

Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on May 1, 2011, watching developments in the Special Forces raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Neither played a particularly prominent role in the operation. (White House photo by Pete Souza)

As a U.S. senator and Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton often followed a neocon-style foreign policy, backing the Iraq War, teaming up with Defense Secretary Robert Gates on an Afghan War "surge," and staking out an even more hawkish stance than Gates on Libya.

Most Democratic power-brokers appear settled on Hillary Clinton as their choice for President in 2016 – and she holds lopsided leads over potential party rivals in early opinion polls – but there are some warning flags flying, paradoxically, hoisted by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates in his praise for the former First Lady, U.S. senator and Secretary of State.

On the surface, one might think that Gates's glowing commendations of Clinton would further burnish her standing as the odds-on next President of the United States, but strip away the fawning endorsements and Gates's portrait of Clinton in his new memoir, *Duty*, is of a pedestrian foreign policy thinker who is easily duped and leans toward military solutions.

Indeed, for thoughtful and/or progressive Democrats, the prospect of a President Hillary Clinton could represent a step back from some of President Barack Obama's more innovative foreign policy strategies, particularly his readiness to cooperate with the Russians and Iranians to defuse Middle East crises and his willingness to face down the Israel Lobby when it is pushing for heightened confrontations and war.

Based on her public record and Gates's insider account, Clinton could be expected to favor a more neoconservative approach to the Mideast, one more in line with the traditional thinking of Official Washington and the belligerent dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

As a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State, Clinton rarely challenged the conventional wisdom or resisted the use of military force to solve problems. She famously voted for the Iraq War in 2002 – falling for President George W. Bush's bogus WMD case – and remained a war supporter until her position became politically untenable during Campaign 2008.

Representing New York, Clinton rarely if ever criticized Israeli actions. In summer 2006, as Israeli warplanes pounded southern Lebanon, killing more than 1,000 Lebanese, Sen. Clinton shared a stage with Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations Dan Gillerman who had said, "While it may be true – and probably is – that not all Muslims are terrorists, it also happens

to be true that nearly all terrorists are Muslim.”

At a pro-Israel rally with Clinton in New York on July 17, 2006, Gillerman proudly defended Israel’s massive violence against targets in Lebanon. “Let us finish the job,” Gillerman told the crowd. “We will excise the cancer in Lebanon” and “cut off the fingers” of Hezbollah. Responding to international concerns that Israel was using “disproportionate” force in bombing Lebanon and killing hundreds of civilians, Gillerman said, “You’re damn right we are.” [NYT, July 18, 2006]

Sen. Clinton did not protest Gillerman’s remarks, since doing so would presumably have offended an important pro-Israel constituency.

Misreading Gates

In November 2006, when Bush nominated Gates to be Defense Secretary, Clinton gullibly misread the significance of the move. She interpreted it as a signal that the war was being wound down when it actually presaged the opposite, that an escalation or “surge” was coming.

From her seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Clinton failed to penetrate the smokescreen around Gates’s selection. The reality was that Bush had ousted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in part, because he had sided with Generals John Abizaid and George Casey who favored shrinking the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. Gates was privately onboard for replacing those generals and expanding the U.S. footprint.

After getting blindsided by Gates over what became a “surge” of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, Sen. Clinton sided with Democrats who objected to the escalation, but Gates quotes her in his memoir as later telling President Obama that she did so only for political reasons.

Gates recalled a meeting on Oct. 26, 2009, to discuss whether to authorize a similar “surge” in Afghanistan, a position favored by Gates and Clinton, with Secretary of State Clinton supporting even a higher number of troops than Defense Secretary Gates was. But the Afghan “surge” faced skepticism from Vice President Joe Biden and other White House staffers.

Gates wrote that he and Clinton “were the only outsiders in the session, considerably outnumbered by White House insiders. ... Obama said at the outset to Hillary and me, ‘It’s time to lay our cards on the table, Bob, what do you think?’ I repeated a number of the main points I had made in my memo to him [urging three brigades].

