

A Media Unmoored from Facts

Exclusive: Mainstream U.S. journalism has completely lost its way, especially in dealing with foreign policy issues where bias now overwhelms any commitment to facts, a dangerous development, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Several weeks ago, I received a phone call from legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh who had seen one of my recent stories about Syria and wanted to commiserate over the state of modern journalism. Hersh's primary question regarding reporters and editors at major news outlets these days was: "Do they care what the facts are?"

Hersh noted that in the past – in the 1970s when he worked at The New York Times – even executive editor Abe Rosenthal, who was a hard-line cold warrior with strong ideological biases, still wanted to know what was really going on.

My experience was similar at The Associated Press. Among the older editors, there was still a pride in getting the facts right – and not getting misled by some politician or spun by some government flack.

That journalistic code, however, no longer exists – at least not on foreign policy and national security issues. The major newspapers and TV networks are staffed largely by careerists who uncritically accept what they are fed by U.S. government officials or what they get from think-tank experts who are essentially in the pay of special interests.

For a variety of reasons – from the draconian staff cuts among foreign correspondents to the career fear of challenging some widely held "group think" – many journalists have simply become stenographers, taking down what the Important People say is true, not necessarily what is true.

It's especially easy to go with the flow when writing about some demonized foreign leader. Then, no editor apparently expects anything approaching balance or objectivity, supposedly key principles of journalism. Indeed, if a reporter gave one of these hated figures a fair shake, there might be grumblings about whether the reporter was a "fill-in-the-blank apologist." The safe play is to pile on.

This dishonesty – or lack of any commitment to the truth – is even worse among editorialists and columnists. Having discovered that there was virtually no cost for being catastrophically wrong about the facts leading into the Iraq invasion in 2003, these writers must feel so immune from accountability that they can

safely ignore reality.

But – for some of us old-timers – it’s still unnerving to read the work of these “highly respected” journalists who simply don’t care what the facts are.

For instance, the establishment media has been striking back ferociously against President Barack Obama’s apostasy in a series of interviews published in The Atlantic, in which he defends his decision not to bomb the Syrian government in reaction to a mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Though The Atlantic article was posted a month ago, the media fury is still resonating and reverberating around Official Washington, with Washington Post editorial-page editor Fred Hiatt penning the latest condemnation of Obama’s supposed fecklessness for not enforcing his “red line” on chemical-weapon use in Syria by bombing the Syrian military.

Remember that in 2002-03, Hiatt penned Post editorials that reported, as “flat fact,” that Iraq possessed hidden stockpiles of WMD – and he suffered not a whit for being horribly wrong. More than a dozen years later, Hiatt is still the Post’s editorial-page editor – one of the most influential jobs in American journalism.

On Thursday, Hiatt reported as flat fact that Syria’s “dictator, Bashar al-Assad, killed 1,400 or more people in a chemical gas attack,” a reference to the 2013 sarin atrocity. Hiatt then lashed out at President Obama for not punishing Assad and – even worse – for showing satisfaction over that restraint.

Citing The Atlantic interviews, Hiatt wrote that Obama “said he had been criticized because he refused to follow the ‘playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment,’ which would have counseled greater U.S. intervention.” Hiatt was clearly disgusted with Obama’s pusillanimous choice.

The No ‘Slam Dunk’ Warning

But what Hiatt and other neocon columnists consistently ignore from The Atlantic article is the disclosure that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper informed Obama that U.S. intelligence analysts doubted that Assad was responsible for the sarin attack.

Clapper even used the phrase “slam dunk,” which is associated with the infamous 2002 pledge from then-CIA Director George Tenet to President George W. Bush about how “slam dunk” easy it would be to make the case that Iraq was hiding WMD. More than a decade later, brandishing that disgraced phrase, Clapper told Obama that it was not a “slam dunk” that Assad was responsible for the sarin attack.

In other words, Obama's decision not to bomb Assad's military was driven, in part, by the intelligence community's advice that he might end up bombing the wrong people. Since then, evidence has built up that radical jihadists opposed to Assad staged the sarin attack as a provocation to trick the U.S. military into entering the war on their side.

But those facts clearly are not convenient to Hiatt's neocon goal – i.e., how to get the United States into another Mideast “regime change” war – so he simply expunges the “slam dunk” exchange between Clapper and Obama and inserts instead a made-up “fact,” the flat-fact certainty of Assad's guilt.

Hiatt's assertion of the death toll – as “1,400 or more people” – is also dubious. Doctors on the ground in Damascus placed the number of dead at several hundred. The 1,400 figure was essentially manufactured by the U.S. government using a dubious methodology of counting bodies shown on “social media,” failing to take into account the question of whether the victims died as a result of the Aug. 21, 2013 incident.

Relying on “social media” for evidence is a notoriously unreliable practice, since pretty much anyone can post anything on the Internet. And, in the case of Syria, there are plenty of interest groups that have a motive to misidentify or even fabricate images for the purpose of influencing public opinion and policy. There is also the Internet's vulnerability as a devil's playground for professional intelligence services.

But Hiatt is far from alone in lambasting Obama for failing to do what All the Smart People of Washington knew he should do: bomb, bomb, bomb Assad's forces in Syria – even if that might have led to the collapse of the army and the takeover of Damascus by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and/or the Islamic State.

Nationally syndicated columnist Richard Cohen, another Iraq War cheerleader who suffered not at all for that catastrophe, accused Obama of “hubris” for taking pride in his decision not to bomb Syria in 2013 and then supposedly basing his foreign policy on that inaction.

“In an odd way, Obama's failure to intervene in Syria or to enforce his stated ‘red line’ there has become the rationale for an entire foreign policy doctrine – one based more on hubris than success,” wrote Cohen in a column on Tuesday.

Note how Cohen – like Hiatt – fails to mention the relevant fact that DNI Clapper warned the President that the intelligence community was unsure who had unleashed the sarin attack or whether Assad had, in fact, crossed the “red line.”

Cohen also embraces the conventional wisdom that Obama was mistaken not to have

intervened in Syria, ignoring the fact that Obama did, in violation of international law, authorize arming and training of thousands of Syrian rebels to violently overthrow the Syrian government, with many of those weapons (and recruits) falling into the hands of terror groups, such as Al Qaeda's Nusra Front. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Climbing into Bed with Al Qaeda.](#)"]

Neocon Ideologues

So, it appears that these well-regarded geniuses don't appreciate the idea of ascertaining the facts before charging off to war. And there's a reason for that: many are neocon ideologues who reached their conclusion about what needs to be done in the Middle East – eliminate governments that are troublesome to Israel – and thus they view information as just something to be manipulated to manipulate the public.

This thinking stems from the 1990s when neocons combined their recognition of America's unmatched military capabilities – as displayed in the Persian Gulf War in 1990-91 and made even more unchallengeable with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991– with Israel's annoyance over inconclusive negotiations with the Palestinians and security concerns over Lebanon's Hezbollah militia.

The new solution to Israel's political and security problems would be "regime change" in countries seen as aiding and abetting Israel's enemies. The strategy came together among prominent U.S. neocons working on Benjamin Netanyahu's 1996 campaign for Israeli prime minister.

Rather than continuing those annoying negotiations with the Palestinians, Netanyahu's neocon advisers – including Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser and Mevray Wurmser – advocated a new approach, called "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm."

The "clean break" sought "regime change" in countries supporting Israel's close-in enemies, whether Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Syria under the Assad dynasty or Iran, a leading benefactor of Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas.

Two years later, in 1998, the neocon Project for the New American Century called for a U.S. invasion of Iraq. PNAC was founded by neocon luminaries William Kristol and Robert Kagan. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mysterious Why of the Iraq War.](#)"]

After George W. Bush became president and the 9/11 attacks left the American people lusting for revenge, the pathway was cleared for implementing the "regime change" agenda, with Iraq still at the top of the list although it had nothing to do with 9/11. Again, the last thing the neocons wanted was to inform the American people of the real facts about Iraq because that might have sunk the

plans for this war of choice.

Thus, the American public was consistently misled by both the Bush administration and the neocon-dominated mainstream media. The Post's Hiatt, for instance, was out there regularly reporting Iraq's WMD threat as "flat fact."

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and months of fruitless searching for the promised WMD caches, Hiatt finally acknowledged that the Post should have been more circumspect in its confident claims about the WMD. "If you look at the editorials we write running up [to the war], we state as flat fact that he [Saddam Hussein] has weapons of mass destruction," Hiatt said in an interview with the Columbia Journalism Review. "If that's not true, it would have been better not to say it." [CJR, March/April 2004]

Yet, Hiatt's supposed remorse didn't stop him and the Post editorial page from continuing its single-minded support for the Iraq War – and heaping abuse on war critics, such as former U.S. Ambassador Joe Wilson who challenged President Bush's claims about Iraq seeking yellowcake uranium from Niger.

