

WPost Wants a Bigger War in Syria

The neocon Washington Post wants an even bigger U.S. military intervention in Syria, ignoring the tenets of international law and assuming that more bombing will somehow make things better, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Among the latest in the *Washington Post* editorial page's unrelenting drumbeat of criticism on Syria – which often does not make clear exactly what the United States should be doing there, except that whatever it does should involve more military force than it is using now – is a signed column by deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl, who says President Obama ought to emulate Vladimir Putin.

Diehl says that events in Syria since Russia directly intervened militarily have demonstrated that Mr. Obama was wrong in refraining from a comparable intervention. "Putin has proved," writes Diehl, "that the concept Obama rejected – that a limited use of force could change the political outcome, without large costs – was right all along."

Some of the biggest problems in Diehl's argument are ones that he and his colleagues have displayed all along in beating their drum. Among these is an incredibly rigid and oversimplified view of what is at stake in Syria.

The apparent assumption is that the only thing that should matter to the United States is whether pro-regime or anti-regime players are forcefully gaining an advantage over the other. This complex and multidimensional civil war is treated as primitively as a schoolyard contest in toughness.

"The United States is far stronger than Putin's Russia," Diehl writes. "U.S. fecklessness is a choice."

Diehl's assumption of a zero-sum game is as absolute as the most Manichean views of U.S.-Soviet competition ever were during the Cold War. Putin intervened in Syria, says Diehl, "and it has made Barack Obama the loser." The result is "a victory for Russia, Iran and the Assad regime, at the expense of the United States and its Arab, Israeli and Turkish friends."

Such a statement masks not only the non-zero-sum nature of interests that cross the divide that Diehl postulates but also the significant differences in interests among the players on each side of that divide.

The incorrect zero-summing extends from the military to the diplomatic. Because the United States has not thrown its military weight around, argues Diehl, the

recent cease-fire agreement “offered Putin everything he sought in Syria.” Diehl bemoans that we are “satisfying Putin’s longstanding demand that the West join him in fighting ‘terrorists’ rather than Assad.”

And so we should be against fighting terrorists, just because Putin is in favor of it? That seems to be the argument. Certainly serious questions should be raised about how effective U.S. military force can be against the Islamist extremist part of the Syrian situation (and some of the results of military operations the United States already is conducting against ISIS in Syria underscore those questions).

Real Terrorists

But there really are terrorists in Syria, with or without the quotation marks, and a more plausible case can be made that they ought to be more of a concern for the United States than engaging in a shoving match with Putin that is an extension of Assad’s fight against his domestic opponents.

Nothing in Diehl’s column considers exactly where U.S. interests do and do not lie in Syria. They do not lie with any particular political coloration of a future regime in Damascus. They do not rest on overthrowing the Assads; somehow U.S. interests have survived even though the Assads, father and son, have been in power for 46 years.

Violent extremism of the sort that also can appear in the West has more to do with U.S. interests, and on that subject there is more convergence with Russian interests in Syria than there is conflict with them.

As for Diehl’s main argument that Russia has demonstrated a successful use of military force that the United States should have used but fecklessly did not, there are two fundamental problems with that argument.

One is that it overlooks a large asymmetry between what Russia set out to do with its military intervention and what the United States would be doing if it tried to follow Diehl’s advice. The Russian military’s mission was to shore up a well-established incumbent regime – the one that’s been in power for 46 years. If the United States were to try something similar on the other side, it would be “shoring up” (not really an applicable term) a fractionated, unproven, quarrelsome, extremist-infested hodge-podge of opposition groups.

Whenever the ineffectiveness of the Syrian opposition gets mentioned, pro-interventionists such as Diehl resort to the counterfactual assertion (with all of the logical flaws that such argumentation entails) that if only the Obama administration had acted more forcefully earlier, an effective and moderate Syrian opposition would have prevailed.

But interventionists never can point to evidence in the political archeology indicating this would have been the case. The moderate, effective opposition fighter is the Syrian version of Piltdown Man, a presumed creature who never really existed, at least not in the numbers and with the organization that would have made a difference.

The other fundamental problem in the Putin-proved-what-could-be-done argument is that by defining the policy problem in terms of who gets to rule in Damascus and who wins a U.S.-Russian shoving match, this overlooks the more important variable of the scope and intensity of the war.

Making Matters Worse

Diehl does mention President Obama's observation that "U.S. intervention would only worsen the war, encourage extremism and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis," but then Diehl blows off the observation by saying, "All those bad things happened in the absence of American action."

Such a dismissal seems to assume that bad things can't get even worse, and that a larger U.S. military intervention is more likely to make them better than worse. No evidence is offered to suggest that those assumptions are true; much recent history in the region suggests that they are false.

It is the war itself, not the absence of any particular political outcome, that makes Syria a concern for U.S. interests. It is the war itself, not the continuation of the Assad regime, that gave ISIS the opportunity to gain a foothold in Syria, and it is the war itself that has been causing much human suffering.

There is no discernible route to an alternative political outcome that would please most of the Syrian opposition (if the opposition could ever agree on such) and displease the Russians without going through much more war, more chaos, more extremism, and more suffering.

This would be true whether or not Bashar al-Assad were to depart the scene tomorrow, and it would be true whether or not the United States weighed in heavily with military force.

The conspicuous and current examples of Iraq and Libya are not merely hang-ups of feckless U.S. leaders. They are glaring lessons in the implications of regime change that are highly applicable to Syria.

In Libya little effort was made after helping to overthrow the previous leader, and the country has been a violent mess. In Iraq the United States made enormous effort, including the expenditure of thousands of American lives, and still left

a mess, including a lack of political accommodation among contending Iraqi forces and the continuation of a civil war that was still going at a substantial clip when Barack Obama took office in 2009.

Mr. Obama can be faulted for ever subscribing to the “Assad must go” slogan. He should not be faulted for not trying to imitate Putin in Syria.

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Are Neocons an Existential Threat?

Exclusive: Despite a record of unprecedented error, American neocons remain the dominant foreign policy force in Official Washington, demanding more “regime change” in the Middle East and a new Cold War that could heat up and end all life on the planet, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The neoconservatives arguably have damaged American national interests more than any group in modern history. They have done more harm than the marginal Communists pursued by Sen. Joe McCarthy in the 1950s, more than the Yippies of the 1960s, more than Richard Nixon’s Watergate burglars in the 1970s or the Iran-Contra conspirators in the 1980s.