“Hillary agreed with my overall proposal but urged the president to consider approving the fourth brigade combat team if the allies wouldn’t come up with the troops.”

Gates then reported on what he regarded as a stunning admission by Clinton, writing: “The exchange that followed was remarkable. In strongly supporting the surge in Afghanistan, Hillary told the president that her opposition to the surge in Iraq had been political because she was facing him in the Iowa primary [in 2008]. She went on to say, ‘The Iraq surge worked.’

“The president conceded vaguely that opposition to the Iraq surge had been political. To hear the two of them making these admissions, and in front of me, was as surprising as it was dismaying.” (Obama’s aides have since disputed Gates’s suggestion that the President

indicated that his opposition to the Iraq “surge” was political, noting that he had always opposed the Iraq War. The Clinton team has not challenged Gates’s account.)

But the exchange, as recounted by Gates, indicates that Clinton not only let her political needs dictate her position on an important national security issue, but that she accepts as true the superficial conventional wisdom about the “successful surge” in Iraq.

While that is indeed Official Washington’s beloved interpretation – in part because influential neocons believe the “surge” rehabilitated their standing after the WMD fiasco and the disastrous war – the reality is that the Iraq “surge” never achieved its stated goal of buying time to reconcile the country’s financial and sectarian divides, which remain bloody to this day.

The Unsuccessful Surge

The truth that Hillary Clinton apparently doesn’t recognize is that the “surge” was only “successful” in that it delayed the ultimate American defeat until Bush and his neocon cohorts had vacated the White House and the blame for the failure could be shifted, at least partly, to President Obama.

Other than sparing “war president” Bush the humiliation of having to admit defeat, the dispatching of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in early 2007 did little more than get nearly 1,000 additional Americans killed – almost one-quarter of the war’s total U.S. deaths – along with what certainly was a much higher number of Iraqis.

For example, WikiLeaks’s “[Collateral Murder](#).” video depicted one 2007 scene during the “surge” in which U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters news staffers, walking down a street in Baghdad. The attack helicopters then killed a Good Samaritan, when he stopped his van to take survivors to a hospital, and severely wounded two children in the van.

A more rigorous analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 – apparently beyond Hillary Clinton’s abilities or inclination – would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the “surge” and were implemented in 2006 by Generals Casey and Abizaid.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid deployed a highly classified operation to eliminate key al-Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward al-Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the so-called “Awakening” in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the *de facto* ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves, thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the “surge” or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military’s occupation indeed

was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki insisted on – and got – a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush.

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that praised Bush's early war judgments, concluded that the "surge" was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence. In his book, *The War Within*, [Woodward wrote](#), "In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge."

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of al-Qaeda extremists in Anbar province and the surprise decision of al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

However, in Washington, where the neocons remain very influential, the myth grew that Bush's "surge" had brought the violence under control. Gen. David Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as the military genius who achieved "victory at last" in Iraq (as Newsweek declared).

Even the inconvenient truth that the United States was unceremoniously ushered out of Iraq in 2011 – and that the mammoth U.S. embassy that was supposed to be the command center for Washington's imperial reach throughout the region sat mostly empty – did not dent this cherished conventional wisdom about the "successful surge."

Clinton's Conundrum

Yet, it is one thing for neocon pundits to promote such fallacies; it is another thing for the Democratic front-runner for President in 2016 to believe this nonsense. And to say that she only opposed the "surge" out of a political calculation could border on disqualifying.

But that pattern fits with Clinton's previous decisions. She belatedly broke with the Iraq War during Campaign 2008 when she realized that her hawkish stance was damaging her political chances against Obama, who had opposed the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Despite Clinton's shift on Iraq, Obama still managed to win the Democratic nomination and ultimately the White House. However, after his election, some of his advisers urged him to assemble a "team of rivals" – a la Abraham Lincoln – by asking Republican Defense Secretary Gates to stay on and recruiting Clinton to be Secretary of State.

