

Neocons and Neolib: How Dead Ideas Kill

By [Robert Parry](#)

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For centuries hereditary monarchy was the dominant way to select national leaders, evolving into an intricate system that sustained itself through power and propaganda even as its ideological roots shriveled amid the Age of Reason. Yet, as monarchy became a dead idea, it still killed millions in its death throes.

Today, the dangerous “dead ideas” are neoconservatism and its close ally neoliberalism. These are concepts that have organized American foreign policy and economics, respectively, over the past several decades – and they have failed miserably, at least from the perspective of average Americans and people of the nations on the receiving end of these ideologies.

Neither approach has benefited mankind; both have led to untold death and destruction; yet the twin “neos” have built such a powerful propaganda and political apparatus, especially in Official Washington, that they will surely continue to wreak havoc for years to come. They are zombie ideas and they kill.

Yet, the Democratic Party is poised to nominate an adherent to both “neos” in the person of Hillary Clinton. Rather than move forward from President Barack Obama’s unease with what he calls the Washington “playbook,” the Democrats are retreating into its perceived safety.



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

After all, the Washington Establishment remains enthralled to both “neos,” favoring the “regime change” interventionism of neoconservatism and the “free trade” globalism of neoliberalism. So, Clinton has emerged as the clear favorite of the elites, at least since the field of alternatives has narrowed to populist billionaire Donald Trump and democratic socialist Bernie Sanders.

Democratic Party insiders appear to be counting on the mainstream news media and prominent opinion-leaders to marginalize Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, and to finish off Sanders, who faces long odds against Clinton’s delegate lead for the Democratic nomination, especially among the party regulars known as “super-delegates.”

But the Democratic hierarchy is placing this bet on Clinton in a year when much of the American electorate has risen up against the twin “neos,” exhausted by the perpetual wars demanded by the neoconservatives and impoverished by the export of decent-paying manufacturing jobs driven by the neoliberals.

Though much of the popular resistance to the “neos” remains poorly defined in the minds of rebellious voters, the common denominator of the contrasting appeals of Trump and Sanders is that millions of Americans are rejecting the “neos” and repudiating the establishment institutions that insist on sustaining these ideologies.

The Pressing Question

Thus, the pressing question for Campaign 2016 is whether America will escape from the zombies of the twin “neos” or spend the next four years surrounded by these undead ideas as the world lurches closer to an existential crisis.

The main thing that the zombie “neos” have going for them is that the vast majority of Very Important People in Official Washington have embraced these concepts and have achieved money and fame as a result. These VIPs are no more likely to renounce their fat salaries and overblown influence than the favored courtiers of a King or Queen would side with the unwashed rabble.



Image: Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then Saudi ambassador to the United States, meeting with President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, on Aug. 27, 2002. (White House photo)

The “neo” adherents are also very skilled at framing issues to their benefit, made easier by the fact that they face almost no opposition or resistance from the mainstream media or the major think tanks.

The neoconservatives have become Washington’s foreign policy establishment, driving the old-time “realists” who favored more judicious use of American power to the sidelines.

Meanwhile, the neoliberals dominate economic policy debates, treating the “markets” as some new-age god and “privatization” of public assets as scripture. They have pushed aside the old New Dealers who called for a robust government role to protect the people from the excesses of capitalism and to build public infrastructure to benefit the nation as a whole.

The absence of any strong resistance to the now dominant “neo” ideologies is why we saw the catastrophic “group think” over Iraq’s WMD in 2003 and why for many years no one of great significance dared question the benefits of “free trade.”

After all, both strategies benefited the elites. Neoconservative warmongering diverted trillions of dollars into the Military-Industrial Complex and neoliberal job outsourcing has made billions of dollars for individual corporate executives and stock investors on Wall Street.

Those interests have, in turn, kicked back a share of the proceeds to fund Washington think tanks, to finance news outlets, and to lavish campaign donations and speaking fees on friendly politicians. So, for the insiders, this game has been a case of win-win.

The Losers

Not so much for the “losers,” those average citizens who have seen the Great American Middle Class hollowed out over the past few decades, watched America’s public infrastructure decay, and worried about their sons and daughters being sent off to fight unnecessary, perpetual and futile wars.



Image: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders. (NBC photo)

But inundated with clever propaganda - and scrambling to make ends meet - most Americans see the reality as if through a glass darkly. Many of them, as Barack Obama indelicately said during the 2008 campaign, “cling to guns or religion.” They have little else - and many are killing themselves with opiates that dull their pain or with those guns that they see as their last link to “freedom.”

