

Neocons to Americans: Trust Us Again. “Marching in Lockstep with Israeli Hardliners against Iran”

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America’s neocons insist that their only mistake was falling for some false intelligence about Iraq’s WMD and that they shouldn’t be stripped of their powerful positions of influence for just one little boo-boo. That’s the [point of view](#) taken by Washington Post editorial page editor Fred Hiatt as he whines about the unfairness of applying “a single-interest litmus test,” i.e., the Iraq War debacle, to judge him and his fellow war boosters.

After noting that many other important people were on the same pro-war bandwagon with him, Hiatt criticizes President Barack Obama for citing the Iraq War as an argument not to listen to many of the same neocons who now are trying to sabotage the Iran nuclear agreement. Hiatt thinks it’s the height of unfairness for Obama or anyone else to suggest that people who want to kill the Iran deal — and thus keep alive the option to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran — “are lusting for another war.”



President George W. Bush pauses for applause during his State of the Union Address on Jan. 28, 2003, when he made a fraudulent case for invading Iraq. Seated behind him are Vice President Dick Cheney and House Speaker Dennis Hastert. (White House photo)

Hiatt also faults Obama for not issuing a serious war threat to Iran, a missing ultimatum that explains why the nuclear agreement falls “so far short.” Hiatt adds: “war is not always avoidable, and the judicious use of force early in a crisis, or even the threat of force, can sometimes forestall worse bloodshed later.”

But it should be noted that the neocons – and Hiatt in particular – did not simply make one mistake when they joined President George W. Bush’s rush to war in 2002-03. They continued with their warmongering in Iraq for years, often bashing the handful of brave souls in Official Washington who dared challenge the neocons’ pro-war enthusiasm. Hiatt and his fellow “opinion leaders” were, in effect, the enforcers of the Iraq War “group think” – and they have never sought to make amends for that bullying.

The Destruction of Joe Wilson

Take, for instance, the case of CIA officer Valerie Plame and her husband, former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson. Hiatt’s editorial section waged a long vendetta against Wilson for challenging one particularly egregious lie, Bush’s nationally televised claim about Iraq seeking “yellowcake” uranium from Niger, a suggestion that Iraq was working on a secret nuclear bomb. The Post’s get-Wilson campaign included publishing a column that identified Plame as a CIA officer, thus destroying her undercover career.

At that point, you might have thought that Hiatt would have stepped forward and tried to ameliorate the harm that he and his editorial page had inflicted on this patriotic American family, whose offense was to point out a false claim that Bush had used to sell the Iraq War to the American people. But instead Hiatt simply piled on the abuse, essentially driving Wilson and Plame out of government circles and indeed out of Washington.

In effect, Hiatt applied a “a single-issue litmus test” to disqualify the Wilson family from the ranks of those Americans who should be listened to. Joe Wilson had failed the test by being *right* about the Iraq War, so he obviously needed to be drummed out of public life.

The fact that Hiatt remains the Post’s editorial-page editor and that Wilson ended up decamping his family to New Mexico speaks volumes about the upside-down world that Official Washington has become. Be conspicuously, obstinately and nastily wrong about possibly the biggest foreign-policy blunder in U.S. history and you should be cut some slack, but dare be right and off with your head.

And the Iraq War wasn’t just a minor error. In the dozen years since Bush launched his war of aggression in Iraq, the bloody folly has destabilized the entire Middle East, resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths (including nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers), wasted well over \$1 trillion, spread the grotesque violence of Sunni terrorism across the region, and sent a flood of refugees into Europe threatening the Continent’s unity.

Yet, what is perhaps most remarkable is that almost no one who aided and abetted the catastrophic and illegal decision has been held accountable in any meaningful way. That applies to Bush and his senior advisers who haven’t spent a single day inside a jail cell; it applies to Official Washington’s well-funded think tanks where neoconservatives still dominate; and it applies to the national news media where almost no one who disseminated pro-war propaganda was fired (with the possible exception of Judith Miller who was dumped by The New York Times but landed on her feet as a Fox News “on-air personality” and an op-ed contributor to The Wall Street Journal).