Then, in his first months in office, as Obama grappled with what to do about the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, Gates and Clinton teamed up with Gen. David Petraeus, a neocon favorite, to maneuver the President into another 30,000-troop "surge" – to wage a counterinsurgency war across large swaths of Afghanistan.

In *Duty*, Gates cites his collaboration with Clinton as crucial to his success in getting Obama to agree to the troop escalation and the expanded goal of counterinsurgency. Referring to Clinton, Gates wrote, "we would develop a very strong partnership, in part because it turned out we agreed on almost every important issue."

The hawkish Gates-Clinton tandem helped counter the move dovish team including Vice

President Joe Biden, several members of the National Security Council staff and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who tried to steer President Obama away from this deeper involvement.

Gates wrote, "I was confident that Hillary and I would be able to work closely together. Indeed, before too long, commentators were observing that in an administration where all power and decision making were gravitating to the White House, Clinton and I represented the only independent 'power center,' not least because, for very different reasons, we were both seen as 'un-fireable.'"

When General Stanley McChrystal proposed the expanded counterinsurgency war for Afghanistan, Gates wrote that he and "Hillary strongly supported McChrystal's approach" along with UN Ambassador Susan Rice and Petraeus. On the other side were Biden, NSC aide Tom Donilon and intelligence adviser John Brennan, with Eikenberry supporting more troops but skeptical of the counterinsurgency plan because of weaknesses in the Afghan government, Gates wrote.

After Obama hesitantly approved the Afghan "surge" - and reportedly immediately regretted his decision - Clinton took aim at Eikenberry, a retired general who had served in Afghanistan before being named ambassador.

Pressing for his removal, "Hillary had come to the meeting loaded for bear," Gates wrote. "She gave a number of specific examples of Eikenberry's insubordination to herself and her deputy. ... She said, 'He's a huge problem.' ...

"She went after the NSS [national security staff] and the White House staff, expressing anger at their direct dealings with Eikenberry and offering a number of examples of what she termed their arrogance, their efforts to control the civilian side of the war effort, their refusal to accommodate requests for meetings. ...

"As she talked, she became more forceful. 'I've had it,' she said, 'You want it [control of the civilian side of the war], I'll turn it all over to you and wash my hands of it. I'll not be held accountable for something I cannot manage because of White House and NSS interference.'"

However, when the protests failed to get Eikenberry and General Douglas Lute, a deputy national security adviser, fired, Gates concluded that they had the protection of President Obama and reflected his doubts about the Afghan War policy:

"It had become clear that Eikenberry and Lute, whatever their shortcomings, were under an umbrella of protection at the White House. With Hillary and me so adamant that the two should leave, that protection could come only from the president. Because I could not imagine any previous president tolerating someone in a senior position openly working against policies he had approved, the most likely explanation was that the president himself did not really believe the strategy he had approved would work."

Of the 2,300 American soldiers who have died in the 12-year-old Afghan War, about 1,670 (or more than 70 percent) have died since President Obama took office. Many were killed in what is now widely regarded as the failed counterinsurgency strategy that Gates, Petraeus and Clinton pushed on Obama.

Getting Gaddafi

In 2011, Secretary of State Clinton also was a hawk on military intervention in Libya to oust (and ultimately kill) Muammar Gaddafi. However, on Libya, Defense Secretary Gates sided with the doves, feeling that the U.S. military was already overextended in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and another intervention risked further alienating the Muslim world.

This time, Gates found himself lined up with Biden, Donilon and Brennan “urging caution,” while Clinton joined with Rice and NSC aides Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power in “urging aggressive U.S. action to prevent an anticipated massacre of the rebels as Qaddafi fought to remain in power,” Gates wrote. “In the final phase of the internal debate, Hillary threw her considerable clout behind Rice, Rhodes and Power.”

President Obama again ceded to Clinton’s advocacy for war and supported a Western bombing campaign that enabled the rebels, including Islamic extremists with ties to al-Qaeda, to seize control of Tripoli and hunt Gaddafi down in Sirte, Libya, on Oct. 20, 2011.

