “less confidence in the renormalization process” as reasons for the Fed backtrack.

Ironically, David Ignatius in his article gives the game away: Lew is not going soft, saying that the US needs to use its tools more prudently; far from it. His point is different, and Ignatius exposes it inadvertently:

“U.S. power flows from our unmatched military might, yes. But in a deeper way, it’s a product of the dominance of the U.S. economy. Anything that expands the reach of U.S. markets – such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership in trade, for example – adds to the arsenal of U.S. power. Conversely, U.S. power is limited by measures that drive business away from America, *or allow other nations to build a rival financial architecture that’s less encumbered by a smorgasbord of sanctions.*”

This latter point precisely is what is frightening Lew and Ignatius. The tables are turning: in fact, the U.S. and Europe may be becoming more vulnerable to retaliation (e.g. Europe, with Russia’s retaliatory sanctions on European agricultural products) than China and Russia are, to unilateral Treasury or Fed warfare.

*This is the new hybrid war* (and not the hot air issuing from NATO). Lew and Ignatius know that a parallel “architecture” is under construction, and that Congress’ addiction to new sanctions is just speeding it into place.

So, why then is the U.S. Treasury so zealous in undermining the effectiveness of JCPOA’s agreed lifting of sanctions? Well, probably because Iran has less leverage over the global financial system than either China or Russia. But also perhaps, because “Iran sanctions” are (erroneously) viewed by U.S. leaders as the Treasury’s “jewel in its crown” of geo-financial success.

What may be missing from this hubristic interpretation, however, is the understanding that Iran’s experience will not be lost on the others, nor on the SCO when it convenes its next meetings on how to combat Western “color revolution” operations (with Iran likely joining that organization as a member, rather than an observer, this summer).

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## Fearing Sanders as ‘Closet Realist’

**Exclusive:** To Washington’s neocons like David Ignatius, Sen. Sanders should be

disqualified as a presidential candidate for being a “closet realist.” Sanders seems not to accept their forced “regime change” in Syria, nor their plans for more “nation building” like the neocon handiwork in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

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

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

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

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

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

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

If Americans still had pitchforks, they should have chased down this arrogant elite for inflicting so much pain and bloodshed on both the people of these tragic countries and on the U.S. soldiers who were dispatched so casually to make the benighted policies work. There’s also the little issue of the trillions of dollars in taxpayers’ money wasted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This strange reality underscores reporting by Mideast expert Gareth Porter who [wrote](#) that “Information from a wide range of sources, including some of those the United States has been explicitly supporting, makes it clear that every armed anti-Assad organization unit in those provinces [around Aleppo] is engaged in a military structure controlled by Nusra militants. All of these rebel groups fight alongside the Nusra Front and coordinate their military activities with it.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Risking Nuclear War for Al Qaeda.”](#)]

**Believing in Unicorns**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Sniffing Out ‘Realism’**

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

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

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

That’s right, how scary would it be if there was a “realist” in the White House?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## Letting US ‘Lead’ Against Islamic State

America’s Mideast “allies” are less eager to take on Islamic State terrorists themselves than to urge the U.S. military to do so, raising questions about whether much of today’s campaign-trail tough-guy/gal talk about Washington taking the lead really means doing the dirty work for Saudi Arabia, Israel and others, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

A recent [column](#) by David Ignatius contains an important insight about how different countries perceive their roles in countering the extremist group known as ISIS. Ignatius observed a table-top war game at Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies. The game scenario involved ISIS seizing control of a province in southern Syria and conducting cross-border attacks that inflict casualties on the armed forces of both Israel and Jordan.

The teams playing the roles of the Israeli and Jordanian governments both acted with restraint, hoping not to be drawn deeply into the Syrian war. The Israeli team retaliated for ISIS killing its soldiers but did not initiate any major military operations. The Jordanian team was looking for the Syrian regime and its Russian backer to use force to eject ISIS from its new position in southern Syria.





The Israeli team was led by a retired general who previously headed the planning staff of the Israel Defense Forces. Ignatius confirmed with a later visit to Israeli military headquarters that the game accurately reflected how Israel's actual military leaders currently view the war in Syria. He cites a senior Israeli military official as saying that if Israel wanted to launch a major ground offensive against ISIS forces in southern Syria (as well as ISIS-connected militants in the Sinai Peninsula), it could wipe out the ISIS forces in three or four hours.

"But," the official continued, "what would happen the day after? Right now, we think it will be worse." That is a terse but correct statement of the key question and main problem involved in any ideas at the present time about escalating the use of force in an effort to destroy ISIS.

When it comes to how most Israeli officials talk about the U.S. role, however, they say something different. According to Ignatius, "They argue that the United States is a superpower, and that if it wants to maintain leadership in the region, it must lead the fight to roll back the Islamic State."

That's not leadership; it would be, among other things, a free rider problem.

It's not just the Israelis and Jordanians who are thinking along such lines. Although U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter says, "I have personally reached out to the ministers of defense in over forty countries around the world to ask them to contribute to enhancing the fight against ISIL," the *New York Times* reports that "the United States has had little success in persuading allies to provide more troops."

It is quite rational and unsurprising for other countries to behave as they have

on this issue, both because of the long-term prospects for ineffectiveness that the Israeli official noted and as a matter of burden-shifting.