The neocons have plunged the U.S. government into extraordinarily ill-considered wars wasting trillions of dollars, killing hundreds of thousands if not millions of people, and destabilizing large swaths of the planet including the Middle East, much of Africa and now Europe. Those costs include a swelling hatred against America and a deformed U.S. foreign policy elite that is no longer capable of formulating coherent strategies.

Yet, the neocons have remained immune from the consequences of their catastrophes. They still dominate Washington’s major think tanks as well as the op-ed pages of virtually all the leading newspapers, including The Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and New York Times. They hold down key positions in the State Department, and their “liberal interventionist” pals have the ear of President Barack Obama.

Clearly, the neocons are skilled operatives, knowing how to arrange a steady

stream of funding for themselves, from military contractors donating to think tanks, from U.S. taxpayers footing the bill for organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy, and from ideological billionaires set on aligning U.S. foreign policy with hard-line Israeli desires.

The neocons are adept at writing op-ed articles that twist any set of facts into support for their ideological cause; they supply just the right quote that fits into the news cycle's latest narrative; and they host policy conferences that attract powerful politicians and fawning media coverage.

But are the neocons a force that can coexist with the American Republic? Have they become an existential threat not only to the constitutional structure crafted in 1787 but to continued life on the planet? Are they locked on a course of action that could lead to a nuclear holocaust?

Clearly, the neocons' commitment to Israeli interests violates a key principle established by the nation's early presidents who all warned against "foreign entangling alliances" as a fundamental threat to a citizens' republic that would transform America into a warrior state that would inevitably sap the nation's liberties.

That loss of liberty has surely happened. Not only is there now bipartisan support for a surveillance state that can spy on the personal lives of American citizens, but the U.S. government has wedded itself to the concept of "strategic communications," a catch-phrase that merges psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. into a seamless approach toward managing public perceptions at home and abroad.

When information is systematically pushed through a filter designed to ensure consent, the core democratic concept of an informed electorate has been turned on its head: The people no longer oversee the government; the government manipulates the people.

Neocon Tactics

All this has been part of the neocon approach dating back to the 1980s when key operatives, such as Robert Kagan and Elliott Abrams, were part of inter-agency task forces designed to whip the American people into line behind the government's aggressive war policies. Guided by seasoned CIA propagandists, such as Walter Raymond Jr., the neocons learned their lessons well.

But the neocons are no longer just threatening the existence of the Republic; they are now endangering the continuation of life itself. They have decided to launch a new Cold War against Russia that will push the world toward the brink of thermo-nuclear war.

Of course, the neocons will frame their doomsday strategy as all Vladimir Putin's fault. They will insist that they are just standing up to "Russian aggression" and that anyone who doesn't join them is a "stooge of Moscow" or "weak." They will dictate the shape of the debate just as they have in countless other situations, such as guiding Americans to war in Iraq over non-existent WMD stockpiles.

The neocon pundits will write seemingly authoritative op-eds about devious Kremlin strategies which will glue black hats on the Russians and white hats on whomever is on the other side, whether the neo-Nazis in Ukraine or the Islamic State/Al Qaeda terrorists in Syria. Americans will be whipped up into a frenzy that will demand a direct clash with the "Russ-kies" or "regime change" in Moscow.

There will be little or no concern about the risks. With the neocons, there never is. The assumption is that if "Amur-ika" is tough, the other side will back down. Then, with U.S.-led economic sanctions from the outside and U.S.-funded NGOs stirring up trouble from the inside, "regime change" becomes the cure-all.

Everyone who's important in Official Washington everyone on the talk shows and op-ed pages knows that these disruptive situations always play out just the way they're diagramed inside the top think tanks. A hand-picked "democratic reformer" who's traveled the think-tank circuit and gotten the seal of approval the likes of Iraq's Ahmed Chalabi will easily be installed and then the target country will do whatever the neocons dictate. After all, that approach worked so well in Iraq. The neocons always know best.

Raising the Stakes

Yet, with Russia, the stakes are even higher than with Iraq. Yes, it's easy to find fault with Vladimir Putin. I myself have a personal rule that men over 40 should keep their shirts on when out in public (unless maybe they're actors in a Bond film or going for a swim at the beach).

But Putin at least is a rational player in global affairs. Indeed, he has tried to cooperate with President Obama on a variety of key issues, including convincing Syria to surrender its chemical weapons and getting Iran to make concessions in the nuclear deal two contributions to world peace that infuriated the neocons who favored bomb-bomb-bombing both Syria and Iran.

At a dinner party in Europe this summer, I was asked by a well-informed British woman what should be done with Putin. My answer was that Putin doesn't frighten me; it's the guy who comes after Putin who frightens me because despite the

neocons' confidence that their "regime change" plans for Moscow will install a malleable moderate, the more likely result would be a much harder-line Russian nationalist than Putin.

The idea of the nuclear codes being handed to someone determined to defend the honor of Mother Russia is what scares me. Then, the clumsily aggressive neocons in Washington would have their reckless counterpart in Moscow, with neither side having the wisdom of a John F. Kennedy or a Nikita Khrushchev as displayed during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

Would American neocons or a Russian super-nationalist have the wisdom and courage to back down, to compromise, to make the concessions necessary to avoid plunging over the edge? Or would they assume that the other guy would blink first and that they would "win" the showdown?

I recall what William R. Polk, one of Kennedy's mid-level aides during the Cuban Missile Crisis, wrote recently about what happens to the human mind under such stress.

"Since human beings make the decisions, we must be aware of decision makers' vulnerabilities," Polk wrote. "During the Cuban Missile Crisis, I was one of about 25 civilians fully engaged in the events. I was not at the center but in the second or third 'echelon.' So I did not feel the full strain, but by the Thursday of the Crisis, I was thoroughly exhausted. My judgment must have been impaired even though I was not aware of it.

"I do remember, however, a terrible episode fortunately lasting only a few minutes at which I thought to myself, 'let's just get it over with.' When later I met with my Soviet counterparts, I got the impression, although they denied it, that my feelings were not unique. How the strain impacted on the inner group I can only guess."

If someone as stable and serious as Bill Polk had such thoughts "let's just get it over with" what might happen when American neocons or hyped-up Russian nationalists are inserted into the decision process? That is an existential question that I don't want to even contemplate.