The degree to which the neocons continue to dominate the major news outlets, such as The Washington Post and The New York Times, is demonstrated by the lack of virtually any accountability on the journalists who misinformed their readers about an issue as consequential as the war in Iraq.

And, despite the disaster in Iraq, the neocons never cast aside their "clean break" playbook. After Iraq, the "regime change" strategy listed Syria next and then Iran. Although the neocons suffered a setback in 2008 with the election of Iraq War opponent Barack Obama, they never gave up their dreams.

The neocons worked through Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other Iraq War supporters who managed to survive and even move up through the government ranks despite Obama's distaste for their military solutions.

While in office, Clinton sabotaged chances to get Iran to surrender much of its nuclear material – all the better to keep the "regime change" option in play – and she lobbied for a covert military intervention to oust Syria's Assad. (She also tipped the balance in favor of another "regime change" war in Libya that has created one more failed state in the volatile region.)

But the most disturbing fact is that these war promoters – both in politics and the press – continue to be rewarded for their warmongering. Hiatt retains his gilded perch as the Post's editorial-page editor (setting Official Washington's agenda); Cohen remains one of America's leading national columnists; and Hillary Clinton is favored to become the next President.

So, the answer to Sy Hersh's question – “Do they care what the facts are?” – is, it appears, no. There is just too much money and power involved in influencing and controlling Washington and – through those levers of finance, diplomacy and war – controlling the world. When that's at stake, real facts can become troublesome things. For the people who wield this influence and control, it is better for them to manufacture their own.

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](#)).

Dangerous Punditry on Syria

Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen has built a long record of getting nearly every major issue wrong over many decades but still eagerly dispenses the latest conventional wisdom emerging from Official Washington's misguided “group thinks,” as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar noticed regarding Syria.

By Paul R. Pillar

Ill-fated U.S. military adventures abroad have had various fathers, even though some of those fathers have tried to disavow paternity once the problems became apparent. Neoconservatives figure prominently in this story, especially given that one of the most costly misadventures in recent times, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was a distinctly neocon project.

But even with that project, the neocon promoters of the war had to manufacture a rationale that tapped into another strain of sentiment that has helped to lead to such misadventures: the fear of terrorist or other attacks against the United States itself.

Yet another paternal line is liberal interventionism, which distinguishes itself from both the terrorism-related fears and the neocon objective of spreading democracy and free market values by focusing on the humanitarian objective of saving foreign lives overseas.

All three of these dimensions, democratization, counterterrorism and humanitarianism, are figuring prominently in current rhetoric about use of U.S. military force in the Middle East and especially Syria. Collectively all three dimensions have been creating substantial political pressure in favor of use of more such force than the Obama administration has used to date.

A representative of the liberal interventionist school, and of some of the worst errors of that school, is *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen. Although questions certainly can be raised about whether Cohen merits the label of liberal and whether the *Post* is justified in considering him a “left-leaning” columnist, Cohen himself endeavors to distinguish himself from schools of thought more associated with the political right, whether such distinctions are justified or not.

Lately Cohen has been lashing out at President Obama regarding the use, or non-use, of military force in Syria. Cohen repeatedly insists that the United States needs “to do more” there militarily. He seems to have less concern about exactly what form more military action should take or how such action would work, except to try to dispel any perception that whatever he has in mind is anything like the previous administration’s costly misadventure in Iraq.

In a column earlier this month, Cohen wrote, “George W. Bush’s war was a lesson to us all. But from the start of the Syrian crisis, no one sane was proposing to do it all over again. Instead, the proposal was to intervene early and attempt to avoid the bloodbath and humanitarian calamity that have resulted.”

The column refers again later to “the proposal,” but the reader is left to guess what “the proposal” consists of, other than that it somehow means “to do more” than what the United States is doing militarily now.

In a column three weeks later, Cohen said “nobody of consequence ever publicly proposed putting substantial numbers of U.S. service members in the Middle East.” In doing so he had to exclude explicitly former Republican presidential nominee and current Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain, as well as Senator Lindsey Graham (and Cohen really should have mentioned others as well) from his assertions about what sane and consequential people have or have not been proposing.

Finally in the same column we learn what “the proposal” is: according to Cohen, it consists of “establishing a no-fly zone to ground Assad’s gunships and maybe taking a shot or two at a key government installation.”

The concept of a no-fly zone, or rather, just the *term* “no-fly zone”, has become a popular way to call for more use of military force while not arguing in favor of a new ground war and also making it sound as if the caller has a specific and well-conceived proposal even if he doesn’t. Like many others who have flown the term “no fly-zone,” Cohen offers no details about what such an operation would entail, and he gives no indication that he has ever bothered to think about such details.

Despite the salience of barrel bombs that Syrian regime forces have dropped from helicopters, most of the bloodshed the regime has caused has come from ground operations, including the pummeling of urban neighborhoods with ground-based artillery. A no-fly zone can be a useful way to help protect a well-established and friendly force on the ground from attacks by a hostile air force, as has been true in the past in Iraqi Kurdistan, but that is not the situation in Syria at all.

Who would control the ground below a no-fly zone in Syria? If it isn't the Syrian regime's army, or a substantial Western ground force, who is it? One of those ghost-like forces of armed Syrian "moderates"? Or maybe the Al-Nusra Front? Or worst of all, maybe ISIS, which does not have an air force and which Cohen, astoundingly, does not even mention in his column, apart from a passing reference to past activity in Iraq. Such an omission represents an incredibly myopic way for anyone to address any question of security policy in Syria today.

Cohen indulges in another favorite tactic of those who want to fulminate about current policy toward Syria without having to offer any effective alternative: to assert that if only a different policy had been pursued earlier, vast problems would have been avoided. Cohen writes that if his "proposal" had been adopted "early on," then "upward of 300,000 Syrian deaths" and the displacement of millions of refugees might have been avoided.

But like many others who have pushed this counterfactual hypothesis, he offers no reason to believe that the factors that have made the Syrian war a bloody mess would have been any less relevant and less consequential a couple of years ago than they are now. There would have been the same differences and distrust between the Syria regime and the majority of the Syrian population, the same sectarian divisions, the same weaknesses and disadvantages of "moderates" in an environment of civil warfare, the same multiple and intersecting lines of conflict, and the same political culture that underlies the entire mess.

The counterfactual has become a screen that hides a lack of analysis. And it is comically absurd to suggest that "maybe taking a shot or two at a government installation" would have helped to save lives numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

For liberal interventionists, a big black mark that somehow needs to be explained away is the Western intervention in Libya, a case where the liberal/humanitarian interventionist viewpoint did, at least for a moment, drive policy of the Obama administration. Post-intervention Libya has been sustained chaos in which many lives have been lost and threatened not only directly in a continued civil war but also through spillover effects of the chaos.

Men and materiel from post-Gaddafi Libya have been factors in terrorism and violence across much of North Africa and the Middle East, and Libya is the place outside Iraq and Syria where ISIS today can most plausibly claim an organizational presence and not just an inspirational one. And all this is in addition to the awful message that was sent to other rogue regimes when Western governments seized an opportunity to overthrow a leader who, through a peaceful negotiated agreement, had given up his unconventional weapons programs and his involvement in international terrorism.

Cohen repeats the oft-voiced claim that the intervention precluded what would have been certain genocide in eastern Libya. No matter how often this claim gets repeated, there still is not reason to believe it. Muammar Gaddafi certainly made clear he wanted to deal harshly with those who had taken up arms against his regime, but there is nothing else in what he said, and more importantly in what he did, to suggest that a broader genocide was imminent.

Gaddafi had been in power four decades, and he had plenty of opportunity to perpetrate genocide if he had wanted to, including in earlier stages of the revolt that was in progress at the time of the intervention.

Regarding Libya, Cohen takes pains to explain that we should not confuse his point of view with that of regime-changing neocons. Regime change and democratization were not the purpose of the intervention in Libya, he says. Well, that's right in terms of what the Obama administration and other Western governments publicly declared as their purpose, but what else besides regime change, practically and logically, could have been the end game of this operation?

If Gaddafi really was, in Cohen's words, a "psychopath" and "madman" who was bent on genocide, how could things end just by stopping a regime advance on one battle front west of Benghazi? How could the story end and the West even begin to claim success for its operation unless it meant, thanks to the Western air attacks on regime forces, the collapsing of the regime's position until someone shot the dictator in a ditch?