As Ignatius puts it, "Most players still want to hold America's coat while the United States does the bulk of the fighting."

It may be in the interest of those players for the roles to be apportioned that way; it certainly is not in the interests of the United States for the roles to be apportioned that way. And the question about what happens the day after applies to the United States as it would to Israel or any other party that might intervene.

All of this is related to warped but nonetheless commonly expressed views within the United States about what constitutes U.S. leadership abroad, in the Middle East or anywhere else. Too often what is labeled as leadership is really more like followership, in that it gets measured in terms of what other, coat-holding governments would like the United States to do. Also too often, leadership is equated with sounding bellicose or doing tough-looking, kinetic things such as escalating the use of military force.

The warped views of U.S. global leadership do not correspond to what generally is understood to constitute leadership in other contexts, such as a corporation or other organization. In those places, for the boss to do everything himself or herself is not seen as leadership but rather as a sign of inability to exercise leadership.

True leadership instead involves persuading everybody in an enterprise that they are part of a common effort with important goals, and motivating them to work together to do their parts of the job. Maybe Secretary Carter is not demonstrating effective leadership in his failure to get other countries to contribute more in fighting ISIS, or maybe the interests of those countries just make it difficult for even the most skillful leader to make much headway on that front. But it should not be a matter of the United States doing it all.

Sometimes a leader does have to get ahead of what other players are doing, but as a way of pointing them in the right direction and inspiring them to act as well, not as an alternative to their acting.

Underlying all of this as far as the ISIS problem is concerned is the question of whom the group most threatens. As measured by generation of refugees, destabilization of one's region, and potential for direct physical harm, the United States has less reason to feel threatened than do many other countries, including the coat-holders.

**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.)

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## US/Israeli/Saudi 'Behavior' Problems

**Exclusive:** In Official Washington's latest detour from the real world, top pundits are depicting Iran as the chief troublemaker in the Mideast and saying the nuclear deal should hinge on Iranian "behavior." But the real "behavior" problems come from Israel, Saudi Arabia and the U.S., writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There is a madness in how the mainstream U.S. media presents the world to the American people, a delusional perspective that arguably creates an existential threat to humanity's survival. We have seen this pattern in the biased depiction of [the Ukraine crisis](#) and now in how Official Washington is framing the debate over the Iranian nuclear agreement.

In this American land of make-believe, Iran is assailed as the chief instigator of instability in the Middle East. Yet, any sane and informed person would dispute that assessment, noting the far greater contributions made by Israel, Saudi Arabia and, indeed, the United States.

Israel's belligerence, including frequently attacking its Arab neighbors and brutally repressing the Palestinians, has roiled the region for almost 70 years. Not to mention that Israel is a rogue nuclear state that has been hiding a sophisticated atomic-bomb arsenal.

An objective observer also would note that Saudi Arabia has been investing its oil wealth for generations to advance the fundamentalist Wahhabi sect of Sunni Islam, which has inspired terrorist groups from Al Qaeda to the Islamic State. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were identified as Saudis and the U.S. government is still concealing those 28 pages of the congressional 9/11 inquiry regarding Saudi financing of Al Qaeda terrorists.

The Saudis also have participated directly and indirectly in regional wars, including encouragement of Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, support for Al Qaeda-affiliate Nusra Front's subversion of Syria, and the current Saudi bombardment of Yemen, killing hundreds of civilians, touching off a humanitarian crisis and helping Al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate expand its territory.

## **U.S. Meddling**

Then there's the United States, which has been meddling in the Middle East overtly and covertly for a very long time, including one of the CIA's first covert operations, the overthrow of Iran's elected government in 1953, and one of U.S. foreign policy's biggest overt blunders, President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Iran coup engendered a deep-seated hatred and suspicion of the U.S. government among Iranians that extends to the present day. And, the Iraq invasion not only spread death and destruction across Iraq but has spilled over into Syria, where U.S. "allies" Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel have been seeking another "regime change" that is being spearheaded by Sunni terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

The U.S. government has further aided in the destabilization of the region by flooding U.S. "allies" with powerful military equipment, including aircraft that both Israel and Saudi Arabia have used to bomb neighboring countries.

Yet, in the fantasy land that is Official Washington, the politicians and pundits decry "Iranian aggression," parrotting the propaganda theme dictated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he spoke before an adoring audience of senators and congressmen at a joint session of Congress on March 3.

This Iranian "bad behavior" includes helping the Iraqi government withstand brutal attacks by the Islamic State and assisting the Syrian government in blocking a major victory for Islamic terrorism that would follow the fall of Damascus. Iran is also being blamed for the Houthi uprising in Yemen although most informed observers believe the Iranian influence and assistance are minimal.

In other words, the neoconservatives who dominate Official Washington's "group think" may detest Iran's regional activities since they are not in line with Israeli (and Saudi) desires, but less ideological analysts might conclude that on balance Iran is contributing to the stability of the region or at least helping to avert the worst outcomes.

## **A Lost Mind**

The question becomes: Has Official Washington so lost its collective mind that it actually favors Al Qaeda or the Islamic State raising the black flag of Islamic terrorism over Damascus and even Baghdad? Is Iranian assistance in averting such a calamity such a terrible thing?