Endless Putin-Bashing

And, if you doubt that the neocons will engage in over-the-top Cold War-style Putin bashing, you should read the op-ed by The Washington Post's neocon deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl on Monday, entitled "Putin shifts fronts: With a move into Syria, he continues his in-your-face maneuvers."

Diehl delves into Putin's psyche a process that is so much easier than doing

real reporting and concludes that Putin's decision to join the fight in Syria against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda is just another attempt to stick his finger in the eye of the righteous but clueless United States.

Diehl, of course, starts off with the neocon-approved narrative of the Ukraine crisis, ignoring the key role of neocon Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland (Robert Kagan's wife) in midwifing the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installed an intensely anti-Russian regime on Russia's border. Nuland even handpicked the new Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, telling U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt in a phone call several weeks before the coup that "Yats is the guy."

The coup-makers then dispatched neo-Nazi militias (and Islamist militants) to wage a bloody "anti-terrorism operation" against ethnic Russian Ukrainians who resisted the "regime change." [See Consortiumnews.com's "Ukraine Merges Nazis and Islamists."]

But all that complexity is neatly boiled down by American neocons and the mainstream U.S. media as "Russian aggression." Regarding the Syrian civil war, some neocons have even joined with senior Israeli officials in claiming that a victory by Al Qaeda is preferable to the continuation of Assad's secular regime. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Syria's Nightmarish Narrative."]

Yet, however the story goes, the biggest bad guy is Putin, always with sinister motives and evil intent. So, in explaining the situation in Ukraine and Syria, Diehl writes:

"Throughout the summer, Russia's forces in eastern Ukraine kept up a daily drumbeat of attacks on the Ukrainian army, inflicting significant casualties while avoiding a response by Western governments. On Sept. 1, following a new cease-fire, the guns suddenly fell silent. Optimists speculated that Vladimir Putin was backing down.

"Then came the reports from Syria: Russian warplanes were overflying the rebel-held province of Idlib. Barracks were under construction at a new base. Ships were unloading new armored vehicles. Putin, it turns out, wasn't retreating, but shifting fronts, and executing another of the in-your-face maneuvers that have repeatedly caught the Obama administration flat-footed."

The rest of the op-ed is similarly didactic and one-sided: Putin is the villain and Obama is the rube. In Diehl's world, only he and other neocons have what it takes to take on Putin and put Russia down.

Any alternative explanation for Russia's action in Syria is brushed aside, such as Putin deciding that a victory by either Al Qaeda's Nusra Front as favored by

Israel or the even more bloodthirsty Islamic State is unacceptable and thus Assad's regime must be stabilized to avert a major geopolitical catastrophe.

Typically, the neocons breeze past the frightening logic of what the collapse of Assad's military would mean for the Middle East, Europe and the world. After all, once Israeli leaders decided to throw in their lot with Al Qaeda in Syria, the die was cast as far as the neocons were concerned.

But the notion that the neocons can micromanage the outcome in Syria, with "moderate" Al Qaeda taking Damascus rather than the more "radical" Islamic State, reflects the arrogant know-nothing-ism of these U.S. opinion leaders. More likely, Al Qaeda's Nusra Front would coordinate with their former allies in the Islamic State and share in the Sunni revenge against Syria's Christian, Alawite, Shiite and other minorities.

So, while the Islamic State would busy itself chopping off heads of "heretics," Al Qaeda could use its new headquarters in Damascus to plot the next round of terror attacks against the West. And, as destabilizing as the current refugee flow into Europe has been, it would multiply astronomically as the survivors of the Islamic State/Al Qaeda bloodletting flee Syria.

With Europe in chaos and the neocons still insisting that the real enemy is Russia, the possible consequences would be frightening to contemplate. Yet, this is the course that the neocons have set for the world and nearly all the Republican candidates for president have signed on for the journey along with Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton.

In 2014, arch-neocon Robert Kagan, whom Secretary of State Clinton selected as one of her advisers while also promoting his wife, Victoria Nuland, told The New York Times that he could embrace a Clinton presidency: "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." [For more, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?](#)" and "[Obama's True Foreign Policy 'Weakness.'](#)"]

So far, virtually no one in the 2016 presidential race or in the mainstream U.S. news media is seriously addressing the reality of the neocons' "regime change" chaos spreading across the Middle East and the prospect of a destabilized Europe. What limited discussion there is on the campaign trail mostly echoes Jackson Diehl's Putin-bashing.

No one dares confront the existential question of whether the United States and the world can continue to tolerate and accommodate the neoconservatives.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

How Neocons Constrain Obama's Message

Exclusive: President Obama said that just because the U.S. military is "the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail" a wise observation but he then confused his foreign policy speech by pandering to neocon narratives on crises in Ukraine and elsewhere, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As American neocons continue to shape the narratives that define the permissible boundaries for U.S. foreign policy thinking, the failure to enforce any meaningful accountability on them for their role in the criminal and disastrous invasion of Iraq has become painfully clear.

In any vibrant democratic system, it would be unthinkable that the neocons and other war hawks who yahooped the United States into Iraq a little more than a decade ago would still be exercising control over how Americans perceive today's events. Yet, many of the exact same pundits and pols who misled the American people then are still misleading them today.

Thus, we're stuck reading the Washington Post's deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl reinforce the myth that the Ukraine crisis was caused by "the aggression of Russian President Vladimir Putin," when the reality is that it was the United States and the European Union that stirred up the unrest and set the stage for neo-Nazi militias to overthrow elected President Viktor Yanukovich and plunge the country into a nasty little civil war.

Yet, you're not supposed to know that. Anyone who dares explain the actual narrative of what happened in Ukraine is immediately accused of spreading "Russian propaganda." The preferred U.S. narrative of white-hat "pro-democracy" protesters victimized by black-hat villain Yanukovich with the help of the even more villainous Vladimir Putin is so much more fun. It lets Americans cheer as ethnic Russians in the east are burned alive by neo-Nazi mobs and mowed down by Ukrainian military aircraft.

Diehl and his boss, editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, are precisely the same neocon propagandists who told Americans in 2002 and early 2003 that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. Hiatt and Diehl didn't write that as an allegation or a suspicion, but as flat fact. Yet, it turned out to be flatly untrue and hundreds of thousands of people, including nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers, died as a result of the war.