On the Libya issue, Cohen endeavors to defend Hillary Clinton against criticisms from her primary opponent Bernie Sanders. The defense is centered on the notion of how the intervention was supposedly about preventing genocide and not about regime change, but Cohen also strangely likens Sanders to, of all people, Ted Cruz.

In the Cohen version, the positions of Sanders and Cruz on Libya, and of both of them as well as Barack Obama on Syria, consist of a "do nothing" approach that pays insufficient attention to the lives of non-Americans. One wonders on what

planet Cohen has been residing while all the rhetoric about Syria has been filling American airwaves in recent months, given that Cruz's most distinctive proposal about military force in Syria has been to call for "carpet bombing." That certainly doesn't sound like Bernie Sanders, or like Barack Obama for that matter, even if Cruz was talking about targeting ISIS rather than the Assad regime.

Cohen has an inconsistent way of weighing the lives of Americans and non-Americans, depending on what argument he is trying to make. In some places he takes off his international humanitarian hat and seems to place a much higher value on American lives, as when he notes that "no Americans died in the Libyan bombing campaign" while saying nothing about the deadly post-intervention chaos. Or when he writes, with Syria particularly and unrealistically in mind, of the need to intervene to "at little or no cost to us in American lives."

But elsewhere in the same columns he seems to put that hat back on and not give any preferred consideration to American lives. He knocks Mr. Obama for the estimates the President gave in a recent meeting with journalists about likely American casualties that would result from expanded ground operations in the Middle East. He even knocks the President for talking about his visits at Walter Reed Hospital with maimed veterans who have lost limbs and of how the prospect of ordering troops into battle and leading to more such casualties has to weigh heavily on the decisions of any incumbent president.

Cohen's comment about this is, "Life presents mean choices. Limbs were lost in Paris, too."

That last comment suggests a comparison between casualties from international terrorism and those from military operations that have been conducted in the name of combating terrorism, although if Cohen did the math he might not like the result. (Then again, maybe he wouldn't care, given how his recent writing on Syria has been as narrowly focused on combating the Assad regime, to the exclusion of any concern with ISIS or terrorism, as the most narrow-minded Sunni Gulf Arab.)

Even the death toll of the granddaddy of all international terrorist incidents, 9/11, was surpassed by American deaths in the Iraq War, which post-9/11 public alarm about terrorism had made politically possible.

One last observation about the Iraq War and Cohen. Despite his striving to distinguish himself from neocons, and despite his distancing-himself reference to "George W. Bush's Iraq war," Cohen clearly has not learned lessons from that war.

Cohen supported the invasion of Iraq. Later after the war went sour, he like many others who had supported the invasion used an “if only I had known” excuse to try to explain away that support. But like many of those others, including many Congressional Democrats who had voted in favor of the war resolution, getting bamboozled by the Bush administration’s public rationale for the war was not the reason they supported it.

In Cohen’s case, he explicitly recognized before the war how flimsy that rationale was, but nonetheless still supported launching the war. His pre-war position directly contradicted his later effort to make excuses.

In a column shortly before the invasion in March 2003, Cohen wrote, “I grant you that in the run-up to this war, the Bush administration has slipped, stumbled and fallen on its face. It has advanced untenable, unproven arguments. It has oscillated from disarmament to regime change to bringing democracy to the Arab world. It has linked Hussein with al Qaeda when no such link has been established. It has warned of an imminent Iraqi nuclear program when, it seems, that’s not the case.” And yet, said Cohen, war was necessary because “sometimes peace is no better.”

Underlying this position was one of the worst attributes of liberal interventionism, which is a compulsion to make big gestures, including very costly and destructive gestures, basically because while seeing bad things going on in the world it gives one a warm feeling in the tummy to make such gestures against the bad things, regardless of how sound or unsound is the logical case for doing so and regardless of how costly or ineffective the results may be.

To the extent Barack Obama is receiving brickbats from the likes of Richard Cohen for not falling into this line of thinking, or rather of emoting, he is serving the country well.

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Is WP’s Cohen Dumbest Columnist?

From the Archive: Official Washington operates with a reverse “meritocracy,” the more clueless the pundits are the more esteem they seem to get as long as they conform to the latest “group think.” Washington Post columnist Richard

Cohen is a prime example, Robert Parry noted in 2007.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on June 19, 2007)

Granted it would be quite a competition, but is Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen the dumbest columnist ever?

For instance, in his June 19, 2007 op-ed, Cohen joined the neoconservative media riot over the 30-month jail sentence facing former White House aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby.

From reading the column, it does appear that Cohen has the skills at least to master and recite the litany of talking points that the neocons have compiled to make their case about the injustice of Libby going into the slammer for committing perjury and obstruction of justice.

Cohen accuses special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald of violating longstanding Justice Department guidelines on when to bring a case; he denounces the trial over Libby's lying about his role in unmasking covert CIA officer Valerie Plame as "a mountain out of a molehill"; he asserts that there was no "underlying crime"; he even pokes fun at Americans who thought the invasion of Iraq might have been a bad idea.

"They thought if 'thought' can be used in this context that if the thread was pulled on who had leaked the identity of Valerie Plame to Robert D. Novak, the effort to snooker an entire nation into war would unravel and this would show . . . who knows? Something," Cohen wrote.

Yet, beyond a talent for reprising the conventional wisdom from Washington dinner parties, it is hard to tell what justifies Cohen's long career as a political columnist. On nearly every major development over the past couple of decades, Cohen has missed the point or gotten it dead wrong.

For example, during the Florida recount battle in 2000, Cohen cared less about whom the voters wanted in the White House than the Washington insiders' certainty that George W. Bush would be a uniter, not a divider.

"The nation will be in dire need of a conciliator, a likable guy who will make things better and not worse," Cohen wrote. "That man is not Al Gore. That man is George W. Bush."

Cohen also joined the Washington herd in the disastrous stampede for invading Iraq. After Secretary of State Colin Powell's deceptive Iraq War speech to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003, Cohen mocked anyone who still dared doubt that Saddam Hussein possessed hidden WMD stockpiles.

"The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman could conclude otherwise."

Misplaced Enthusiasm

It took Cohen another three years before he recognized that his enthusiasm for the war had been misplaced.

On April 4, 2006, as the U.S. death toll reached into the thousands and the Iraqi death toll soared into the tens of thousands, Cohen wrote, "those of us who once advocated this war are humbled. It's not just that we grossly underestimated the enemy. We vastly overestimated the Bush administration."

In normal work settings, incompetence especially when it is chronic and has devastating consequences justifies dismissal or at least demotion, maybe a desk in Storage Room B where Cohen could sit with his red stapler, but without access to a word processor.

Yet, in the strange world of Washington punditry, success is measured not in being right but in keeping one's opinion within the parameters of the capital's respectable opinions, even if those judgments are atrociously wrong.

As for the Plame case, Cohen seems to be living in the propaganda dreamscape of the still-influential neocons, not in the real world where the disclosure of Plame's identity caused actual damage, destroying her undercover career as a CIA officer and putting in jeopardy the lives of foreigners who worked with her investigating weapons proliferation.

Plus, the motive behind the leaking of Plame's identity was not "gossip," as Cohen asserts, but a White House-orchestrated campaign to punish her husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, for telling the truth about his 2002 fact-finding mission to Africa. Wilson's findings helped the U.S. intelligence community debunk false claims about Iraq attempting to buy yellowcake uranium from Africa.

Despite warnings from the CIA, however, President George W. Bush cited Iraq's supposed uranium shopping during his 2003 State of the Union Address, making it a key part of the case to invade Iraq.

When Wilson went public with his story in July 2003, the Bush administration sought to discredit him by suggesting that his Africa trip was just a junket arranged by his CIA wife. One White House official told a reporter from the

Washington Post that the administration had informed at least six reporters about Plame.

The official said the disclosure was “purely and simply out of revenge.” That was a revelation that special prosecutor Fitzgerald corroborated in his investigation.

Libby's Role

Also, contrary to Cohen's column, Libby, as Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, was a central figure in this anti-Wilson smear campaign. Libby briefed two reporters Judith Miller and Matthew Cooper about Plame's identity and brought press secretary Ari Fleischer into the leak operation.

Though it turned out that other senior administration officials, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and his friend, White House political adviser Karl Rove, were the successful ones in getting a journalist, Robert Novak, to publish Plame's identity, it wasn't for the lack of Libby trying to get Plame's identity into the press.

