

“Regime Change” and “Neocon Ideologues”: A Media Unmoored from Facts

By [Robert Parry](#)

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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.



Image: Washington Post's editorial page editor Fred Hiatt.

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.



Image: President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney receive an Oval Office briefing

from CIA Director George Tenet. Also present is Chief of Staff Andy Card (on right). (White House photo)

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.



Image: President Barack Obama shakes hands with U.S. troops at Bagram Airfield in Bagram, Afghanistan, Sunday, May 25, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

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.



Image: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressing the AIPAC conference in Washington D.C. on March 21, 2016. (Photo credit: AIPAC)

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](#)).

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