Apparently yes. Here's how The Washington Post's foreign affairs honcho David

Ignatius in a column entitled “Will Tehran Behave?” describes the geopolitical situation following Tuesday’s signing of a deal to tightly constrain Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for lifting sanctions:

“The problem isn’t the agreement but Iran itself. Its behavior remains defiantly belligerent, even as it signs an accord pledging to be peaceful. Its operatives subvert neighboring regimes, even as their front companies are about to be removed from the sanctions lists. The agreement welcomes Iran to the community of nations, even though its leader proclaims that Iran is a revolutionary cause.

“Obama argues that dealing with a menacing Iran will be easier if the nuclear issue is off the table for the next 10 years. He’s probably right, but the Iran problem won’t vanish with this accord. Iranian behavior in the region becomes the core issue. Having played the dealmaker, Obama must now press Iran to become a more responsible neighbor.”

By the way, I always thought that the United States proclaimed itself “a revolutionary cause.” But here is Ignatius, who is regarded as a “big thinker,” setting the parameters of the acceptable debate about the Iran nuclear deal. It’s all about Iran’s “behavior.”

Ignatius even quotes Netanyahu decrying the danger that, after 10 years, the agreement will give Iran “a sure path to nuclear weapons.” Of course, Ignatius doesn’t bother to note that Israel already has taken its own path to nuclear weapons. That context is almost never mentioned.

Nor does Ignatius admit how he and many of his fellow pundits supported Bush’s invasion of Iraq, which in a normal, parallel universe would disqualify Ignatius and his friends from lecturing anyone about how to “behave.” But in today’s Official Washington, a pre-war endorsement of the Iraq disaster is not a disqualifier but a prerequisite for being taken seriously.

Similarly, The Washington Post’s editorial page, which in 2002-03 eagerly backed Bush’s invasion and routinely asserted as flat fact that Iraq possessed hidden WMD stockpiles, now says the real risk in the Iran deal is, you guessed it, “Iranian behavior.”

The Post says the deal could unleash “a dangerous threshold nuclear state that poses a major threat to the United States and its allies.” And, the Post warns that Iran’s “leaders will probably use” the money from the sanctions relief “to finance wars and terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria, the Gaza Strip, Yemen and elsewhere.”

**Step into Crazy Land**

Again, to appreciate the Post's thinking, you have to step into crazy land. In the real Iraq and the real Syria, the Iranians are supporting internationally recognized governments battling *against* terrorist groups, Al Qaeda's affiliate and the Islamic State.

In Yemen, Iranian involvement is probably minor at most. Plus, the Houthis are not a terrorist group, but rather an indigenous popular movement that has been fighting Al Qaeda's terrorist affiliate in Yemen.

While it's not clear what the Post thinks that Iran is doing in the Gaza Strip, which is under a tight Israeli military blockade, only fully committed neocons would think that the long-suffering people of the Gaza Strip don't deserve some outside help.

Still, the larger issue for the American people is what to do with this insane political-media system that dominates Official Washington. Either these powers-that-be are detached from reality or they are deceitful propagandists who think they can manipulate us with lies and distortions.

Yet, by creating a false reality, whether from madness or cynicism, this system guides the nation into terrible decision-making. And, given the immense military power of the United States, this long national detour into a dark psychosis of delusion must be addressed or the future of humankind will be put into serious jeopardy.

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## Eyes Finally Open to Syrian Realities

**Exclusive:** For the past three years, Official Washington has viewed the Syrian civil war as "white-hatted" rebels against "black-hatted" President Assad, but finally some of the "gray-hatted" reality is breaking through, though perhaps too late, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

In late summer 2013, Official Washington was rushing to the judgment that the “evil” Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had launched a barrage of missiles tipped with Sarin gas to slaughter hundreds of civilians in rebel-held neighborhoods near Damascus.

It was inconceivable to virtually every person who “mattered” in Washington that there was any other interpretation of the events on Aug. 21, 2013. Washington Post national security columnist David Ignatius even explained the “big picture” reason why President Barack Obama needed to launch punitive bomb strikes against Assad’s government for crossing Obama’s “red line” against using chemical weapons.

“What does the world look like when people begin to doubt the credibility of U.S. power?” Ignatius wrote a week after the Sarin incident. “Unfortunately, we’re finding that out in Syria and other nations where leaders have concluded they can defy a war-weary United States without paying a price.

“Using military power to maintain a nation’s credibility may sound like an antiquated idea, but it’s all too relevant in the real world we inhabit. It has become obvious in recent weeks that President Obama needs to demonstrate that there are consequences for crossing a U.S. ‘red line.’ Otherwise, the coherence of the global system begins to dissolve.”

At the time, there were only a few of us raising questions about Official Washington’s Sarin-attack “group think,” partly because it made no sense for Assad to have invited United Nations inspectors into Syria to examine chemical weapons attacks that he was blaming on the opposition and then to launch a major Sarin attack just miles from where the inspectors were unpacking at their hotel.

I also was hearing from inside U.S. intelligence that some CIA analysts shared those doubts, suspecting that the supposedly high number of Sarin-laden rockets (which represented the strongest evidence against Assad’s forces) was wildly overstated and that public panic might have exaggerated the scope of the attack.

But perhaps the strongest reason to doubt Official Washington’s hasty conclusion blaming Assad was what had been occurring inside the Syrian rebel movement over the prior two years, i.e., its radicalization into a hyper-violent Sunni jihadist force that was prepared to inflict any brutality on civilians to achieve its goal of ousting the secular Assad and establishing an Islamist state in Damascus.