Nor is it accurate to say that there was no underlying crime. It is illegal to willfully disclose the identity of a covert CIA officer and the administration officials involved were well aware that her identity was classified. Leaking classified material also can be and often is treated as a crime. ...

Rather than a wild-eyed prosecutor on a rampage, Fitzgerald actually appears to have been a very cautious prosecutor who chose not to pursue what would have been a deserving but politically disruptive case against Bush, Cheney and other government conspirators implicated in both leaking classified material and participating in a cover-up.

But all this is missed by Cohen. In his June 19, 2007 column, he does reiterate his current position that the Iraq War was a mistake. He also acknowledges that lying under oath is a bad thing to do. But blinded by the pervasive neocon talking points he refuses to see the larger scandal.

“I have come to hate the war and I cannot approve of lying under oath not by Scooter, not by Bill Clinton, not by anybody,” Cohen wrote. “But the underlying crime is absent, the sentence is excessive and the investigation should not have been conducted in the first place. This is a mess. Should Libby be pardoned? Maybe. Should his sentence be commuted? Definitely.” [As it turned out, President Bush did commute Libby's sentence so he avoided jail time.]

Cohen took a similarly tolerant view of lies told by Reagan administration officials in the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s and its successful cover-up by

President George H.W. Bush in the early 1990s when special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh was pressing for long-withheld answers.

When Bush sabotaged Walsh's probe by issuing six Iran-Contra pardons on Christmas Eve 1992, prominent U.S. journalists, including Cohen, praised Bush's actions and brushed aside Walsh's complaint that the move was the final act in a long-running cover-up that protected a secret history of criminal behavior and Bush's personal role.

Cohen spoke for many of his colleagues when he defended Bush's fatal blow against the Iran-Contra investigation. Cohen especially liked Bush's pardon of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who had been indicted for obstruction of justice but was popular around Washington.

In a Dec. 30, 1992 column, Cohen said his view was colored by how impressed he was when he would see Weinberger in the Georgetown Safeway store, pushing his own shopping cart.

"Based on my Safeway encounters, I came to think of Weinberger as a basic sort of guy, candid and no nonsense which is the way much of official Washington saw him," Cohen wrote. "Cap, my Safeway buddy, walks, and that's all right with me."

There was a time when The Washington Post aggressively pursued cover-ups of government wrongdoing, such as Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal. Even during the Clinton administration, a favorite pearl of Washington wisdom was: "It's not the crime, it's the cover-up."

But that was then and this is now. Today, the Post editorial page and its prized columnists, like Cohen, eagerly join in cover-ups and happily bash anyone who won't go with the Washington flow.

So, the question remains, is Cohen just a clueless incompetent when he berates Fitzgerald for the "train wreck" of the Libby conviction or is this columnist really a clever guy who is very skilled at knowing how to stay on the gravy train of modern Washington journalism?

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

Obama Boots Syrian Peace Chance

Exclusive: President Obama thinks he can appease the neocons and liberal hawks by talking tough about Syria and Russia but in doing so he is throwing away a promising opportunity to resolve the Syrian conflict, plus he still gets bashed by Official Washington's pundits, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama is turning his back on possibly the last best chance to resolve the bloody Syrian war because he fears a backlash from Official Washington's powerful coalition of neoconservatives and "liberal interventionists" along with their foreign fellow-travelers: Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Gulf sheikdoms.

The route toward peace would be to collaborate with Russia and Iran to get Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to accept a power-sharing unity government that would fairly represent Syria's major religious and ethnic groups Christians, Alawites, Shiites and moderate Sunnis along with a commitment for free, internationally monitored elections once adequate security is restored.

But for such an arrangement to work, Obama also would have to crack down aggressively on U.S. regional "allies" to ensure that they stopped funding, supplying and otherwise assisting the Sunni extremist forces including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State (or ISIS). Obama would have to confront the Sunni "allies" including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey as well as Israel.

His pressure would have to include stern action aimed at the global finances of the Gulf states i.e., seizing their assets as punishment for their continuing support for terrorism as well as similar sanctions against Turkey, possibly ousting it from NATO if it balked, and a withdrawal of political and financial support for Israel if it continued helping Nusra fighters and viewing Al Qaeda as the "lesser evil" in Syria. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia and Israel.](#)"]

Obama also would have to make it clear to Syria's "moderate" Sunni politicians whom the U.S. government has been subsidizing for the past several years that they must sit down with Assad's representatives and work out a unity government or the American largesse would end.

This combination of strong international pressure on the Sunni terror infrastructure and strong-arming internal players in Syria into a unity government could isolate the Sunni extremists from Al Qaeda and the Islamic

State and thus minimize the need for military strikes whether carried out by Russia (against both Al Qaeda and ISIS) or the U.S. coalition (focusing on ISIS).

And, the arrival of Russian military support for the Assad government as well as the increased backing from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah represented the moment when the prospect for peace was brightest, whatever one thinks of those various players. However, instead of working with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, President Obama chose to bend to the pressures of Official Washington.

Appeasing the Warmongers

Thinking he had stretched the tolerance of neocons and liberal hawks as far as he could by pushing through the nuclear deal with Iran, Obama fell in line behind their propagandistic denunciations of Assad and Putin. Obama's administration joined in promoting the new favorite "group think" of Washington that Putin had promised to only bomb the Islamic State and then reneged by attacking "moderate" rebels and their more powerful ally, Al Qaeda's Nusra Front.

Conveniently, this storyline doesn't cite the wording of Putin's supposed "promise" although some articles do mention him vowing to attack "terrorist" groups, which the mainstream U.S. news media has interpreted as the Islamic State only. But this odd framing accepts the breathtaking premise that Al Qaeda is no longer a terrorist organization apparently rehabilitated by the fact that Israel has been helping Al Qaeda's affiliate, the Nusra Front, along the Golan Heights and prefers it to Assad's continued rule. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Should US Ally with Al Qaeda in Syria?](#)"]

Among the many purveyors of this "Putin lied" narrative is Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, who on Tuesday repeated the canard that Putin had "promised" to strike only the Islamic State and then broke that promise. For good measure, Cohen added that the Russians had "invaded" Syria although they were formally invited by the recognized government of Syria.

"Yes, the Russians did invade," Cohen wrote. "They sent war planes, mechanized units and even troops into Syria. They have begun bombing missions, apparently hitting insurgents seeking to topple Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and not only, as Russian President Vladimir Putin promised, Islamic State units. Putin surprise! lied."

Normally in journalism, before we accuse someone of lying, we show what they actually said and contrast it with the facts. But Official Washington has long

since moved Putin into the free-fire zone of demonization. Anything can be said about him, whether based in reality or not, and anyone who objects to this “group think” is called a “Putin bootlicker” or a “Putin apologist.”

Thus, any reality-based skepticism is ruled out of the frame of debate. Such was the way that the United States plunged blindly into the Iraq War in 2003 when Saddam Hussein was the demonized figure and the Europeans who warned President George W. Bush not to invade were laughed at as “Euro-weenies.” American skeptics were “Saddam apologists.”

Inside-Out ‘Logic’

Cohen is back at it again in his Tuesday column, which on the Internet has the curious title “The High Cost of Avoiding War in Syria.” Cohen throws around the word “invasion” where Russia is involved even when there was no “invasion” but he advocates an actual U.S. invasion with cavalier hypocrisy.

Cohen slams Obama for not having established “a no-fly zone” in Syria earlier, which would have involved the United States bombing and destroying Syria’s air force, a clear act of aggression and an obvious boon to Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Cohen also says he was for “arming the rebels,” another violation of international law which when tried by Obama to appease the drumbeat from Cohen and his ilk led to many U.S.-trained and U.S.-armed rebels taking their equipment and skills to Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Yet, Cohen – on the prized opinion real estate of The Washington Post’s op-ed page and in his nationally syndicated column – unapologetically encourages an illegal invasion of another country while condemning Russia for doing the same except that Russia was following international law by working with the sovereign government of Syria and therefore has not “invaded” Syria.

We also are supposed to forget that Cohen’s ideas would benefit Sunni jihadists, such as the Al Qaeda-dominated “Army of Conquest” which could use the “no-fly zones” to mount a victorious offensive to capture Damascus and create a humanitarian crisis even worse than now.

Possibly with ISIS chopping off the heads of “infidels” Christians, Alawites, Shiites, etc. and with Al Qaeda having a new home in the center of the Middle East to plot terror strikes on the West, Cohen’s plan might necessitate a major U.S. military intervention that would get even more people killed and deal the final death blow to the American Republic.