But don't worry: the careers of Diehl and Hiatt didn't suffer. They're still in their same influential jobs a dozen years later, framing how we should understand Syria, Ukraine and the rest of the world.

And, if Hiatt and his editorial board had their way, American troops would still be patrolling Iraq. On Wednesday, the Post's lead editorial condemned President Barack Obama for not maintaining permanent U.S. military forces in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan and not getting deeper into the Syrian civil war.

"You can't fault President Obama for inconsistency," the Post's editorial sneered. "After winning election in 2008, he reduced the U.S. military presence in Iraq to zero. After helping to topple Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi in 2011, he made sure no U.S. forces would remain. He has steadfastly stayed aloof, except rhetorically, from the conflict in Syria. And on Tuesday he promised to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

"The Afghan decision would be understandable had Mr. Obama's previous choices proved out. But what's remarkable is that the results also have been consistent, consistently bad."

The neocons, including the Post's editorialists, voice outrage when Obama paints them with a broad brush as obsessed with putting American boots on the ground. But how can one read that editorial and not recognize that what the neocons want is not just temporary U.S. boots on the ground but to have them cemented into these countries as permanent occupiers?

Mr. Overrated

Then, over at the New York Times, you can read the wisdom of Thomas L. Friedman, another star promoter of the Iraq War who infamously kept telling Americans every six months that the grinding war would look better in six months but it never did.

Friedman, who may be the most overrated columnist in American history, is now asserting what he trusts will become the new conventional wisdom on Ukraine, that Putin lost the Ukraine crisis. On Wednesday, Friedman wrote "In the end, it was Putinism versus Obamaism, and I'd like to be the first on my block to declare that the 'other fellow', Putin, 'just blinked.'"

According to Friedman, the Ukraine crisis “may be the first case of post-post-Cold War brinkmanship, pitting the 21st century versus the 19th. It pits a Chinese/Russian worldview that says we can take advantage of 21st-century globalization whenever we want to enrich ourselves, and we can behave like 19th-century powers whenever we want to take a bite out of a neighbor, versus a view that says, no, sorry, the world of the 21st century is not just interconnected but interdependent and either you play by those rules or you pay a huge price.”

As with Hiatt and Diehl, one has to wonder how Friedman can be so disconnected from his own record as an eager imperialist when it came to U.S. desires for “regime change” in a variety of disliked countries. While it may be true that the United States hasn’t taken bites out of its immediate neighbors recently although there were U.S.-backed coups in Honduras, Haiti and Venezuela in the 21st Century the U.S. government has taken numerous bites out of other countries halfway around the world.

And, as for playing by the “rules,” Friedman’s “exceptional” America sets its own rules. [For more on how this style of propaganda relates to Ukraine, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“NYT’s One-Sided Ukraine Narrative.”](#)]

Friedman’s schoolyard taunt about Putin having “blinked” also is at best a superficial rendering of the recent developments in Ukraine and a failure to recognize the long-term harm that Official Washington’s tough-guy-ism over Ukraine has done to genuine U.S. national interests by shoving Russia and China closer together. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Premature US Victory-Dancing on Ukraine.”](#)]

Even newspaper columnists are supposed to connect their writings to reality once in a while. But I guess since the likes of Hiatt, Diehl and Friedman advocated the gross violation of international law that was the Iraq War, got their facts wrong, and paid no career price for doing so, they have little reason to think that they should change their approach now.

During my four-decade-plus career in journalism, I have seen reporters take on tough stories and do so with high professional standards, yet still have their careers ruined because some influential people accused them of some minor misstep, the case of Gary Webb and his Contra-cocaine series being one tragic example. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Warning in Gary Webb’s Death.”](#)]

In contrast, Hiatt, Diehl and Friedman can provide false propaganda to justify an illegal war that gets hundreds of thousands of people killed while squandering about \$1 trillion in taxpayers’ money, yet they faced no consequences. So, today, they are still able to frame new trouble spots like Syria, Libya and Ukraine and cramp President Obama’s sense of how far he can go

in charting a less violent foreign policy.

Obama's Timid Speech

Even though Obama did oppose the Iraq invasion last decade, he has been sucked into the same barren rhetoric about American "exceptionalism"; he makes similar hyperbolic denunciations of American "enemies"; and he plays into new false narratives like those that paved the way to hell in Iraq.

On Wednesday in addressing the graduating class at West Point, Obama had what might be his last real chance to shatter this phony frame of propaganda, but instead he delivered a pedestrian speech that tried to talk tough about crises in Ukraine and Syria as a defense against neocon critics who will predictably accuse him of weakness.

In Obama's speech, the United States is still "the one indispensable nation," so "when a typhoon hits the Philippines, or schoolgirls are kidnapped in Nigeria, or masked men occupy a building in Ukraine, it is America that the world looks to for help." By the way, his reference to the "masked men" occupying a building in Ukraine wasn't a reference to the masked neo-Nazi militias who seized buildings during the Feb. 22 coup against Yanukovich, but rather a shot at eastern Ukrainians who have resisted the coup.

Again, staying safely within Official Washington's "group think," Obama also lamented "Russia's aggression toward former Soviet states" and said that "unnerves capitals in Europe." But he expressed no concern for the Russian alarm over NATO enveloping Russia's western borders. Obama also took a slap at China.

Obama said, "Regional aggression that goes unchecked – whether in southern Ukraine or the South China Sea, or anywhere else in the world – will ultimately impact our allies and could draw in our military. We can't ignore what happens beyond our boundaries." (Is Obama really suggesting that the United States might go to war with nuclear-armed Russia and China over Ukraine and the South China Sea?)

The President also slid into familiar hyperbole about Russia's agreement to accept Crimea back into the Russian federation after a post-coup referendum there found overwhelming support among Crimean voters to break away from the failed Ukrainian state. Instead of noting that popular will and the reality that Russian troops were already in Crimea as part of a basing agreement for Sevastopol Obama conjured up images of an old-style invasion.

"In Ukraine, Russia's recent actions recall the days when Soviet tanks rolled into Eastern Europe," Obama said, claiming that this latest "aggression" was countered with U.S. public diplomacy. "This mobilization of world opinion and

international institutions served as a counterweight to Russian propaganda and Russian troops on the border and armed militias in ski masks,” he said.

Yet, while using this tough-guy rhetoric, Obama did reject endless warfare and endless occupations, saying:

“Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences – without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required.