### **Blinded by Propaganda**

Most Washington’s pols and pundits had not noticed this change because of a geopolitical blindness inflicted by neoconservative propaganda, which insisted

that the only acceptable way to view the Syrian civil war was to see Assad as the “bad guy” and the rebels as the “good guys.”

After all, “regime change” in Syria had long been near the top of the neocon agenda as it was for Israel, which wanted Assad out because he was allied with Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Early in the civil war, Assad’s harsh response to what he termed rebel “terrorism” had also rallied the Obama administration’s “liberal interventionists” to the side of “regime change.”

Thus, the notion that some vicious Syrian rebel group might willfully kill innocent civilians as a provocation to get the U.S. military to attack Assad’s defenses and thus pave the way for a rebel victory was outside Official Washington’s accepted frame of reference. In August 2013, the rebels were wearing the white hats, as far as U.S. mainstream opinion was concerned.

Over the past year, however, reality has reasserted itself, at least somewhat. The Sarin case against Assad has largely crumbled with a UN report finding Sarin on only one rocket and independent scientists concluding that the one Sarin-laden rocket had a maximum range of only about two kilometers, meaning it could not have come from the suspected Syrian base about nine kilometers away.

Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh also learned from his well-placed sources that inside the U.S. intelligence community suspicion had shifted toward rebel extremists working with hardliners in Turkish intelligence. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?”]

But most “important people” in U.S. officialdom, including New York Times and Washington Post editors, still insisted that Assad must have done the Sarin attack. They even report it as flat fact. They are, after all, not the sort of folks who easily admit error.

### **A Shift in the Paradigm**

However, over the past year, the paradigm for understanding the Syrian conflict has begun shifting. In September 2013, many Syrian rebel forces repudiated the political opposition that the Obama administration had organized and instead embraced al-Qaeda’s al-Nusra Front, an aggressive jihadist force which had emerged as the most effective fighters against Assad.

Then, in February 2014, al-Qaeda’s leadership disavowed an even more brutal jihadist force known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. The Islamic State promoted a strategy of unspeakable brutality as a way of intimidating its rivals and driving Westerners from the Middle East.

ISIS got its start after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 when Jordanian



Abu Musab al-Zarqawi organized “al-Qaeda in Iraq,” a hyper-violent Sunni militia that targeted Iraq’s Shiites and destroyed their mosques, touching off a vicious sectarian war across Iraq.

After Zarqawi’s death in 2006 and the alienation of less-extreme Iraqi Sunnis al-Qaeda in Iraq faded from view before reemerging in Syria’s civil war, refashioned as the Islamic State and crossing back into Iraq with a major offensive last summer.

Amid reports of the Islamic State massacring captives and beheading American and British hostages, it no longer seemed so far-fetched that some Syrian rebel group would be ruthless enough to obtain Sarin and launch an attack near Damascus, killing innocents and hoping that the Assad regime would be blamed.

Even the Post’s Ignatius is looking more skeptically at the Syrian rebel movement and the various U.S.-allied intelligence agencies that have been supplying money, weapons and training even to fighters associated with the most extreme militias.

### **Opening the Door**

In a column on Friday, Ignatius faulted not only Syria’s squabbling “moderate opposition” but “the foreign nations, such as the United States, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, that have been funding the chaotic melange of fighters inside Syria. These foreign machinations helped open the door for the terrorist Islamic State group to threaten the region.”

Ignatius acknowledged that the earlier depiction of the Syrian opposition as simply an indigenous movement of idealistic reformers was misleading. He wrote: “From the beginning of the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, Syria has been the scene of a proxy war involving regional powers: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar all wanted to topple Assad, but they competed with each other as regional rivals, too.

“At various points, all three nations provided Sunni rebel groups with money and weapons that ended up in the hands of extremists. The United States, Saudi Arabia and Jordan joined forces in 2013 to train and arm moderate rebels at a CIA-backed camp in Jordan. But this program was never strong enough to unify the nearly 1,000 brigades scattered across the country. The resulting disorganization helped discredit the rebel alliance known as the Free Syrian Army.

“Syrian rebel commanders deserve some blame for this ragged structure. But the chaos was worsened by foreign powers that treated Syria as a playground for their intelligence services. This cynical intervention recalled similar meddling

that helped ravage Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Libya during their civil wars.

“The story of how Syria became a cockpit for rival intelligence services was explained to me by sources here [in Istanbul] and in Reyhanli, a rebel staging area on the Turkey-Syria border. Outside efforts to arm and train the Syrian rebels began more than two years ago in Istanbul, where a ‘military operations center’ was created, first in a hotel near the airport.

“A leading figure was a Qatari operative who had helped arm the Libyan rebels who deposed Moammar Gaddafi. Working with the Qataris were senior figures representing Turkish and Saudi intelligence. But unity within the Istanbul operations room frayed when the Turks and Qataris began to support Islamist fighters they thought would be more aggressive.

“These jihadists did emerge as braver, bolder fighters, and their success was a magnet for more support. The Turks and Qataris insist they didn’t intentionally support the extremist group Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State. But weapons and money sent to more moderate Islamist brigades made their way to these terrorist groups, and the Turks and Qataris turned a blind eye.”