In evaluating Cohen’s lame-brained double-think, it is worth remembering that he was one of the many U.S. opinion leaders who cheered on Secretary of State Colin

Powell's deceptive Iraq War speech to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003. Waving "we-love-Colin" pompoms alongside all his esteemed colleagues, Cohen laughed at anyone who still doubted that Saddam Hussein possessed hidden WMD stockpiles.

"The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman could conclude otherwise."

Ha-ha, did you get that clever line "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman" pretty funny except that by heaping ridicule on those of us who doubted Powell's evidence, Cohen contributed to the deaths of some 4,500 U.S. soldiers, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, the cost to U.S. taxpayers of more than \$1 trillion, and chaos now spreading across not just the Middle East but into Europe.

In a normal place where there was some modicum of accountability, you would have expected Cohen to be banished to Storage Room B with his red stapler or worse. But no, Cohen is back running with the same juvenile in-crowd, behaving just as stupidly and just as recklessly as he has many times in the past.

Obama Intimidated

But the larger problem is that President Obama appears intimidated by this collection of know-it-alls who preen across the editorial pages of The Washington Post and The New York Times or who hold down prestigious "fellowships" at the Brookings Institution or other big-name think tanks or who self-identify as "human rights activists" advocating "humanitarian" wars.

Arguably, Obama has always had an outsized regard for people with establishment credentials. It is, after all, how he rose through the ranks as first an extremely bright academic and later a talented orator and politician. Without family connections or personal wealth, he needed the approval of various influential individuals. If he offended them in some way, he risked being pigeonholed as "an angry black man."

Indeed, the comedy duo Key & Peele developed a series of funny skits with Jordan Peele playing the always proper and controlled Obama and Keegan-Michael Key as "anger translator Luther." Obama even invited "Luther" to translate Obama's speech to the 2015 White House Correspondents Dinner, except that by the end of that talk Obama was expressing his own anger and Luther peeled away.

The problem in the real world is that Obama remains cowed by the Important People of Washington represented in that oh-so-important crowd at the dinner and

bows to their misguided thinking.

Obama also is facing a beefed-up lobbying operation for Saudi Arabia to go along with the always formidable Israel Lobby. The Intercept reported that in September the Saudi kingdom added to its large stable of thoroughbred influence-peddlers by signing "Edelman, the largest privately owned public relations agency in the world [and] the Podesta Group a lobbying firm founded by Tony Podesta, a major fundraiser for the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign."

Indeed, the repressive Saudi kingdom may need some special P.R. help as it prepares to behead Ali Mohammed al-Nimr whose body would then be attached to a cross or otherwise displayed in a crucifixion that would leave his corpse to rot for several days as a warning to others. Al-Nimr is a Shiite who at the age of 17 in 2012 participated in a pro-democracy demonstration that was viewed as an affront to the monarchy.

The Saudis also have been waging a ruthless air war against impoverished Yemen, attacking Houthis who stem from a branch of Shia Islam which Saudi Sunni Wahhabism considers apostasy. The Saudi bombing campaign, which recently killed some 131 celebrants at a wedding inside Yemen, gets intelligence and logistical support from the Obama administration even though the slaughter of Houthis has benefited their Yemeni rivals, "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" who have gained ground behind the Saudi air offensive.

Diverting Attention

Yet, the Saudis' P.R. battalions along with the Israel Lobby have kept Official Washington's focus in other directions. Indeed, there are now so many false or dubious narratives dis-informing the capital's "group think" that U.S. decisions are driven more by mythology than facts.

Obama could begin the process of restoring sanity to Washington by declassifying U.S. intelligence analyses on several key issues. For instance, Obama could release what's now known about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus.

After that attack, there was a rush to judgment at the State Department and within the mainstream U.S. news media to blame that atrocity on Assad's forces, although I'm told that CIA analysts have since moved away from that view and now agree that the attack was likely a provocation designed to draw the U.S. military into the war on the side of the Sunni jihadists. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case."]

Though Obama and other officials have dropped the sarin accusations from their public speeches harping instead on "barrel bombs" as if those homemade weapons

are some uniquely evil device Obama has refused to retract the sarin allegations which helped shape the hyper-hostile “conventional wisdom” against Assad.

Similarly, Obama has withheld U.S. intelligence information about the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine, letting stand hasty accusations blaming Putin. Obama appears infatuated by the trendy concept of “strategic communications” or “Stratcom,” which blends psy-ops, propaganda and P.R. into one noxious brew to poison public opinion about one’s “enemy.”

With the recent Russian military intervention in Syria, Obama had the chance to correct the record on the sarin-gas attack and the MH-17 shoot-down but instead continued the “Stratcom” both in his United Nations speech and his news conference last Friday with more hyperbolic attacks against Assad and Putin. In doing so, Obama apparently bowed to the desired rhetoric of hardliners like U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power and the editorial-page masters of The Washington Post and The New York Times.

Obama may have hoped his harsh language would appease the neocons and their liberal-hawk pals, but the tough-guy rhetoric has only opened him up to new attacks over the disparity between his words and deeds. As the clueless columnist Richard Cohen wrote, “A no-fly zone needs to be established. It is not too late to do *something*. By doing so little, the United States has allowed others to do so much.” [Emphasis in original.]

In other words, Cohen appears to want the U.S. military to shoot down Russian planes over Syria, even though the Russians have been invited by the recognized government to be there and the U.S. has not. The minor complication of possible human extinction from a nuclear war apparently is of little consequence when compared to the street cred that one gets from such manly talk.

For Official Washington and apparently Obama the peace option is regarded as unacceptable, i.e., working with Russia and Iran to achieve a power-sharing unity government in Damascus (with the promise of elections as soon as possible) along with the United States demanding from its regional “allies” a complete shutdown of assistance to the Islamic State, Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and all other Sunni jihadists.

That option would require Obama and the neocon/liberal-hawk cowboys to get down off their high horses, admit they have been tossing their lasso in the wrong direction and compromise.

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](#).

Racism Through Rose-Colored Glasses

Many Americans tend to whitewash their country's ugly history of racism all the better to feel good about "exceptionalism" but even sophisticated writers can ignore this grim reality when praising their favored presidents, as William Loren Katz explains.

By William Loren Katz

In 2013, we have Barack Obama, a two-term African-American President, hundreds of other black men and women elected to state and local offices, and a country that officially celebrates Black History Month. Even more, no white official would dare *publicly* use a racist slur. As a result, many of our intellectuals, historians and media writers are onboard with the pleasing message: "We live in a post-racial America."

Well, maybe. Bill Keller, who served for eight years as executive editor of *The New York Times*, and is the author of a children's book on Nelson Mandela, recently wrote the *Sunday Times Book Review's* [front page essay](#) on Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *The Bully Pulpit*, which examines Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. Keller extolled them as "politicians of stature and conscience."

Really? As presidents neither made any serious effort to improve race relations or protect minorities from violence. Neither challenged the forces promulgating segregation, discrimination, and lynching.

Though their Republican Party controlled the House and Senate from 1900 to 1910, neither Roosevelt nor Taft paid more than lip service to Abraham Lincoln's "new birth of freedom." Neither enforced the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments that promised former slaves liberty, justice, and equality. Neither challenged "the new slavery", the debt-peonage, sharecropping and convict-lease systems that ground down millions in the South.

Roosevelt spoke as a proud champion of "the Anglo-Saxon race," and urged his people to embrace "the clear instinct for race selfishness." He advocated

imperialism with the claim, "It is wholly impossible to avoid conflicts with the weaker races."

Roosevelt and Taft vigorously courted Southern "lily-white" members of both parties. During an era of weekly Southern lynching carnivals, Roosevelt told a black audience the "rapists and criminals" among them "did more harm to their race than any white man can possibly do them."

In 1909, President Taft told African-American college graduates in North Carolina: "Your race is meant to be a race of farmers, first, last and for all times." Taft had the distinction of being the first Republican presidential candidate to campaign in the South. He announced he would never enforce "social equality" and told black audiences that the white Southern man was their "best friend." People of color could find little comfort, justice or even safety during the age of Roosevelt and Taft.

But this is a different time, and we as a nation wish to move toward "a more perfect union," to follow the Constitution and embrace its promises. Why then do some intelligent people still manage to distort our past to send a wrong message? Perhaps they do so because lying about the past makes it easier to dissemble about the present.

As Richard Cohen wrote in the Washington Post in November, "Today's G.O.P. is not racist, as Harry Belafonte alleged about the Tea Party, but it is deeply troubled, about the expansion of government, about immigration, about secularism, about the mainstreaming of what used to be the avant-garde.

