

Democrats in ‘Group Think’ Land

By [Robert Parry](#)

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Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confronts Sen. Bernie Sanders in Democratic presidential debate on Jan. 17, 2016.

A curious reality about Official Washington is that to have “credibility” you must accept the dominant “group thinks” whether they have any truth to them or not, a rule that applies to both the mainstream news media and the political world, even to people who deviate from the pack on other topics.

For instance, Sen. Bernie Sanders may proudly declare himself a “democratic socialist” – far outside the acceptable Washington norm – but he will still echo the typical propaganda about Syria, Russia, Iran and other “designated villains.” Like other progressives who spend years in Washington, he gets what you might call “Senate-ized,” adopting that institution’s conventional wisdom about “enemies” even if he may differ on whether to bomb them or not.

That pattern goes in spades for former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other consciously “centrist” politicians as well as media stars, like NBC’s Andrea Mitchell and Lester Holt, who were the moderators of Sunday’s Democratic presidential [debate](#). They know what they know based on what “everybody who’s important” says, regardless of the evidence or lack thereof.

So, you had Mitchell and Holt framing questions based on Official Washington’s “group thinks” – and Sanders and Clinton responding accordingly.

Regarding Iran, Sanders may have gone as far as would be considered safe in this political environment, welcoming the implementation of the agreement to restrain Iran’s nuclear program but accepting the “group think” about Iran’s “terrorism” and hesitant to call for resumption of diplomatic relations.

“Understanding that Iran’s behavior in so many ways is something that we disagree with; their support of terrorism, the anti-American rhetoric that we’re hearing from their leadership is something that is not acceptable,” Sanders said. “Can I tell you that we should open an embassy in Tehran tomorrow? No, I don’t think we should.”

Blaming Iran

In her response, Clinton settled safely behind the Israeli-preferred position – to lambaste Iran for supposedly fomenting the trouble in the Middle East, though more objective observers might say that the U.S. government and its “allies” – including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – have wreaked much more regional havoc than Iran has.

“We have to go after them [the Iranians] on a lot of their other bad behavior in the region which is causing enormous problems in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere,” Clinton said.

Yet, how exactly Iran is responsible for “enormous problems” across the region doesn’t get explained. Everybody just “knows” it to be true, since the claim is asserted by Israel’s right-wing government and repeated by U.S. pols and pundits endlessly.

Yet, in Iraq, the chaos was not caused by Iran, but by the U.S. government’s invasion in 2003, which then-Sen. Clinton supported (while Sen. Sanders opposed it). In Yemen, it is the Saudis and their Sunni coalition that created a humanitarian disaster by bombing the impoverished country after wildly exaggerating Iran’s support for Houthi rebels.

In Syria, the core reason for the bloodshed is not Iran, but decisions of the Bush-43 administration last decade and the Obama administration this decade to seek another “regime change,” ousting President Bashar al-Assad.

Supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers, this U.S.-backed “covert” intervention instigated both political unrest and terrorist violence inside Syria, including arming jihadist forces such as Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al-Sham and – to a lesser degree – Al Qaeda’s spinoff, the Islamic State. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”](#)]

The desire of these Sunni powers — along with Israel and America’s neoconservatives — was to shatter the so-called “Shiite crescent” that they saw reaching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Since Assad is an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam, he had to be removed even though he was regarded as the principal protector of Syria’s Christian, Shiite and Alawite minorities. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Did Money Seal Saudi-Israeli Alliance?”](#)]

However, while Israel and the Sunni powers get a pass for their role in the carnage, Iran is blamed for its assistance to the Syrian military in battling these jihadist groups. Official Washington’s version of this tragedy is that the culprits are Assad, the Iranians and now the Russians, who also intervened to help the Syrian government resist the jihadists, both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda’s various friends and associates. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Climbing into Bed with Al Qaeda.”](#)]

Blaming Assad

Official Washington also accepts as undeniably true that Assad is responsible for all 250,000 deaths in the Syrian civil war – even those inflicted by the Sunni jihadists against the Syrian military and Syrian civilians – a logic that would have accused President Abraham Lincoln of slaughtering all 750,000 or so people – North and South – who died in the U.S. Civil War.