Regarding the rise of these radicals, Ignatius quoted one Arab intelligence source who claimed to have “warned a Qatari officer, who answered: ‘I will send weapons to al-Qaeda if it will help’ topple Assad. This determination to remove Assad by any means necessary proved dangerous. ‘The Islamist groups got bigger and stronger, and the FSA day by day got weaker,’ recalls the Arab intelligence source.”

### **Selling the Sarin Story**

Based on such information, the idea of anti-Assad extremists securing Sarin possibly with the help of Turkish intelligence, as Hersh reported and launching a provocative attack with the goal of getting the U.S. military to devastate Assad’s army and clear a path for a rebel victory begins to make sense.

After all, back in Washington, the propaganda strategy of blaming Assad could count on the ever-influential neocons who in August 2013 did start pushing the rush-to-war bandwagon and shoved aside any doubters of the Assad-did-it conventional wisdom.

Israel took a similar position on Syria, favoring even the victory of al-Qaeda extremists if necessary to oust Assad and hurt his Iranian allies.

In September 2013, then-Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an interview that “The greatest danger to Israel is

by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc. We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the other "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

So, the danger from the Sunni extremists was played down and the focus remained on ousting Assad. No wonder there was such "surprise" among Official Washington's "group thinkers" when the Islamic State opened a new front inside Iraq and routed the U.S.-trained Iraqi army. Once again, the neocons had made sure that American eyes stayed wide shut to an inconvenient truth.

But the neocons are not through with the Syrian fiasco that they helped create. They are now busy reshaping the narrative accusing Obama of waiting too long to arm the Syrian rebels and insisting that he switch from bombing Islamic State targets inside Syria to destroying the Syrian air force and creating a no-fly zone so the rebels can march on Damascus.

The recklessness of that strategy should now be obvious. Indeed, if Obama had succumbed to the interventionist demands in summer 2013 and devastated Assad's military, we could now be seeing either al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in control of Damascus. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Neocons' Noses into the Syrian Tent.](#)"]

Obama might be wiser to take this opportunity to declassify the U.S. intelligence on the Sarin gas attack of Aug. 21, 2013, including the dissents from CIA analysts who doubted Assad's responsibility. That information might shed substantial new light on how Turkish and Arab intelligence services – with the help of the neocons – enabled the rise of the Islamic State.

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## Official Washington's Syrian 'Fantasy'

**Exclusive:** It is perhaps not news that the U.S. government bases wars on illusions, such as the nonexistent WMD in Iraq, but it is rare when there is a

broad consensus before the conflict begins that a war's success rests on a "fantasy" like the chimera of "moderate" Syrian rebels, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

What does it say when the capital of the world's most powerful nation anchors a major decision about war in what every thinking person acknowledges is a "fantasy" even the principal policymaker and a top advocate for foreign interventions?

It might suggest that the U.S. government has completely lost its bearings or that political opportunism now so overwhelms rationality that shortsighted expediency determines life-or-death military strategies. Either way, it is hard to see how the current U.S. policy toward Iraq, Syria and the larger Middle East can serve American national interests or translate into anything but more misery for the people of the region.

Official Washington's most treasured "fantasy" today is the notion that a viable "moderate opposition" exists in Syria or could somehow be created. That wish-upon-a-star belief was the centerpiece of congressional action last month on a \$500 million plan by President Barack Obama to train and arm these "moderate" rebels to combat Islamic State terrorists who have been plundering large swaths of Syria and Iraq – and also take on the Syrian army.

Yet, as recently as August, President Barack Obama publicly declared that trust in these "moderates" was a "fantasy" that was "never in the cards" as a workable strategy. Then, on Wednesday, David Ignatius, national security columnist for the neoconservative Washington Post and a prominent booster of U.S. interventionism, reported from a rebel staging area in Reyhanli, Turkey, the same reality in nearly the same language.

"The problem is that the 'moderate opposition' that the United States is backing is still largely a fantasy," Ignatius wrote, noting that the greatest challenge would be to coordinate "the ragtag brigades of the Free Syrian Army into a coherent force that can fill the vacuum once the extremists are driven out."

Ignatius quoted Syrian rebel commander Hamza al-Shamali, a top recipient of American support including anti-tank missiles, as saying, "At some point, the Syrian street lost trust in the Free Syrian Army," the U.S.-backed rebel force that was the armed wing of the supposedly "moderate opposition" to President Bashar al-Assad. Ignatius added:

"Shamali explains that many rebel commanders aren't disciplined, their fighters aren't well-trained and the loose umbrella organization of the FSA lacks command and control. The extremists of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra have filled

the vacuum. Now, he says, 'the question every Syrian has for the opposition is: Are you going to bring chaos or order?'"

According to Ignatius, Shamali said he rejected a proposal to merge the FSA's disparate brigades because "we refuse to repeat failed experiments." He argued that an entirely new "Syrian national army" would be needed to fight both the Islamist radicals and Assad's military.

But even the sympathetic Ignatius recognized that "the FSA's biggest problem has been internecine feuding. Over the past two years, I've interviewed various people who tried to become leaders, such as: Abdul-Jabbar Akaidi, Salim Idriss and Jamal Maarouf. They all talked about unifying the opposition but none succeeded.