"People with conventional views must repress a gag reflex when considering the mayor-elect of New York, a white man married to a black woman and with two biracial children. (Should I mention that Bill de Blasio's wife, Chirlane McCray, used to be a lesbian?) This family represents the cultural changes that have enveloped parts, but not all, of America. To cultural conservatives, this doesn't look like their country at all."

Sadly, just as Cohen claims that much of America is post-racial, modern influencers such as Keller would have us believe that Taft and Roosevelt were also not racist, they were simply presidents who advocated for policies that would ensure that "traditional" values would continue to rule. Never mind that many of those values had racial animosity at their core.

We can't move toward the fulfillment of the Constitution, *for the common good*, if we either continue to see the past through a racial revisionist lens or continue to misconstrue the racism in our present. It might be more accurate to state that some white American die-hards of a racist past have no choice but to

live in a future world embracing Mandela's principles of racial tolerance as much as they might prefer "traditional" attitudes.

While these Americans may celebrate Mandela's courage and achievements in the abstract, they cannot fully digest this brave South African who sacrificed his freedom and life for a world where people of all races, ethnicities and kinds will try to live in peace and harmony.

William Loren Katz is the author of *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*

WPost's Cohen Fears the Hoodie

Exclusive: After George Zimmerman was acquitted for murdering Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black 17-year-old, many Americans reacted with disgust. But others, like columnist Richard Cohen, blamed the slaying on a white person's understandable fear of young black males, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In 2007, I wrote an article asking whether the Washington Post's Richard Cohen was "the dumbest columnist ever," acknowledging that it would be quite a competition. But his latest blathering about the Trayvon Martin case should resolve the question once and for all. Cohen wins, hands-down.

There are many worthy observations that one might make about the acquittal of George Zimmerman for shooting the unarmed 17-year-old African-American boy, especially the recognition that white racism is still a serious problem in the United States and that systemic mistreatment of blacks and other minorities remains a national scandal. But Cohen was more interested in voicing sympathy for Zimmerman because Cohen, too, gets scared when he sees a black youth in a hoodie.

On Tuesday, Cohen wrote that he "can understand why Zimmerman was suspicious and why he thought Martin was wearing a uniform we all recognize," i.e. the hoodie. Cohen's biggest beef was with "politicians and others who have donned hoodies in solidarity with Martin and who essentially suggest that, for recognizing the reality of urban crime in the United States, I am a racist."

Cohen singled out New York City Council speaker Christine Quinn for the unpardonable sin of donning a hoodie and added: "Where is the politician who will own up to the painful complexity of the problem and acknowledge the

widespread fear of crime committed by young black males?”

He then praised New York City police for targeting black youth with “stop and frisk” policies, since, he wrote, “if young black males are your shooters, then it ought to be young black males whom the police stop and frisk.”

Of course, such profiling also might land a lot more black youth in jail for petty offenses like marijuana possession, even though they are no more likely than white youth to carry around a joint. But, hey, that’s a price young blacks have to pay so Richard Cohen won’t be so frightened.

Cohen also poked fun at anyone who would advocate a race-neutral approach to “stop-and-frisk” police actions. “It would be senseless for the police to be stopping Danish tourists in Times Square just to make the statistics look good,” he wrote. Yuck, yuck!

Then, after rationalizing racial profiling of young black males, Cohen threw up his hands on the possibility of any serious national effort to address the centuries-old mistreatment of African-Americans in the United States.

“The problems of the black underclass are hardly new,” he continued. “They are surely the product of slavery, the subsequent Jim Crow era and the tenacious persistence of racism. They will be solved someday, but not probably with any existing programs. For want of a better word, the problem is cultural, and it will be solved when the culture, somehow, is changed.”

Cohen’s pretentious appeal to some future “cultural” transformation regarding the historic oppression of African-Americans is, of course, a cop-out, one that has been practiced at least since the Founding when slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson would wring their hands about the abomination of slavery and the need to do something, but then continue to own black slaves and have them whipped for running away.

Freedman’s Village

As I write this article, I’m at a coffee shop just a few blocks from Freedman’s Village, a community created during the Civil War for emancipated slaves including those who had worked on Robert E. Lee’s plantation in Arlington, Virginia.

When Gen. Lee deserted his Union command in favor of leading the Confederacy’s army, part of Lee’s property was taken for a cemetery to bury American soldiers and part was given over to freed African-Americans who began a vibrant community of craftsmen in what is now South Arlington.

However, the promise of freedom from the Civil War was never backed up with the political will necessary to change the predicament that these former slaves faced. Many had been denied education and their families were often broken up so plantation owners in the old slave states could make more money by breeding their blacks and selling the children to the new slave states in the west.

After the Civil War ended, the Radical Republicans and President Ulysses S. Grant tried to force a cultural change throughout the South, an acceptance of African-Americans as full citizens of the United States. But the traditional white aristocracy reasserted its control, often using terror tactics of the Ku Klux Klan.

By 1877, the Republican Party had grown weary of the struggle and abandoned Southern blacks to the gentle mercies of the white racist political leaders anchored in the Democratic Party, which went from being the party of slavery to the party of segregation.

In South Arlington today, the legacy of that post-Reconstruction resurgent racism is still visible in the fact that U.S. Route 1 as it passes not far from the old Freedman's Village is named after Confederate President Jefferson Davis, a particularly virulent white supremacist. Meanwhile, there is no official recognition of Freedman's Village beyond its legacy of making South Arlington the most racially diverse part of the county. South Arlington is also the section most neglected for public improvements.

Metro's Orange Line had originally been planned for Columbia Pike, the main thoroughfare through South Arlington, but the subway line was shifted to whiter North Arlington, which has experienced an economic boom as a result. Even today, a proposal for a Streetcar line down Columbia Pike a far less expensive alternative languishes amid complaints that the county shouldn't spend the money.

The reality is much worse in Richmond, Virginia's capital, where homage to the Confederacy is even more lavish. Along Monument Avenue, there are massive statues in honor of General Lee, Confederate President Davis and other Confederate luminaries.

After the end of Reconstruction, it took nearly a century and much more bloodshed for the United States to finally overturn Jim Crow laws and segregation. It was a bitter political struggle spearheaded by principled Republicans and Democrats operating at the national level. Again, the federal government intervened against recalcitrant white Southerners.

But the South's political structure continued to resist, this time by switching

allegiances to a revamped Republican Party where opportunistic leaders such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan saw the potential to flip the electoral map by pandering to white racists, albeit with “race-neutral” code words.

One of the appeals from these Republican politicians was that government programs to help blacks would not resolve or ameliorate the legacies of slavery and segregation, that only a “cultural” shift would do, a “change of the heart.”

Of course, waiting for that change meant that, in the meantime, blacks would be “stopped and frisked,” charged with both petty and serious crimes, incarcerated at extraordinary rates, denied employment and voting rights once they got out, and left in poverty, without health care and dying at a premature age.

But you can’t expect Richard Cohen or idiots like him to grasp the scope of this national shame the gravity of this national scandal because he is too nervous when he sees a young black man in a hoodie.

Why the Dumbest?

If you’re wondering the context of my 2007 article asking if Cohen was “the dumbest columnist ever,” it was his fury over the conviction of Vice President Dick Cheney’s aide I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby for committing perjury and obstruction of justice in the exposure of CIA officer Valerie Plame.

Libby had been one of the Bush administration officials who peddled Plame’s covert identity to journalists in an effort to discredit her husband, former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson, after he exposed one of the lies that President George W. Bush had cited to justify his invasion of Iraq.

Like many of his Inside-the-Beltway cohorts, Cohen defended Libby and denounced special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald for daring to bring the charges against Libby, one of their beloved neocons. Cohen called the prosecution of Libby for lying about his role in unmasking Plame and destroying her career “a mountain out of a molehill.”

Cohen also mocked Americans who thought the invasion of Iraq might have been a bad idea. “They thought if ‘thought’ can be used in this context that if the thread was pulled on who had leaked the identity of Valerie Plame to Robert D. Novak, the effort to snooker an entire nation into war would unravel and this would show . . . who knows? Something,” Cohen wrote.

But Cohen’s incompetence did not stop with his deference to political leaders who started wars on false pretenses. As a nationally syndicated columnist based at the Washington Post, Cohen had a remarkable record of getting nearly every major political development over the past couple of decades wrong.