The Plame-Gate Affair

While the overall performance of the Post’s editorial page during the Iraq War was one of the most shameful examples of journalistic malfeasance in modern U.S. history, arguably

the ugliest part was the Post's years-long assault on Wilson and Plame. The so-called "Plame-gate Affair" began in early 2002 when the CIA recruited ex-Ambassador Wilson to investigate what turned out to be a forged document indicating a possible Iraqi yellowcake purchase in Niger. The document had aroused Vice President Dick Cheney's interest.

Having served in Africa, Wilson accepted the CIA's assignment and returned with a conclusion that Iraq had almost surely not obtained any uranium from Niger, an assessment shared by other U.S. officials who checked out the story. However, the bogus allegation was not so easily quashed.

Wilson was stunned when Bush included the Niger allegations in his State of the Union Address in January 2003. Initially, Wilson began alerting a few journalists about the discredited claim while trying to keep his name out of the newspapers. However, in July 2003 – after the U.S. invasion in March 2003 had failed to turn up any WMD stockpiles – Wilson penned an op-ed article for The New York Times describing what he didn't find in Africa and saying the White House had "twisted" pre-war intelligence.

Though Wilson's article focused on his own investigation, it represented the first time a Washington insider had gone public with evidence regarding the Bush administration's fraudulent case for war. Thus, Wilson became a major target for retribution from the White House and particularly Cheney's office.

As part of the campaign to destroy Wilson's credibility, senior Bush administration officials leaked to journalists that Wilson's wife worked in the CIA office that had dispatched him to Niger, a suggestion that the trip might have been some kind of junket. When right-wing columnist Robert Novak published Plame's covert identity in The Washington Post's op-ed section, Plame's CIA career was destroyed.

Accusations of Lying

However, instead of showing any remorse for the harm his editorial section had done, Hiatt simply enlisted in the Bush administration's war against Wilson, promoting every anti-Wilson talking point that the White House could dream up. The Post's assault on Wilson went on for years.

For instance, in a Sept. 1, 2006, editorial, Hiatt accused Wilson of lying when he had claimed the White House had leaked his wife's name. The context of Hiatt's broadside was the disclosure that Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage was the first administration official to tell Novak that Plame was a CIA officer and had played a small role in Wilson's Niger trip.

Because Armitage was considered a reluctant supporter of the Iraq War, the Post editorial jumped to the conclusion that "it follows that one of the most sensational charges leveled against the Bush White House – that it orchestrated the leak of Ms. Plame's identity – is untrue."

But Hiatt's logic was faulty for several reasons. First, Armitage may have been cozier with some senior officials in Bush's White House than was generally understood. And, just because Armitage may have been the first to share the classified information with Novak didn't mean that there was no parallel White House operation to peddle Plame's identity to reporters.

In fact, evidence uncovered by special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, who examined the Plame leak, supported a conclusion that White House officials, under the direction of Vice President Cheney and including Cheney aide Lewis Libby and Bush political adviser Karl Rove, approached a number of reporters with this information.

Indeed, Rove appears to have confirmed Plame's identity for Novak and also leaked the information to Time magazine's Matthew Cooper. Meanwhile, Libby, who was indicted on perjury and obstruction charges in the case, had pitched the information to The New York Times' Judith Miller. The Post's editorial acknowledged that Libby and other White House officials were not "blameless," since they allegedly released Plame's identity while "trying to discredit Mr. Wilson." But the Post reserved its harshest condemnation for Wilson.

"It now appears that the person most responsible for the end of Ms. Plame's CIA career is Mr. Wilson," the editorial said. "Mr. Wilson chose to go public with an explosive charge, claiming – falsely, as it turned out – that he had debunked reports of Iraqi uranium-shopping in Niger and that his report had circulated to senior administration officials.

He ought to have expected that both those officials and journalists such as Mr. Novak would ask why a retired ambassador would have been sent on such a mission and that the answer would point to his wife. He diverted responsibility from himself and his false charges by claiming that President Bush's closest aides had engaged in an illegal conspiracy. It's unfortunate that so many people took him seriously.

A Smear or a Lie

The Post's editorial, however, was at best an argumentative smear and most likely a willful lie. By then, the evidence was clear that Wilson, along with other government investigators, had debunked the reports of Iraq acquiring yellowcake in Niger and that those findings did circulate to senior levels, explaining why CIA Director George Tenet struck the yellowcake claims from other Bush speeches.