"An Arab intelligence source explains: 'Until now, the FSA is a kind of mafia. People inside Syria are tired of this mafia. There is no structure. It's nothing.' And this from one of the people who have struggled the past three years to organize the resistance."

In other words, the "moderate" rebels to the degree that they do exist are viewed by many Syrians as part of the problem, not part of any solution.

### **Favoring Al-Qaeda**

Another flaw in Obama's strategy is that the Syrian "moderates" are much more opposed to Assad's harsh but secular regime than they are to the Sunni jihadists who have emerged as the most effective fighting force against him.

"If U.S. airstrikes and other support are seen to be hitting Muslim fighters only, and strengthening the despised Assad, this strategy for creating a 'moderate opposition' will likely fail," Ignatius concluded.

That complaint has given new hope to Washington's influential neoconservatives that they can ultimately redirect Obama's intervention in Syria from bombing the Islamic State terrorists to a full-scale "regime change" war against Assad, much like the neocons helped convince President George W. Bush to invade Iraq in 2003. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["Neocons' Noses Into the Syrian Tent."](#)]

In this regard, Obama appears to be the proverbial deer in the headlights. He's afraid of being called "weak" if he doesn't go after the Islamic State for its hyper-violent attacks inside Iraq and its brutal executions of American hostages in Syria. Yet, Obama's also can't escape his earlier tough talk that "Assad must go."

Obama's core contradiction has been that by providing "covert" assistance to

Syrian rebels, he has indirectly strengthened the Sunni extremists who have seized the Free Syrian Army's weapons depots and won converts from the "moderate" rebels, some of whom were trained, armed and financed by the CIA. Meanwhile, other U.S. allies, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have been helping more extreme Syrian rebels, including al-Qaeda's Nusra Front.

A year ago, many of the "moderate" rebels publicly repudiated the Syrian political front that the Obama administration had put together and instead endorsed al-Nusra. According to one source with access to Western intelligence information, some "moderate" rebels recruited from Muslim communities in Great Britain and other Western countries have now taken their military skills (and passports) to the Islamic State.

Yet, instead of acknowledging that this strategy of relying on an unreliable "moderate opposition" is indeed a "fantasy," President Obama and a majority in Congress have chosen to pursue this geopolitical unicorn with another \$500 million and much political chest-thumping.

### **An Alternative Approach**

At this late stage, the only practical strategy would be to press the non-extremist Sunni opposition to work out some form of unity government with Assad who retains strong support among Syria's Alawite, Shiite and Christian minorities. By enlisting Russia and Iran, Obama might be able to secure concessions from Assad, including the possibility of a gradual transition to a post-Assad era.

With such a political settlement in hand, the focus could then be on defeating the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's Nusra affiliate and restoring some order to Syria. But the problem is that Official Washington's neocons and their "liberal interventionist" allies are so fixated on "regime change" in Syria and are so hostile to Russia and Iran that any pragmatic strategy is effectively ruled out.

Though Obama may be a closet "realist" who would favor such a compromise approach, he has consistently lacked the political courage or the geopolitical foresight to impose this kind of solution on the powers-that-be in Washington. Any suggestion of collaboration with Russia and Iran or acquiescence to continued rule by Assad would touch off a firestorm of outrage in Congress and the mainstream U.S. media.

So, Obama instead has charted a course into what he knows to be a fantasyland, a costly pursuit of the chimerical Syrian "moderates" who once located are supposed to defeat both the Sunni extremists and the army of the secularist Assad. This journey is not simply a march of folly but a meandering into

illusion.

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## Itching for Confrontation with Iran

The neocons along with their allies in Congress and on the Washington Post's op-ed page remain determined to sabotage a diplomatic rapprochement with Iran, demanding that its leaders be confronted, not engaged, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

David Ignatius offers in [his column](#) some thoughts inspired by results of a [Pew Research Center poll](#) in which the headline item is that nearly half of Americans believe the United States "should mind its own business internationally," a finding that the Pew people describe as "one of the highest readings of isolationist sentiment in decades."

In commenting on the issue of Iran's nuclear program, Ignatius notes that completion of a final agreement will require President Barack Obama to secure agreement from Congress and the public, and that it looks now that he will have a tough time securing that support. Ignatius is right insofar as there already is deal-scuppering trouble-making in Congress and likely to be more to come. But then he tries to summarize the public mood by saying, "The public doesn't want war, but it doesn't seem to like entangling diplomacy much, either."

"Entangling diplomacy"? Hold that thought while we move down the *Washington Post* opinion page to the next column, the [one by George Will](#). Will evidently is so taken by Kenneth Pollack's new book on Iran that this is Will's second column in the last two weeks that is based on it.

Will and Pollack are right on two very important propositions about the Iranian nuclear matter. One is that the idea of using military force to deal with it would be, for multiple reasons, a big and even disastrous mistake. The other is

that if Iran ever did acquire a nuclear weapon, deterrence would work and the situation that is generally referred to as "containment" is one we can live with. I have made these same points in my own writing.

The rest of the viewpoint Will is defending involves a giving up of any possibility of reaching further agreements with an Iran whose nuclear program stays peaceful. To be fair to Pollack, and Will is fair enough to mention this, Pollack completed his book before the recent successful negotiation of an interim nuclear agreement with Tehran. But the negative fatalism that is being expressed errs in at least three ways.