“Tough talk often draws headlines, but war rarely conforms to slogans. As General [Dwight] Eisenhower, someone with hard-earned knowledge on this subject, said at this ceremony in 1947: ‘War is mankind’s most tragic and stupid folly; to seek or advise its deliberate provocation is a black crime against all men.’”

And, in possibly the speech’s best line, Obama added: “Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”

Yet, despite such reasonable observations, Obama kept sliding back into super-patriotic rhetoric, including assertions that sounded at best hypocritical if not ludicrous:

“I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law; it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions. And that’s why I will continue to push to close Gitmo – because American values and legal traditions do not permit the indefinite detention of people beyond our borders. That’s why we’re putting in place new restrictions on how America collects and uses intelligence – because we will have fewer partners and be less effective if a perception takes hold that we’re conducting surveillance against ordinary citizens.

“America does not simply stand for stability or the absence of conflict, no matter what the cost. We stand for the more lasting peace that can only come through opportunity and freedom for people everywhere.”

The JFK Contrast

Many eyes must have been rolling while listening to Obama attempt to disassociate himself from scandalous behavior that had occurred during his five-plus years as president. And his stab at soaring rhetoric fell far short of the mark set by President John F. Kennedy when he gave possibly his greatest speech at American University on June 10, 1963, declaring:

“What kind of peace do I mean and what kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, and the kind that enables men and nations to grow, and to hope, and build a better life for their children, not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace in our time but peace in all time.”

Kennedy recognized that his appeal for this serious pursuit of peace would be dismissed by the cynics and the warmongers as unrealistic and even dangerous. The Cold War was near its peak when Kennedy spoke. But he was determined to change the frame of the foreign policy debate, away from the endless bravado of militarism:

“I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary, rational end of rational men. I realize the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war, and frequently the words of the pursuers fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task.

“Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings.”

And then, in arguably the most important words that he ever spoke, Kennedy said, “For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.”

In his day, Kennedy also faced powerful war hawks who sought to constrain his vision of an international system that recognized the legitimate interests of other nations and their peoples. But Kennedy still deployed his rhetoric bravely to smash the narrow framework of Cold War reductionism.

By contrast, Obama accepted the tiny frame as shaped by Official Washington’s still powerful neocons; he simply tried to maneuver for a little more elbow room.

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

trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Rigging the Game Against Palestinians

Official Washington's neocons are busy spinning the latest U.S. failure to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian peace as an excuse to extend the Israeli occupation indefinitely by insisting that the Palestinians first pass some ever-receding test of quality self-governance, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Now that Secretary of State John Kerry's attempt to breathe life into the diplomacy known as the Middle East peace process has been widely pronounced even by those who appropriately salute his efforts to be a failure, different quarters are chiming in with recommendations for what to do next about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some suggestions are helpful; others would only help to perpetuate the Israeli occupation and lack of an agreement, and may be tacitly intended to do just that.

The *New York Times* editorial board proposes that the United States, as a last act before ending this phase of its active diplomacy on the problem, post on the international bulletin board its own sense of what the principles of a final settlement ought to look like. This is probably worth doing, and it has the merit of reflecting the fact that the basic lines of a feasible two-state solution have been apparent for some time.

Perhaps this would help to clarify who is resisting such a settlement and who is not. This has been tried before, however, most notably with the Clinton parameters, and it was insufficient to push the process over a finish line.

A couple of other limitations and uncertainties, revealed in the most recent diplomacy, would have to be overcome for such a U.S. declaration of principles to help. One concerns whether the Obama administration would be able and willing to backtrack on how, in its recent efforts to get some kind of preliminary agreement, it moved away from the consensus feasible settlement and adopted certain Israeli positions, such as regarding a continued troop presence in the Jordan River valley, that were bound to be unacceptable to any Palestinian leader.

The other uncertainty concerns the ability of one of the parties with the Israeli government demonstrating this skill in virtuoso form to use mixtures of procedural and substantive issues to put off any agreement even without explicitly rejecting U.S.-promulgated principles. The Netanyahu government has done this with its "Jewish state" demand and, more recently, with its renegeing on a commitment to release Palestinian prisoners. The latter tactic resembles the familiar North Korean ploy of selling the same horse twice by making new demands for compensation in return for doing something it was already supposed to do anyway.

A different, but old and familiar, proposal that comes from those most sympathetic to an indefinite Israeli occupation has been voiced anew by Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post* and Michael Singh of the Washington Institute for New East Policy. This notion is that a Palestinian state is not something to be created from above through negotiations but built up from below through a long process of developing Palestinian institutions.

The idea is that statehood is not a gift to be given to the Palestinians, but something they must earn by being good administrators. The appropriate role for the United States and other outsiders, according to this formulation, is to provide assistance and tutelage in being good administrators.

Thus Diehl says, "The Obama administration could have kept the forward movement going by continuing to promote the construction of Palestinian institutions including a democratic, corruption-resistant government and by pushing Israel to turn over more security responsibility and remove impediments to the Palestinian economy."

Similarly, Singh writes that "a greater emphasis should be placed on Palestinian economic growth and reform" and addressing "corruption in the PA."

This idea is not a prescription at all for reaching a settlement, ending the occupation, and creating a Palestinian state. It instead is a prescription for extending the occupation indefinitely by making it run smoothly. It is a method for making the principal Israeli sub-contractor for the occupation because that is what the Palestinian Authority has become do its part of the occupation duties tolerably well.

Meanwhile, Israel arrogates for itself the function of judge in determining whether the Palestinians have performed well enough to move to the next stage of this game. There will always be some reason why they are declared not yet ready. Corruption, as mentioned by both Diehl and Singh, will be a perennial favorite issue for this purpose.

If necessary, the Israelis can take direct action to make sure the economic and security performance of the Palestinians does not get *too* good, lest too many people start asking whether they really are ready for a state. The Israelis have done so in the past by trashing Palestinian infrastructure in the West Bank, and of course have done so in a more brutal way with the Gaza Strip in making it as difficult as possible for the Palestinian governing authority there to govern.

Singh states, "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not ripe to be solved." The obvious, glaring question to be asked in response is, "So when, after 47 years of occupation and more than two decades since the Palestinian Authority was created, will it ever be ripe?"