The “group think” also holds that Assad was behind the sarin gas attack near Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, despite growing evidence that it was a jihadist group, possibly with the help of Turkish intelligence, that staged the outrage as a provocation to draw the U.S. military into the conflict against Syria’s military by creating the appearance that Assad had crossed Obama’s “red line” on using chemical weapons.

Mitchell cited Assad’s presumed guilt in the sarin attack in asking Clinton: “Should the President have stuck to his red line once he drew it?”

Trying to defend President Obama in South Carolina where he is popular especially with the black community, Clinton dodged the implicit criticism of Obama but accepted Mitchell's premise.

"I know from my own experience as Secretary of State that we were deeply worried about Assad's forces using chemical weapons because it would have had not only a horrific effect on people in Syria, but it could very well have affected the surrounding states, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey. ...

"If there is any blame to be spread around, it starts with the prime minister of Iraq, who sectarianized his military, setting Shia against Sunni. It is amplified by Assad, who has waged one of the bloodiest, most terrible attacks on his own people: 250,000-plus dead, millions fleeing. Causing this vacuum that has been filled unfortunately, by terrorist groups, including ISIS."

Clinton's account - which ignores the central role that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and outside support for the jihadists in Syria played in creating ISIS - represents a thoroughly twisted account of how the Mideast crisis evolved. But Sanders seconded Clinton's recitation of the "group think" on Syria, saying:

"I agree with most of what she said. ... And we all know, no argument, the Secretary is absolutely right, Assad is a butcher of his own people, man using chemical weapons against his own people. This is beyond disgusting. But I think in terms of our priorities in the region, our first priority must be the destruction of ISIS. Our second priority must be getting rid of Assad, through some political settlement, working with Iran, working with Russia." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Blind Eye Toward Turkey's Crimes.](#)"]

Sanders also repeated his talking point that Saudi Arabia and Qatar must "start putting some skin in the game" - ignoring the fact that the Saudis and Qataris have been principal supporters of the Sunni jihadists inflicting much of the carnage in Syria. Those two rich countries have put plenty of "skin in the game" except it comes in the slaughter of Syrian Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other religious minorities.

Blaming Russia

NBC anchor Lester Holt then recited the "group think" about "Russian aggression" in Ukraine - ignoring the U.S. role in instigating the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Holt also asserted Moscow's guilt in the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 despite the lack of any solid evidence to support that claim.

Holt asked:

"Secretary Clinton, you famously handed Russia's foreign minister a reset button in 2009. Since then, Russia has annexed Crimea, fomented a war in Ukraine, provided weapons that downed an airliner and launched operations, as we just did discuss, to support Assad in Syria. As president, would you hand Vladimir Putin a reset button?"

While noting some positive achievements from the Russian "reset" such as a new nuclear

weapons treaty, help resupplying U.S. troops in Afghanistan and assistance in the nuclear deal with Iran, Clinton quickly returned to Official Washington's bash-Putin imperative:

"When Putin came back in the fall of 2011, it was very clear he came back with a mission. And I began speaking out as soon as that happened because there were some fraudulent elections held, and Russians poured out into the streets to demand their freedom, and he cracked down. And in fact, accused me of fomenting it. So we now know that he has a mixed record to say the least and we have to figure out how to deal with him. ...

"And I know that he's someone that you have to continually stand up to because, like many bullies, he is somebody who will take as much as he possibly can unless you do. And we need to get the Europeans to be more willing to stand up, I was pleased they put sanctions on after Crimea and eastern Ukraine and the downing of the airliner, but we've got to be more united in preventing Putin from taking a more aggressive stance in Europe and the Middle East."

In such situations, with millions of Americans watching, no one in Official Washington would think to challenge the premises behind these "group thinks," not even Bernie Sanders. No one would note that the U.S. government hasn't provided a single verifiable fact to support its claims blaming Assad for the sarin attack or Putin for the plane shoot-down. No one would dare question the absurdity of blaming Assad for every death in Syria's civil war or Putin for all the tensions in Ukraine. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[MH-17's Unnecessary Mystery](#)."]

Those dubious "group thinks" are simply accepted as true regardless of the absence of evidence or the presence of significant counter-evidence.

The two possibilities for such behavior are both scary: either these people, including prospective presidents, believe the propaganda or that they are so cynical and cowardly that they won't demand proof of serious charges that could lead the United States and the world into more war and devastation.

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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