The Post's accusation about Wilson "falsely" claiming to have debunked the yellowcake reports apparently was based on Wilson's inclusion in his report of speculation from one Niger official who suspected that Iraq might have been interested in buying yellowcake, although the Iraqi officials never mentioned yellowcake and made no effort to buy any. This irrelevant point had become a centerpiece of Republican attacks on Wilson and was recycled by the Post.

Plus, contrary to the Post's assertion that Wilson "ought to have expected" that the White House and Novak would zero in on Wilson's wife, a reasonable expectation in a normal world would have been just the opposite. Even amid the ugly partisanship of modern Washington, it was shocking to many longtime observers of government that any administration official or an experienced journalist would disclose the name of a covert CIA officer for such a flimsy reason as trying to discredit her husband.

Hiatt also bought into the Republican argument that Plame really wasn't "covert" at all – and thus there was nothing wrong in exposing her counter-proliferation work for the CIA. The Post was among the U.S. media outlets that gave a podium for right-wing lawyer Victoria Toensing to make this bogus argument in defense of Cheney's chief of staff Lewis Libby.

On Feb. 18, 2007, as jurors were about to begin deliberations in Libby's obstruction case, the Post ran a prominent Outlook article by Toensing, who had been buzzing around the TV pundit shows decrying Libby's prosecution. In the Post article, she wrote that "Plame was not covert. She worked at CIA headquarters and had not been stationed abroad within five years of the date of Novak's column."

A Tendentious Argument

Though it might not have been clear to a reader, Toensing was hanging her claim about Plame not being "covert" on a contention that Plame didn't meet the coverage standards of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. Toensing's claim was legalistic at best since it obscured the larger point that Plame was working undercover in a classified CIA position and was running agents abroad whose safety would be put at risk by an unauthorized disclosure of Plame's identity.

But Toensing, who promoted herself as an author of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, wasn't even right about the legal details. The law doesn't require that a CIA officer be "stationed" abroad in the preceding five years; it simply refers to an officer who "has served within the last five years outside the United States."

That would cover someone who – while based in the United States – went abroad on official CIA business, as Plame testified under oath in a congressional hearing that she had done within the five-year period. Toensing, who appeared as a Republican witness at the same congressional hearing on March 16, 2007, was asked about her bald assertion that "Plame was not covert."

"Not under the law," Toensing responded. "I'm giving you the legal interpretation under the law and I helped draft the law. The person is supposed to reside outside the United States." But that's not what the law says, either. It says "served" abroad, not "reside."

At the hearing, Toensing was reduced to looking like a quibbling kook who missed the forest of damage – done to U.S. national security, to Plame and possibly to the lives of foreign agents – for the trees of how a definition in a law was phrased, and then getting that wrong, too.

After watching Toensing's bizarre testimony, one had to wonder why the Post would have granted her space on the widely read Outlook section's front page to issue what she called "indictments" of Joe Wilson, U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald and others who had played a role in exposing the White House hand behind the Plame leak.

Despite Toensing's high-profile smear of Wilson and Fitzgerald, Libby still was convicted of four felony counts. In response to the conviction, the Post reacted with another dose of its false history of the Plame case and a final insult directed at Wilson, declaring that he "will be remembered as a blowhard."

With Plame's CIA career destroyed and Wilson's reputation battered by Hiatt and his Post colleagues, the Wilsons moved away from Washington. Their ordeal was later recounted in the 2010 movie, "Fair Game," starring Naomi Watts and Sean Penn. Though Libby was sentenced to 30 months in prison, his sentence was commuted by President Bush to eliminate any jail time.

A Pattern of Dishonesty

While perhaps Hiatt's vendetta against Joe Wilson was the meanest personal attack in the Post's multi-year pro-war advocacy, it was just part of a larger picture of complicity and intimidation. Post readers often learned about voices of dissent only by reading Post columnists denouncing the dissenters, a scene reminiscent of a totalitarian society where dissidents never get space to express their opinions but are still excoriated in the official media.

For instance, on Sept. 23, 2002, when former Vice President Al Gore gave a speech criticizing Bush's "preemptive war" doctrine and Bush's push for the Iraq invasion, Gore's talk got scant media coverage, but still elicited a round of Gore-bashing on the TV talk shows and on the Post's op-ed page.