One, it goes along with the erroneous tendency to assume that Iranian policymakers are chomping at the bit to make a nuclear weapon, and that they will not do so only if forced not to do so. This is a misreading of what are ever-more-clear Iranian intentions, in which not only has no decision to build a bomb been made but also the Iranian leadership sees a more normal relationship with the West, and a permanently peaceful nuclear program, as distinctly preferable to having a nuclear weapon. Will's position involves a self-fulfilling worst-case assumption.

Second is an apparent misreading of the obstacles to a comprehensive nuclear agreement. It is true that this is very far from a done deal, but the reason is not because the terms of an agreement that would satisfy both Western and Iranian interests are not fairly clear. Rather, the main obstacle is opposition to *any* U.S.-Iranian agreement from hardliners, especially hardliners outside Iran.

It also is true that this opposition is formidable and is determined to keep doing whatever it can to prevent an agreement, but the opposition is beatable. It is narrow, consisting chiefly of the Israeli government, those in the United States who dance mainly to that government's tune, and assorted neocons who welcome eternal hostility with what they regard as forces of darkness in the Middle East and, unlike Will, would even welcome a war with them.

Pushing against this opposition is a president and his administration who, to their credit, already have shown more drive and moxie on this matter than on almost any other foreign policy issue, or on most domestic issues. Moreover, the narrow opposition does not speak for the American public. This is where Ignatius errs by throwing Congress and the public into the same pot. Opinion polling that has directly addressed the issue of diplomacy to reach a nuclear agreement has shown two-to-one support by the American public for a diplomatic solution. Americans both do not want war *and* they do want a negotiated agreement.

Third, the position Will presents pays inadequate attention to what the negative



fatalism means we would be giving up. First and most obviously, we would be giving up the prospect of a Middle East in which Iran does not have a nuclear weapon, a situation which everyone, including Will, Pollack, me, Barack Obama, most Israelis, the Saudis, and even the Iranian leadership, believes would be preferable to a Middle East in which it does have a nuke.

It also means giving up the prospect of ever getting away from the lines of hostility and conflict that have badly constrained U.S. policy in the region. This is where we get back to Ignatius's idea of entangling diplomacy. Except that entanglement is what we have now, in which the United States is entangled in fixed lines of conflict in which it is expected to defer to the wishes of supposed allies, is barred from ever working for mutual benefit with those labeled forever as adversaries, and is sucked into the narrow agendas and conflicts of the purported allies.

Agreement with Iran on the high-profile nuclear issue would be a step toward disentangling the United States from all that, and toward greater freedom for the United States in using further diplomacy to pursue its own interests, working selectively with different states on different matters as the issues and our own interests may dictate.

**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.)**

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## Iraq War Actors Have No Shame

As wretched as the Iraq War was, the absence of any meaningful accountability for the U.S. policymakers and pundits who made the catastrophe happen is nearly as stomach-turning. Every day the same faces show up on the TV talk shows and Op-Ed pages spouting more of their "wisdom," as Adil E. Shamoo notes.

By Adil E. Shamoo

The only message our children will take away from the war in Iraq is that if you repeat a boldfaced lie enough, it will someday become accepted truth. And as a corollary, saving face is much more important than admitting a mistake, no matter how destructive the outcome.

Unfortunately for our children, manipulating the truth became the norm for the

Bush administration, which invaded Iraq on what we know now (and the administration almost certainly knew then) were utterly false pretenses.

Thanks to these lies, Americans, including our soldiers and civilians serving in Iraq, were convinced Saddam Hussein was linked to the 9/11 attacks and had weapons of mass destruction, two of the ever-evolving reasons for getting into the war. Many still believe this. Engaging in mass deception in order to justify official policy both degrades and endangers democracy. But by far, it is ordinary Iraqis who have suffered the most.

We know now beyond any doubt that Iraq was not involved in 9/11 and had no weapons of mass destruction. But as Paul Pillar, a former senior CIA analyst with the Iraqi portfolio, wrote on March 14, "Intelligence did not drive the decision to invade Iraq not by a long shot, despite the aggressive use by the Bush administration of cherry-picked fragments of intelligence reporting in its public sales campaign for the war." Indeed, this was a war in search of a justification from the very beginning, and any little lie would have worked.

It is very fortuitous for all those politicians, policy makers and bureaucrats with Iraqi blood on their hands, Republicans and Democrats both, that the only courtroom they've been shuffled into is the court of public opinion, where most received light sentences. Indeed, the Iraq War boosters are still a fixture on our television screens.

Dan Senor, who served as a spokesman for the U.S occupation authorities and willfully misrepresented events on the ground during that time, is a regular commentator on MSNBC's "Morning Joe," a veritable roundtable of Washington establishment punditry.

Kenneth Pollack, a longtime Brookings fellow and CIA analyst who wrote the 2002 book *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (which is barely mentioned today on the Brookings website), is a familiar face on the commentary circuit and among think tank salons. Ex-Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, who each left their most recent posts in disgrace, are raking in thousands of dollars for speeches, lectures, and consulting work.

Sure, there are pundits and reporters who admit they wrongly supported the war, but their regrets are usually reserved for their blind faith in the war planners and their own lack of inquisitiveness. For example, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius confessed in a March 21 column that Iraq was one of "the biggest strategic errors in Modern American history." But the thrust of his own *mea culpa* was that he did not write enough "on the overriding question of whether the war made sense," which would have allowed him to see that the U.S was not strong enough nor flexible enough to succeed.