The actual answer, of course, given the framework Singh is trying to impose, is "never." But the false promise of statehood at the end of the rainbow helps to keep enough Palestinians docilely on the reservation while the occupation continues.

Diehl tries to encourage the idea that there actually is some sort of progression toward that ever-receding statehood pot at the rainbow's end by asserting that there has been "cumulatively enormous progress toward coexistence" and the parties "have traveled most of the path to a final settlement." Totally ignoring trends in Israeli politics over the last 20 years, he would have us (and Palestinians) believe that the Palestinians are closer to having a state now, in the era of Benjamin Netanyahu, than they were when Israeli policy was made by Yitzhak Rabin.

Amazingly, Diehl cites as progress Ariel Sharon's pull-out from the Gaza Strip, as if a unilateral action leading to a suffocating blockade and destructive military assaults is somehow a step toward a negotiated settlement providing for two states living peacefully beside each other. He also strains to reassure us about the continued construction of Israeli settlements, saying that the pace of colonization has slowed from earlier in the occupation and that most of the new housing is in "areas near the 1967 border," apparently paying no attention to recent land appropriations that Haaretz describes as the "largest in years."

Amid the fact-creating on the ground and the false-promise-making in print, it is understandable that more and more people talk of discarding hope for a two-solution and concentrating on trying to obtain human rights within one state. Even the son of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas has made this transition. But no one has yet sufficiently explained how the nationalist aspirations of both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs could be satisfied this way, and if they cannot, how a one-state solution would endure.

Perhaps action needs to be taken in the name of human rights within a single

state, but without discarding the goal of two states. In this regard one of the best suggestions for where things ought to go from here comes from Henry Siegman:

“A two-state outcome is still possible if Palestinians were to take their fate into their own hands, rather than waiting for a deus ex machina, by shutting down institutions such as the Palestinian Authority that serve their subjugators and launching a non-violent, anti-apartheid struggle for equal citizenship in the de facto Greater Israel to which they have been consigned. Such a determined struggle may even convince Israelis to accept a two-state outcome, for the loss of their state’s Jewish identity in a single state in which Jews are outnumbered by Arabs is a price most Israelis will not pay for a Greater Israel.”

Siegman assesses that if Israel still rejected a two-state solution under such conditions, broad international backing for the anti-apartheid struggle would lead even Washington to abandon Israeli apartheid. That is hardly a given, and American policy in such circumstances would still be the most critical variable of all.

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

Neocons Push Israeli-Saudi Alliance

Exclusive: Early U.S. presidents warned against the dangers of “entangling alliances,” prescient advice that the neocons want President Obama to ignore amid demands from Israel and Saudi Arabia that America tie itself up in the endless and bloody sectarian conflicts of the Middle East, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

American neocons are rallying to the new Israeli-Saudi alliance by demanding that President Barack Obama engage more aggressively against the two countries’ foes in the Middle East, thus “bolstering Israeli and Saudi confidence,” as the Washington Post’s deputy editorial-page editor Jackson Diehl declared.

For years, the Washington Post has served as Official Washington’s neocon flagship, bristling in support of every hawkish demand for U.S. intervention in the Mideast, most notably assembling a flotilla of misguided consensus in

support of President George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq and then pounding any American skeptics who dared emerge over the horizon.

Diehl's column on Monday represented an extension of the neocons' knee-jerk support of Israeli interests to those of the Saudi monarchy, Israel's new secret friend. Diehl hoisted the banner of this odd-couple alliance in excoriating President Obama for letting down these two "allies" as they maneuver to crush what's known as the Shiite crescent extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon.

In sync with the regional interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel, Diehl argued that the United States should toughen up its military posture in the Middle East with the goal of "reshaping conditions on the ground," specifically going after Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and damaging the new Iranian government of President Hassan Rouhani, or in Diehl's words, "weakening Assad [and] degrading Iranian strength."

Diehl added, "That work could be done without deploying U.S. troops, but it would be hard, expensive and require a lot of presidential attention."

Presumably, Diehl wants the U.S. military to launch those cruise missiles that were poised to "degrade" Assad's regime in late August, and he hopes the U.S. diplomatic corps will rebuff Iran's overtures for a diplomatic settlement over its nuclear program.

Like other neocons, Diehl takes Obama to task for giving peace a chance by accepting Assad's surrender of Syria's chemical weapons, by seeking a negotiated settlement to the Syrian civil war (with Assad agreeing to send representatives to Geneva although the fractious Saudi-backed Syrian rebels and their jihadist allies still balk), by working with Iran on a deal that would swap tighter international controls over Iran's nuclear program for sanctions relief, and by pressing for meaningful talks between Israel and Palestine toward a two-state solution.

Diehl deems this diplomatic offensive a series of "foreign policy fantasies," the title of his Washington Post op-ed. By pushing diplomacy over confrontation, Obama has, in Diehl's view, "driven a wedge between the United States and some of its closest allies [leaving] U.S. allies in the region Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey marooned in a scary new world where *their* vital interests are no longer under U.S. protection.

"Israel and Saudi Arabia worry that Obama will strike a deal with Iran that frees it from sanctions without entirely extirpating its capacity to enrich uranium, leaving it with the potential to produce nuclear weapons. But more fundamentally, they and their neighbors are dismayed that the United States

appears to have opted out of the regional power struggle between Iran and its proxies and Israel and the Arab states aligned with the United States.

“It is the prospect of waging this regional version of the Cold War without significant U.S. support that has prompted Saudi leaders to hint at a rupture with Washington, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to talk more publicly than ever about Israel’s willingness to act alone.”

Fighting for Others

Diehl – like virtually all his compatriots in the mainstream U.S. news media – leaves out the detail that Israeli already possesses one of the most sophisticated though undeclared nuclear arsenals in the world, while U.S. intelligence agencies still conclude that Iran is not working on even a single nuclear bomb.

Diehl also doesn’t bother to explain exactly why the American people should continue to expend vast amounts of money, prestige and blood to take sides in these interminable and often incomprehensible conflicts in the Middle East. The neocons simply behave as if every American should understand why a Shiite-dominated regime is so much more objectionable than a Sunni one; why an absolute monarchy like Saudi Arabia is preferable to a limited democracy like Iran; and why Israel has some fundamental right to possess East Jerusalem and other Palestinian lands.