Clinton expressed delight when she received the news of Gaddafi’s capture during a TV interview. Gaddafi then was brutally assassinated – and Libya has since become a source for regional instability, including an assault on the U.S. mission in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. personnel, an incident that Clinton has called the worst moment in her four years as Secretary of State.

Gates retired from the Pentagon on July 1, 2011, and Clinton stepped down at the State Department on Feb. 1, 2013, after Obama’s reelection. Since then, Obama has charted a more innovative foreign policy course, collaborating with Russian President Vladimir Putin to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs on Syria and Iran, rather than seeking military solutions.

In both cases, Obama had to face down hawkish sentiments in his own administration and in Congress, as well as Israeli and Saudi opposition. Regarding negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program, the Israel Lobby pressed for new sanctions legislation that appeared designed to sabotage the talks and put the U.S. and Iran on a possible path to war.

Dealing with Iran

As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton had been a hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue. In 2009-2010, when Iran first indicated a willingness to compromise, she led the opposition to any negotiated settlement and pushed for punishing sanctions.

To clear the route for sanctions, Clinton helped sink agreements tentatively negotiated with Iran to ship most of its low-enriched uranium out of the country. In 2009, Iran was refining uranium only to the level of about 3-4 percent, as needed for energy production. Its negotiators offered to swap much of that for nuclear isotopes for medical research.

But the Obama administration and the West rebuffed the Iranian gesture because it would have left Iran with enough enriched uranium to theoretically refine much higher – up to 90 percent – for potential use in a single bomb, though Iran insisted it had no such intention and U.S. intelligence agencies agreed.

Then, in spring 2010, Iran agreed to another version of the uranium swap proposed by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey, with the apparent backing of President Obama. But that arrangement came under fierce attack by Secretary of State Clinton and was derided by leading U.S. news outlets, including editorial writers at the New York Times who mocked Brazil and Turkey as being “played by Tehran.”

The ridicule of Brazil and Turkey – as bumbling understudies on the world stage – continued even after Brazil released Obama’s private letter to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva encouraging Brazil and Turkey to work out the deal. Despite the letter’s release, Obama didn’t publicly defend the swap and instead joined in scuttling the deal, another moment when Clinton and administration hardliners got their way.

That set the world on the course for tightened economic sanctions on Iran and heightened tensions that brought the region close to another war. As Israel threatened to attack, Iran expanded its nuclear capabilities by increasing enrichment to 20 percent to fill its research needs, moving closer to the level necessary for building a bomb.

Ironically, the nuclear deal reached in late 2013 essentially accepts Iran’s low-enrichment of uranium for peaceful purposes, pretty much where matters stood in 2009-2010. But the Israel Lobby quickly set to work, again, trying to torpedo the new agreement by getting Congress to approve new sanctions on Iran.

Clinton remained noncommittal for several weeks as momentum for the sanctions bill grew, but she finally declared her support for President Obama’s opposition to the new sanctions. In a Jan. 26 [letter](#) to Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, she wrote:

“Now that serious negotiations are finally under way, we should do everything we can to test whether they can advance a permanent solution. As President Obama said, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed, while keeping all options on the table. The U.S. intelligence community has assessed that imposing new unilateral sanctions now ‘would undermine the prospects for a successful comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran.’ I share that view. “

The sanctions bill has now stalled and its failure is regarded as a victory for President Obama and a rare congressional defeat for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Clinton’s successor, Secretary of State John Kerry, also has pressed Israel and the Palestinian Authority to accept a U.S. framework for settling their long-running conflict. Though chances for a final agreement still seem slim, the Obama administration’s aggressiveness – even in the face of Israeli objections – stands in marked contrast to the behavior of previous U.S. administrations and, indeed, Obama’s first term with Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State.

One key question for a Clinton presidential candidacy will be whether she would build on the diplomatic foundation that Obama has laid — or dismantle it and return to a more traditional foreign policy focused on military might and catering to the views of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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](#).

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