For example, during the Florida recount battle in 2000, Cohen cared less about whom the voters wanted in the White House than the Washington insiders' certainty that George W. Bush would be a uniter, not a divider. "The nation will be in dire need of a conciliator, a likable guy who will make things better and not worse," Cohen wrote. "That man is not Al Gore. That man is George W. Bush."

After being installed in the White House by five Republicans on the U.S. Supreme Court after coming in second to Gore both nationally and (if all legal votes were counted) in Florida Bush became one of the most divisive and disastrous presidents in American history.

Bush treated his critics, including many national Democrats, with disdain, even questioning their patriotism for not marching in lockstep behind him. Most egregiously, he exploited the national mourning over the 9/11 attacks to justify the invasion of Iraq, a country that had nothing to do with 9/11 but had been a longstanding target of the neoconservatives.

Cohen was one of the neocon columnists who joined the Washington herd in the stampede for invading Iraq, and he disparaged Americans and U.S. allies who wouldn't follow behind. After Secretary of State Colin Powell's deceptive Iraq War speech to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003, Cohen ridiculed anyone who still dared doubt that Saddam Hussein possessed hidden WMD stockpiles.

"The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman could conclude otherwise."

Though Cohen never apologized to us fools and Frenchmen – those who didn't buy the Bush administration's lies – he did finally recognize more than three years later that his certainty about the war had been misplaced.

On April 4, 2006, as the U.S. death toll reached into the thousands and the Iraqi death toll soared into the tens of thousands, Cohen wrote, "those of us who once advocated this war are humbled. It's not just that we grossly underestimated the enemy. We vastly overestimated the Bush administration."

In normal work settings, incompetence especially when it is chronic and has devastating consequences justifies dismissal or at least demotion, maybe a desk in Storage Room B where Cohen could sit with his red stapler, but certainly denied access to a word processor and the op-ed page of a major newspaper.

Yet, in the strange world of Washington punditry, success is measured not by getting the story straight but by keeping one's opinions within the parameters

of the capital's "group think," even if those judgments are atrociously wrong.

Now, Richard Cohen weighs in with his sophomoric insights regarding his fears about black youth and his silly rationalizations for George Zimmerman who profiled and then killed Trayvon Martin with a gun shot through his heart. In conclusion, Cohen wrote:

"There's no doubt in my mind that Zimmerman profiled Martin and, braced by a gun, set off in quest of heroism. The result was a quintessentially American tragedy the death of a young man understandably suspected because he was black and tragically dead for the same reason."

"Understandably suspected?" No wonder some people consider Richard Cohen to be a racist.

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](#).

Falling for New Neocon Propaganda

Exclusive: One not-so-funny fact about Washington is that nearly all the news media stars who fell for neoconservative falsehoods about Iraq are still around to fall for new ones on Iran, even some like Richard Cohen who briefly regretted his earlier gullibility, notes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Paul R. Pillar, my former colleague in the CIA's analytical division, has raised a warning flag, cautioning that the same imaginative neocon composers who came up with the various refrains on why we needed to attack Iraq are now providing similar background music for a strike on Iran.

He is right. And as one of my Russian professors used to say, "This is nothing to laugh!"

Pillar's piece dissecting an op-ed by the Washington Post's Richard Cohen about the alleged Iranian plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington first

appeared on The National Interest Web site. On Oct. 21, it was posted at Consortiumnews.com under the title "Sloppy Iran Think by WPost's Cohen."

The Cohen column that Pillar critiques is entitled "The alarm bells behind Iran's alleged assassination plot." Yet Cohen's "alarm bells" ringing now about Iran brought a painful reminder of all the alarms he and his colleagues sounded in cheerleading for the attack on Iraq in 2002 and 2003.

Cohen was one of the many big-name opinion leaders to put on the pompoms after Secretary of State Colin Powell gave his deceptive Iraq War speech to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003. Joining a cheerleading pyramid of pro-war consensus, Cohen mocked anyone who still doubted that Saddam Hussein possessed hidden WMD stockpiles.

"The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them," Cohen wrote. "Only a fool or possibly a Frenchman could conclude otherwise."

However, six weeks after the Iraq invasion, with not one WMD stockpile discovered, Cohen's conscience may have begun to trouble him a bit. To his credit, I suppose, Cohen seems to have been embarrassed enough to fess up, sort of, using the device of an apocryphal conversation with his long-dead grandfather.

In an April 29, 2003, column entitled "Baghdad Bait and Switch," Cohen recounted a middle-of-the-night visit by Grandpa, who is not at all pleased with his grandson's credulity about President George W. Bush's case for war.

"You think maybe you got snookered?" Grandpa asks. "For this your mother sent you to college? For this you fight a war?"

"I read the column where you said that ['Saddam Hussein was like another Hitler']. All my friends said, 'This is your grandson, the hotshot columnist? This is the guy people read so they should know what to think?'"

"Hitler? Hitler was a threat to the world. Saddam threatened only his own people. He fought for only 26 days. I had longer fights with your grandmother."

"First you wanted a war because of terrorism, then because Iraq had a nuclear program. Then you wanted a war because he has poison gas and little crawling things you can't see. Now you want to bring democracy to the Middle East."

"You know what we used to call this when I was in retail? Bait and switch. I

hope everything turns out hunky-dory, like you've been writing. Otherwise, you should have been an accountant."

Cohen's column about the imaginary upbraiding he got from his grandfather ran two days before President Bush jetted onto a U.S. aircraft carrier off the coast of California and gave his memorable "Mission Accomplished" address.

Accountability, Anyone?

One might think that a columnist who got something as wrong as Cohen did would have the decency to admit that Grandpa was right and switch professions.

After all, endorsing the falsehoods that led to an aggressive war in violation of international law an invasion that led to hundreds of thousands of dead and the squandering of \$1 trillion or so isn't exactly a minor mistake.

But Cohen apparently found safety in numbers. The fact that he was surrounded by scores of other big-name media stars who had fallen for the same "bait-and-switch" scam meant that he kept his place as a major national columnist and soon returned to his comfortable role defending the war policies of Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

For instance, in a June 19, 2007, op-ed, Cohen rallied to the defense of Cheney's former chief of staff I. Lewis Libby who had been sentenced to 30 months in jail for perjury and obstruction of justice for lying about his role in unmasking covert CIA officer Valerie Plame.

The destruction of Plame's career was collateral damage resulting from the Bush administration trying to discredit her husband, former Ambassador Joseph Wilson, for criticizing Bush's use of a misleading claim about Iraq seeking uranium from Africa.

But Cohen showed no sympathy for Wilson or Plame, two patriotic citizens who had been personally targeted by Cheney and the White House. Cohen worried only about Libby.

In the column, Cohen denounced the trial as "a mountain out of a molehill." Following the neocon propaganda themes on the Plame case, Cohen concluded there was no "underlying crime" and poked fun at Americans who thought the invasion of Iraq might have been a bad idea.

"They thought if 'thought' can be used in this context that if the thread was pulled on who had leaked the identity of Valerie Plame to Robert D. Novak, the effort to snooker an entire nation into war would unravel and this would show . . . who knows? Something," Cohen wrote.

Smirking at Torture

Cohen also sympathized with Cheney over his enthusiasm for torturing Muslim detainees. In a May 11, 2009, column entitled "What If Cheney's Right?" Cohen justified "enhanced interrogation techniques," including the near-drowning tactic of waterboarding, as worthwhile in eliciting important intelligence information and thus saving American lives.

Starting the column, Cohen made light of the whole issue of torture with the quip, "Blogger Alert: I have written a column in defense of Dick Cheney."

While conceding that torture is morally wrong, Cohen wrote, "where I reserve a soupçon of doubt is over the question of whether 'enhanced interrogation techniques' actually work. That they do not is a matter of absolute conviction among those on the political left, who seem to think that the CIA tortured suspected terrorists just for the hell of it."

Cohen noted that Cheney through his declaration that critical intelligence was extracted by these means "poses a hard, hard question: Is it more immoral to torture than it is to fail to prevent the deaths of thousands?"

With unintended irony, the columnist regretted that Cheney's credibility on torture had been dinged by the fact that his pre-Iraq War claims had proved false, like his insisting "that 'the evidence is overwhelming' that al-Qaeda had been in high-level contact with Saddam Hussein's regime when the 'evidence' was virtually non-existent."

What Cohen left out was the very relevant point that precisely those claims of a Saddam-al-Qaeda connection resulted from a coerced confession from one of the CIA's "high-value detainees," Abu al-Sheikh al-Libi.

A June 2002 CIA report cited claims by al-Libi that Iraq had "provided" unspecified chemical and biological weapons training for two al-Qaeda operatives. Al-Libi's information was then inserted into a November 2002 National Intelligence Estimate.