For many Americans, it’s perhaps even harder to understand why the likes of Jackson Diehl and his boss, editorial-page editor Fred Hiatt, continue to reign over the Washington Post’s editorial section more than a decade after they helped guide the American people into the disastrous war in Iraq.

Not only has there been no accountability for their journalistic errors, including reporting Saddam Hussein’s alleged possession of WMDs as “flat fact” when it was no fact at all, but also none for the ugly character assassination against war critics, such as former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson whose wife, CIA officer Valerie Plame, saw her career destroyed when the Bush administration exposed her identity on the Post’s op-ed pages and Hiatt then kept up a years-long campaign to destroy Wilson’s reputation. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Why WPost’s Hiatt Should Be Fired.”](#)]

Beyond no accountability at the Post, there appear to have been no lessons learned. Hiatt, Diehl and the other neocons simply continue to place the policy desires of Israel, in particular, and now its new buddy, Saudi Arabia, above the foreign policy of the U.S. government and above the interests of the American people.

In the early years of the Republic, Presidents George Washington and John Adams warned against the dangers of “entangling alliances” that could draw the United States into faraway and expensive conflicts that would drain the Treasury and create unnecessary enemies. In his Farewell Address, Washington saw the risk of foreign influence coming not only from adversaries but from allies who would seek to twist American domestic opinion in their favor.

Washington warned: “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.”

Those early warnings seem particularly prescient today regarding the Middle East, given the extensive and expensive efforts by Israel and Saudi Arabia to win favor in Official Washington through lobbying, propaganda and financial favors doled out to many influential Americans.

While Israel’s skills at lobbying and propaganda are renowned, Saudi Arabia also can throw its weight around through its ownership of American debt, its ability to manipulate oil prices and its stakes in major U.S. corporations, including in the powerful Wall Street financial sector.

Now that these two longtime rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia, have formed a behind-the-scenes alliance joining together on key regional issues such as countering Iranian influence, subverting the Assad regime in Syria, and backing the military coup in Egypt the Obama administration finds itself confronting an imposing phalanx of political and economic clout.

The ease with which neocons like Jackson Diehl lift up the banner of this new combination of Israeli-Saudi interests is a telling sign of the two countries’ impressive geopolitical muscle. [For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Israeli-Saudi Alliance Slips into View.”](#)]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

WPost Revives Its Plame-gate Smear

Exclusive: The Washington Post not only swallowed George W. Bush's lies about Iraq's WMD but the neocon newspaper spat on Americans who dared challenge those lies, especially ex-U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson and his CIA wife, Valerie Plame. A top Post editor has now revived that abuse, notes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Sometimes it seems that the humane thing to do with the Washington Post would be to counsel it on the advantages of corporate euthanasia. Then, with its faded glories of Watergate clutched to its chest, it could disappear from its embarrassing present in which the newspaper is disgracing whatever good it did in the past.

Yes, I know you could argue that even its Watergate fame was way overrated, that the newspaper missed the most important aspect of the scandal how it originated with President Richard Nixon's frantic search for a missing file that documented his sabotage of the 1968 Vietnam peace talks, what President Lyndon Johnson privately had termed Nixon's "treason."

The Post's misguided focus on the Watergate cover-up, rather than on the far more grievous underlying crime of extending the Vietnam War for four years, led to one of Official Washington's silliest sayings: "the cover-up is worse than the crime." [For details on the origins of Watergate, see Robert Parry's [*America's Stolen Narrative*](#).]

But at least with Watergate, the Post's editors along with reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein could be credited with keeping the pressure on so Nixon would face some accountability, a humiliating resignation. In effect, the Post helped nail this treacherous war criminal even if it was a bit like jailing Al Capone for tax evasion.

That, however, was then, not now. Over the past few decades, the Washington Post seems to have gotten nearly every big story wrong, most tragically the invasion of Iraq which the Post promoted on its editorial pages and failed to question in its news pages. Then, even as George W. Bush's phony WMD case was collapsing, the Post turned its guns on former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson for having the courage to explode one of Bush's central lies.

Rather than show any journalistic integrity regarding its own massive failure to question the WMD case for war, the Post published a Robert Novak column that exposed Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, as an undercover CIA officer, thus

destroying her career. But even that wasn't enough. The Post's editorial board spent the next several years repeating every ugly Republican talking point aimed at tearing down Wilson.

The key takeaway from the so-called Plame-gate Affair should have been that Wilson was correct in his description of his efforts in 2002, that he along with other U.S. representatives investigated and debunked one of Vice President Dick Cheney's suspicions about Iraq trying to buy yellowcake uranium from Niger.

Yet, despite the U.S. intelligence community's consensus that the Niger suspicions were false, President Bush shoehorned the allegation into his 2003 State of the Union speech as the so-called "sixteen words": "The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

Speaking Truth to Power

After Bush's speech, Wilson revealed, accurately, that the U.S. government knew those suspicions to be false. Wilson was also right when he complained that his truth-telling prompted a counterattack by the Bush administration to discredit him, which included leaking to the press the fact that his wife was a covert CIA officer involved with proliferation issues (and whose office dispatched Wilson on the mission to Niger).

So, here was a public servant who had undertaken a difficult assignment to Niger and who tried to warn the U.S. government away from some bad information. Then, when President Bush tried to deceive the American people anyway, Wilson had the courage and integrity to get the real information to the public.

You might have thought that the Washington Post would want to defend such a person. Instead, the Post went to extraordinary lengths to disparage Wilson while Bush was still in office and has continued that ugly campaign literally to this day. In an [op-ed column](#) on Monday, the Post's deputy editorial-page editor Jackson Diehl reprised the smears against Wilson in the context of discussing the Benghazi case.

With sarcasm dripping from his words, Diehl wrote: "Remember the scandal of 'the 16 words'? If you do, you've probably been inside the Beltway too long, literally or figuratively. If not, the quick version is this: A former ambassador named Joseph C. Wilson IV [charged in 2003](#) that President George W. Bush had included in his State of the Union address a (16-word) allegation about Iraq that his top aides knew to be false, that Saddam Hussein had sought to purchase uranium from Niger.

"Wilson then amped up the ensuing partisan uproar by claiming there had been a

White House conspiracy to punish him by deliberately blowing the cover of his CIA wife. Most of what Wilson said was later proved to be grossly exaggerated, or simply false. But that didn't stop Democrats and partisan media from devoting years to conspiracy-spinning and attempts to pin political and criminal responsibility on Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney or Karl Rove. Blustered Wilson: 'It's of keen interest to me to see whether or not we can get Karl Rove frog-marched out of the White House in handcuffs.'"