Post columnist Michael Kelly called Gore's speech "dishonest, cheap, low" before labeling it "wretched. It was vile. It was contemptible." [Washington Post, Sept. 25, 2002] Post columnist Charles Krauthammer added that the speech was "a series of cheap shots strung together without logic or coherence." [Washington Post, Sept. 27, 2002]

While the Post's wrongheadedness on the Iraq War extended into its news pages – with the rare skeptical article either buried or spiked – Hiatt's editorial section was like a chorus with virtually every columnist singing from the same pro-invasion song book and Hiatt's editorials serving as lead vocalist. A study by Columbia University journalism professor Todd Gitlin noted, "The [Post] editorials during December [2002] and January [2003] numbered nine, and all were hawkish." [American Prospect, April 1, 2003]

The Post's martial harmony reached its crescendo after Secretary of State Colin Powell made his bogus presentation to the United Nations on Feb. 5, 2003, accusing Iraq of hiding vast stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. The next day, Hiatt's lead editorial hailed Powell's evidence as "irrefutable" and chastised any remaining skeptics.

"It is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction," the editorial said. Hiatt's judgment was echoed across the Post's op-ed page, with Post columnists from Right to Left singing the same note of misguided consensus.

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq on March 19-20, 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]

Concealing the Truth

But Hiatt's supposed remorse didn't stop him and the Post editorial page from continuing its single-minded support for the Iraq War. Hiatt was especially hostile when evidence emerged that revealed how thoroughly he and his colleagues had been gulled.

In June 2005, for instance, The Washington Post decided to ignore the leak of the "Downing Street Memo" in the British press. The "memo" – actually minutes of a meeting of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his national security team on July 23, 2002 – recounted the words of MI6 chief Richard Dearlove who had just returned from discussions with his

intelligence counterparts in Washington.

“Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy,” Dearlove said.

Though the Downing Street Memo amounted to a smoking gun regarding how Bush had set his goal first – overthrowing Saddam Hussein – and then searched for a sellable rationalization, the Post’s senior editors deemed the document unworthy to share with their readers.

Only after thousands of Post readers complained did the newspaper deign to give its reasoning. On June 15, 2005, the Post’s lead editorial asserted that “the memos add not a single fact to what was previously known about the administration’s prewar deliberations. Not only that: They add nothing to what was publicly known in July 2002.”

But Hiatt was simply wrong in that assertion. Looking back to 2002 and early 2003, it would be hard to find any commentary in the Post or any other mainstream U.S. news outlet calling Bush’s actions fraudulent, which is what the “Downing Street Memo” and other British evidence revealed Bush’s actions to be.

The British documents also proved that much of the pre-war debate inside the U.S. and British governments was how best to manipulate public opinion by playing games with the intelligence.

Further, official documents of this nature are almost always regarded as front-page news, even if they confirm long-held suspicions. By Hiatt’s and the Post’s reasoning, the Pentagon Papers wouldn’t have been news since some people had previously alleged that U.S. officials had lied about the Vietnam War.

Not a One-Off

In other words, Hiatt’s Iraq War failure wasn’t a one-off affair. It was a long-running campaign to keep the truth from the American people and to silence and even destroy critics of the war. The overall impact of this strategy was to ensure that war was the only option.

And, in that sense, Hiatt’s history as a neocon war propagandist belies his current defense of fellow neocon pundits who are rallying opposition to the Iran nuclear deal. While Hiatt claims that his colleagues shouldn’t be accused of “lusting for another war,” that could well be the consequence if their obstructionism succeeds.

It has long been part of the neocon playbook to pretend that, of course, they don’t want war but then put the United States on a path that leads inevitably to war. Before the Iraq War, for instance, neocons argued that U.S. troops should be deployed to the region to compel Saddam Hussein to let in United Nations weapons inspectors – yet once the soldiers got there and the inspectors inside Iraq were finding no WMD, the neocons argued that the invasion had to proceed because the troops couldn’t just sit there indefinitely while the inspectors raced around futilely searching for the WMD.

Similarly, you could expect that if the neocons succeed in torpedoing the Iran deal, the next move would be to demand that the United States deliver an ultimatum to Iran: capitulate or

get bombed. Then, if Iran balked at surrender, the neocons would say that war and “regime change” were the only options to maintain American “credibility.” The neocons are experts at leading the U.S. media, politicians and public by the nose – to precisely the war outcome that the neocons wanted from the beginning. Hiatt is doing his part.

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](#).

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