Al-Libi's false claim which he later said he offered to escape torture also found its way into Cheney's public presentations and into Powell's UN speech. But Cohen did not deign to mention this inconvenient fact in his column defending these harsh tactics.

On Oct. 6, 2009, Cohen was back serving the neocon cause, baiting President Barack Obama into a major military escalation in Afghanistan, through an opinion piece entitled "Does Obama Have the Backbone?" questioning Obama's mettle as a war president.

“The war in Afghanistan is eminently more winnable than was Vietnam,” Cohen wrote. “Still, the war will require more than a significant commitment of troops and, of course, money. It will take presidential leadership, a consistent staying of the course and implacable confidence that the right choice has been made despite what can be steep costs.”

So, perhaps it should come as no surprise that Richard Cohen is now helping to set the stage for another war with Iran.

Quick! Someone conjure up Cohen’s grandfather again. We need him to pin back Richard’s ears once more before the gullible grandson falls for a new round of neocon propaganda and enables another catastrophic war.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. An Army officer and then CIA analyst for a combined total of 30 years, he is now on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. (VIPS)

Sloppy Iran Think by WPost’s Cohen

In a powerful place like Washington D.C., sloppy thinking can have horrendous consequences, a truism that Big Media pundits have proved over and over. Now, the target is Iran and the usual suspects, the likes of the Washington Post’s Richard Cohen, are back at it, as former CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Richard Cohen’s column in Tuesday’s *Washington Post*, under the headline “Dangerous behavior from Iran,” deserves scrutiny, and not just to pick on Cohen (although he deserves to be picked on for this kind of work).

The column exemplifies several of the types of distorted thinking and non-thinking that were critical in pushing the United States into an enormous blunder of a war eight years ago and are threatening a repeat performance with another of the countries in the same part of the world that has a four-letter name starting with “I.”

Moreover, the column by Cohen, who on most matters other than stumbling into disastrous wars can be considered a liberal, illustrates how the arguments and attitudes that have greased the skids on which the United States can slide into such a war are not the exclusive province of neocons or others who are the prime

movers of such misadventures.

The column begins, unsurprisingly, with the outrage *du jour*: that strange plot involving DEA informants and a used car salesman in Texas. Cohen has a nifty way to dispose of the chief reason skeptics have found it hard to believe this was an officially instigated Iranian operation, namely, the disconnect between the crazy nature of the plot and the careful tradecraft that the Iranians have consistently exhibited.

"I agree" the plot was crazy, says Cohen. "But so is Iran."

It's a rhetorical twofer: not only is the bizarre plot kept in play, but it is done in a way that pushes the main theme of the anti-Iran agitators, which is that Iranian leaders are supposedly irrational and thus cannot be trusted not to do crazy things with whatever capabilities they have, especially a capability as momentous as a nuclear weapon.

"The mistake with Iran," says Cohen, "is the tendency to think its leadership is rational."

But like others who invoke this theme, Cohen adduces nothing in the record of behavior by the Islamic Republic that suggests irrationality and ignores the fact that the record is overwhelmingly one of caution and careful calculation.

Oh, Cohen cites a record, and like most others who do, it concerns Iran's past terrorist operations. But invoking the terrorist record ignores that these very operations were carefully targeted responses to what Iran's adversaries were doing, with every indication that the Iranians were fully mindful of consequences.

There were the assassinations (which pretty much ended a decade and a half ago) of expatriate dissidents, which served to eliminate a political threat to the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

Cohen tries to make an argument that the assassinations exemplify sloppy methods (even suggesting at one point that a stabbing is somehow sloppier than other methods of killing people), with the Iranians not covering their tracks well.

With hits on individual Iranian dissidents, part of the purpose was *not* to cover tracks but instead to send a message to other would-be oppositionists. When the target was foreign, the track-covering was careful and effective.

With the bombing of the U.S. military barracks at Khobar, Saudi Arabia, in 1996 (which Cohen also mentions), the tracks were so well covered that Iranian involvement was not established until years later.

Then there were the bombings by Lebanese Hezbollah against Jewish and Israeli targets in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s. As I briefly noted a few days ago, these operations were specific retaliatory responses to Israeli actions in the Middle East, each of which preceded the response by only a few weeks.

The bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992 responded to Israel's assassination of Hezbollah secretary general Abbas Musawi. The bombing of the Jewish community center in 1994 was a response to Israel's kidnapping of Lebanese Shia leader Mustafa Dirani and bombing of a Hezbollah training camp in eastern Lebanon.

This kind of tit-for-tat retaliation is the epitome of carefully calculated use of the capacity to inflict deadly harm. The experience with Hezbollah in South America, far from demonstrating that Iran or its clients are apt to strike out irrationally, instead demonstrates a pattern of keeping a lethal capability in reserve and *not* striking out until being struck themselves.

Cohen plays the usual religion card in trying to establish the irrationality idea, referring to Iranians as "fervid Shiites." The card is ultimately just another instance of religious stereotyping and prejudice.

Is the fervidness of those Shiites, and the implications for public policy, including the use of military force, any greater than what one can find with, say, many fundamentalist Christians in the United States? Or with the religious right in Israel?

In referring to those feared possible Iranian nuclear weapons, Cohen raises another common specter, of an Iranian nuke touching off a spurt of proliferation throughout the Middle East.

And like others who raise it, he never considers why the sizable Israeli nuclear arsenal, which has existed since the 1970s and involves at least as much antagonism and unresolved issues as anything having to do with Iran, should not have already touched off such a spurt.

Speaking of Israel, Cohen goes on to note that while "few in the West take Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's threats to exterminate Israel seriously," the "Israelis have some experience with the irrational and its consequences" and do not dismiss such threats.

Cohen doesn't say explicitly what the implication of this observation ought to be for U.S. policy. That the United States should fall in line with the posture of a state whose own view of Iran is in large part driven by emotion and, dare one use the word?, irrational fears? It shouldn't, but unfortunately to a large extent that is what is happening.

Cohen concludes his column by circling back to that weird alleged assassination plot. It would be an “incalculable mistake,” he says, for the United States to see the plot as “the reckless act of some runaway intelligence chief.”

He invokes no less an authority than the traitor in a John le Carre novel, who observes that intelligence agencies are “the only real measure of a nation’s political health, the only real expression of its subconscious.”

That’s right, says Cohen, and so the assassination plot “offers an insight into the entire Iranian regime. It’s too reckless to be allowed a nuclear arsenal.”

How’s that for the conclusion of a compelling piece of analysis? The caper involving the used car salesman and the DEA agent shows that Iran cannot be permitted to have a nuclear weapon; a fictional character in a novel says so.

With analysis like that it is not surprising that when reality finally intrudes, Cohen has a tendency to forget some of his own arguments. After three years of the ugly reality of the Iraq War, which Cohen had supported, he wrote a column calling for more leaking by government officials.

He said, “Among other things, the consensus at the CIA was that there was no link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. And while the spooks of Langley more or less concurred that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, they also thought his nuclear program was years away from fruition. In short, there was no urgent reason to go to war. I wish I had known that.”

Amnesia must have set in before that last comment, because here’s what Cohen had written in a column in March 2003, a week before the U.S. invasion:

“In the run-up to this war, the Bush administration has slipped, stumbled and fallen on its face. It has advanced untenable, unproven arguments. It has oscillated from disarmament to regime change to bringing democracy to the Arab world.

“It has linked [Saddam] Hussein to al Qaeda when no such link has been established. It has warned of an imminent Iraqi nuclear program when, it seems, that’s not the case.”

This was an accurate and perceptive capsule assessment of the Bush administration’s case for war. And yet, Cohen still favored launching the war, referring (again, accurately) to Saddam Hussein’s continued ambition to acquire nuclear weapons once the pressure was off.

What was not considered, of course, was the misery and mess that would follow the toppling of Saddam. Cohen became part of a drumbeat, initiated by the neocon

promoters of the war and amplified by other opinion-shapers such as himself, that came to portray the Iraqi dictator as such a grave threat that he had to go.

The drumbeat beat away any concern about post-invasion messes, or about the non-imminence of an Iraqi nuclear weapon or the lack of an alliance between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda.

What leads the prime movers of the Iraq War, many of whom are also among the most active agitators for war against Iran, to promote such folly is a question for another day.

Their promotions are successful only if they get many others beyond their ranks, including the Richard Cohens of the world, to sway to their beat. They did it once, beginning about ten years ago. As frightening as it is to think about, they could do it again.

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