To buttress this renewed assault on Wilson, Diehl linked in the Post's online edition to one of the quibbling editorials that he and his colleagues had published to disparage Wilson years ago. So, Wilson, a private citizen who was doing his civic duty both for the government and as a whistleblower for the public, was torn down and humiliated by the Washington Post for speaking truth to power.

Accountability at the Post?

But what, you might ask, happened to the Post editorialists who got snookered by Bush's false WMD claims and helped bamboozle the nation into a disastrous and illegal war? Well, the answer is nothing.

Fred Hiatt and Jackson Diehl remain on the Post's masthead as editorial-page editor and deputy editor, respectively, just as they did when they were flogging the Iraq War. They and other key news executives at the Washington Post faced no accountability for getting fooled about WMD and serving as propagandists for an aggressive war.

As disgraceful as that may seem to people who actually care about journalism, the Post's malfeasance has been compounded by the fact that no one at the newspaper apparently sees anything wrong with continuing the Hiatt-Diehl obsession to destroy Joseph Wilson, whose family has already suffered enough for his attempt to set the factual record straight.

It also speaks volumes about the disappearing journalistic standards of the Washington Post that the newspaper would allow its deputy editorial-page editor to lead off a column by making fun of anyone who bothers to remember the circumstances behind the terrible Iraq War. Diehl may find it uproarious for some people to remember the fraud of Bush's 16 words, but it is far more laughable in a very dark way that Diehl is still employed in a position of responsibility inside a news organization.

At this stage, however, the pattern of journalistic misconduct at the Washington Post has been so consistent for so long that the blame cannot be placed at the feet of a few editors. The entire newspaper is a disgrace to the principles of

American journalism. [For more details on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Why WPost's Hiatt Should Be Fired.](#)"]

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WPost Pushes for Syrian War

The neoconservative Washington Post wants people to forget about how it and other Iraq War boosters got pretty much everything wrong about that disaster. Amnesia is especially important now as the Post and the neocons begin a new push for U.S. military intervention in Syria, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Just when it seemed we could move beyond the anniversary-related armchair refighting of the Iraq War, [we get from Jackson Diehl](#) of the *Washington Post* editorial staff another mis-aimed salvo from a proponent of that war. Diehl's more immediate subject is the current Syrian civil war, into which a U.S.-armed intervention has been a favorite cause of the *Post's* editorial page for many months.

Diehl's declared objectives in his signed column are to absolve himself and other Iraq War proponents from any credibility gap when they advocate U.S. immersion in yet another Middle Eastern war, and to warn of how any Iraq War syndrome might unwisely dissuade the United States from conducting worthwhile military interventions, such as in Syria. If the Iraq War is to be used to make such a case on an issue of current importance, then we had better wallow a little longer in issues involving the old war.

Diehl begins his comparison to Iraq with the thundering understatement that the situation there "hasn't turned out, so far, as we war supporters hoped." ("So far"? That has to be one of the choicest examples of hope springing eternal.) He then addresses his topic from a humanitarian angle, giving us some figures to try to make a case that "the larger humanitarian price of Syria has been far greater" than that of war in Iraq.

His methodology of comparing current rates of casualties in Syria with averages for the entire period of the U.S. presence in Iraq is deeply flawed by the fact

that the period of intense, high-casualty civil warfare in Iraq, which was comparable to what we have seen in Syria over the past couple of years, was only one portion of the longer period of U.S. occupation. A more fundamental flaw is that he gives us no reason to believe that adding more flames to an existing fire through military intervention would lead the humanitarian problem in Syria to lessen rather than worsen. Nor does he make any moral, as well as policy, distinction made between a war that one starts oneself and one that is already under way.

The next topic in the column is al-Qaeda, with Diehl repeating the flypaper theory of counterterrorism by saying that "in Iraq, the United States faced down al-Qaeda and eventually dealt it a decisive defeat." The fallacy with this theory is that it assumes there is a fixed number of terrorists, with the task simply being one of attracting them to where we can kill them. In fact, by its invasion and occupation of Iraq, the United States generated far more terrorists, including those of the al-Qaeda ilk, than it killed.

There was no al-Qaeda in Iraq until after the U.S. invasion and the ensuing civil war created it. Moreover, the entire war was a propaganda bonanza for Osama bin Laden, lending credibility in many eyes to his accusations about the United States being out to kill Muslims, occupy their lands, and plunder their resources. The war unquestionably gave a major boost to jihadist terrorism.

Diehl asserts that "the Iraq war prompted low-level meddling by Iran, Syria and other neighbors but otherwise left the surrounding region unscathed, thanks to the U.S. presence." Actually, the "low-level meddling" by Iran amid the U.S.-triggered disorder brought Iran the payoff of now being the dominant foreign influence in Iraq. And far from leaving the surrounding region unscathed, the U.S.-unleashed turmoil in Iraq stimulated a wider regional sectarian conflict, with the civil war in Syria being itself the bloodiest current manifestation of that conflict.

Of course, advocates of entering the Syrian war have to deal with public resistance to anything like the long and costly Iraqi expedition. So Diehl assures us that he is only talking about "limited use of U.S. airpower and collaboration with forces on the ground," which, he says, "could have quickly put an end to the Assad regime 18 months ago, preventing 60,000 deaths and rise of al-Qaeda."

He offers no explanation of how, given all the ingredients (especially the sectarian hatred) of the current civil war, dispatching the Assad regime would have had anything like the salutary effects he postulates, or would have those effects if the regime collapsed this week. What, for example, happens to the Alawites if the regime goes, and what happens to all the desire for vengeance on

the Sunni side when that happens?

Note especially the remarkable parallel (which Diehl himself does not highlight) between what is being promised (or hoped for) here and what was promised and hoped for with the invasion of Iraq: that toppling the incumbent regime would be quick and cheap and could be done without any messy, resource-devouring turmoil to follow. The column has other remarkable echoes of the selling of the Iraq War. There is even a line about how if we don't intervene in Syria, al-Qaeda will gain control over chemical and biological weapons.

Diehl says, "The problem here is not that advocates of the Iraq invasion have failed to learn its lessons." If his column is any indication, that is very much a problem.

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.)