Rarely do pundits apologize for the horrendous Iraqi losses inflicted by the war: more than a million deaths and millions more wounded with varying lifelong disabilities, including thousands of tortured prisoners, with an estimated 16,000 of them still unaccounted for. Twenty-eight percent of Iraqi children suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and 2.8 million people are still internally displaced or living as refugees outside the country.

Add to that the complete upheaval of the Iraqi economy, as well as its transportation, education and medical institutions. Don't forget the countless people suffering from trauma and depression, sectarian strife, terrifying birth defects from toxic pollution, and a brain drain that has left the country illiterate.

Not since the American Civil War has the U.S citizenry had to endure such horrors. Yet discussion of these repercussions is noticeably absent as we still struggle to understand the scope of the Iraq War and what all of its lies have wrought.

Let us start with a sincere apology to the Iraqi people for the crimes the U.S government has committed. A long-range plan for restitution is a second step. Empires decline due to moral decay from within. Ten years after the invasion of Iraq, our nation is looking at the moral abyss. If lies have delivered us to this place, then only the truth will begin our journey back.

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**[http://www.fpif.org/articles/after\\_iraq\\_climbing\\_out\\_of\\_the\\_moral\\_abyss](http://www.fpif.org/articles/after_iraq_climbing_out_of_the_moral_abyss)**

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## Establishment Foreign Policy Complaints

Establishment foreign policy writers Vali Nasr and David Ignatius have criticized President Obama for not listening more to supposed experts on world affairs – and concentrating decision-making in the White House but some of those experts have suffered from their own groupthink, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Vali Nasr has caused a stir, the kind that sells books, with a broadside against

the Obama White House's handling of policy on Afghanistan. His book and the broadside in it, excerpted in the current *Foreign Policy*, have already been the focus of a Michael Gordon article in the *New York Times*.

Nasr's tale would appear to complement a pattern that David Ignatius identified and on which I commented last week, of decision-making being highly centralized in the White House.

Nasr's story does indeed do that to a degree, but the story itself is of a flavor that hardly qualifies it as a confirmatory source. It is a highly parochial viewpoint, with a tone that approaches vindictiveness. The strong subtext is the writer's intense personal loyalty to his boss at the time, Richard Holbrooke.

Anything in which Holbrooke was prevented from getting his way is treated as *ipso facto* bad for the cause of sound policy toward South Asia. It is the sort of account that gets one thinking that there must be another side of this story, with neither side having exclusive rights to credibility. We may have to wait for post-Obama-administration memoirs to get the other side.

There is another sense in which Nasr's story gets to something Ignatius and I were talking about, which is how a small group characterized by a strong sense of mutual loyalty is prone to groupthink. The White House is hardly the only place in government where such groupthink can arise. The acute within-group loyalty, which comes through strongly in Nasr's account, in Holbrooke's AfPak unit at the State Department made it a prime candidate for groupthink as well.

Even more obvious was another psychological phenomenon associated with such groups, which was the framing of just about everything in ins-vs.-outs, us-vs.-them terms.

The resulting dysfunction illustrates one of the things wrong in a faux-Machiavelli manual (in the same issue of *Foreign Policy*) by Elliott Abrams on how any president can "have his way on national security." There are many things wrong with it, the most basic of which is the unstated assumption that an unrestrained president "getting his way" is better for the Republic than a president having to deal in a more bridled way with other parts of the government, or at least of the Executive Branch.

It is interesting that this perspective comes from Abrams, who was in the middle of one of the most vivid demonstrations, i.e., the Iraq War, of how disastrous it can be for the Republic when a president and a few appointees make policy unbridled by things like bureaucracies and policy processes.

Even if one accepts the presidential-power purpose of Abrams's advice, there are

other things wrong with it, contradictions, for example. Abrams is most often a fervent bureaucrat-hater; high on his list of maxims is "Don't let your cabinet secretaries put career officials in top positions." But later on he says, "Often, the best asset can be career officials themselves, if they can be brought around." So it is only most bureaucrats he hates, and not the ones that are "brought around" to his views.

The basic justification that Abrams, and many others, make for staffing huge portions of the Executive Branch with temporary political appointees is that this will ensure the president's policies are carried out. But carrying out the policies of whoever is the political master of the day is part of the essence of what a truly professional bureaucracy is all about.

Conversely, many of those appointees, however much they claim to be the president's men (and women), aren't really. They are political people with their own ideas, and their own ambitions to make their marks before they leave government.

The situation Nasr describes regarding Holbrooke is a strong demonstration of this. Of course, the problem was made especially acute because the person involved had a self-image and sense of self-importance that were colossal even by Washington standards. (In a possibly apocryphal story, a State Department wheels-down cable sent when Holbrooke arrived on a foreign trip read, "The ego has landed.")

Would President Obama have been following Abrams's advice if he had never appointed Holbrooke and Hillary Clinton (on whose presidential campaign Nasr and Holbrooke were working when they forged their close relationship) to their posts? Perhaps, but the Republic would not necessarily have been better off for it.

This question also brings to mind Lyndon Johnson's earthy explanation, involving a camel being inside a tent rather than out of it, as to why he kept on J. Edgar Hoover as head of the FBI.

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