What is clear, however, is that large numbers don’t trust - and don’t want - Hillary Clinton, who had a net 24-point unfavorable rating in [one recent poll](#). It turns out that another indelicate Obama comment from Campaign 2008 may not have been true, when he vouched that “you’re likable enough, Hillary.” For many Americans, that’s not the case (although Trump trumped Clinton with a 41-point net negative).

If the Democrats do nominate Hillary Clinton, they will be hoping that the neocon/neolib establishment can so demonize Donald Trump that a plurality of Americans will vote for the former Secretary of State out of abject fear over what crazy things the narcissistic billionaire might do in the White House.

Trump’s policy prescriptions have been all over the place - and it is hard to know what reflects his actual thinking (or his genuine ignorance) as opposed to what constitutes his skillful showmanship that made him the “survivor” in the real-life reality TV competition for the Republican nomination.

Does Trump really believe that global warming is a hoax or is he just pandering to the know-nothing element of the Republican Party? Does he actually consider Obama’s Iran nuclear deal to be a disaster or is he just playing to the hate-Obama crowd on the Right?

Opposing the ‘Neos’

But Trump is not a fan of the “neos.” He forthrightly takes on the neocons over the Iraq War and excoriates ex-Secretary of State Clinton for her key role in another “regime change” disaster in Libya. Further, Trump calls for cooperation with Russia and China rather than the neocon-preferred escalation of tensions.



Image: Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaking to the AIPAC conference in Washington D.C. on March 21, 2016. (Photo credit: AIPAC)

In his April 27 foreign policy speech, Trump called for

“a new foreign policy direction for our country – one that replaces randomness with purpose, ideology with strategy, and chaos with peace. ...It’s time to invite new voices and new visions into the fold. ...

“My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people, and American security, above all else. That will be the foundation of every decision that I will make. America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration.”

Such comments – suggesting that “new voices” are needed and that “ideology” should be cast aside – were fighting words for the neocons, since it is their voices that have drowned out all others and their ideology that has dominated U.S. foreign policy in recent years.

To make matters worse, Trump outlined an “America First” strategy in contrast to neocon demands that the U.S. military be dispatched abroad to advance the interests of Israel and other “allies.” Trump is not interested in staging “regime changes” to eliminate leaders who are deemed troublesome to Israel.

The real estate tycoon also has made criticism of “free trade” deals a centerpiece of his campaign, arguing that those agreements have sold out American workers by forcing them to compete with foreign workers receiving a fraction of the pay.

Sen. Sanders has struck similar themes in his insurgent Democratic campaign, criticizing Hillary Clinton’s longtime support for “free trade” and her enthusiasm for “regime change” wars, such as those in Iraq and Libya.

Examining her long record in public life, there can be little doubt that Clinton is a neocon on foreign policy and a neolib on economic strategies. She stands firmly with the consensus of Official Washington’s establishment, which is why she has enjoyed its warm embrace.

She has followed Wall Street’s beloved neoliberal attitude toward “free trade,” which has been very good for multinational corporations as they shipped millions of U.S. manufacturing jobs to low-wage countries. (She has only cooled her ardor for trade deals to stanch the flow of Democratic voters to Bernie Sanders.)

Wars and More Wars

On foreign policy, Clinton has consistently supported neoconservative wars, although she might shy from the neocon label per se, preferring its less noxious synonym “liberal interventionist.”

But as arch-neocon Robert Kagan, who has recast himself as a “liberal interventionist,” told The New York Times in 2014, “I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy. If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue it’s something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else.”



Image: Prominent neocon intellectual Robert Kagan. (Photo credit: Mariusz Kubik, <http://www.mariuszkubik.pl>)

Summing up the feeling of thinkers like Kagan, the Times reported that Clinton “remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes.”

In February 2016, distraught over the rise of Trump, Kagan, whose Project for the New American Century wrote the blueprint for George W. Bush’s Iraq War, openly threw his support to Clinton, announcing his decision in a Washington Post [op-ed](#).

And Kagan is not mistaken when he views Hillary Clinton as a fellow-traveler. She has often marched in lock step with the neocons as they have implemented their aggressive “regime change” schemes against governments and political movements that don’t toe Washington’s line or that deviate from Israel’s goals in the Middle East.

She has backed coups, such as in Honduras (2009) and Ukraine (2014); invasions, such as Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011); and subversions such as Syria (from 2011 to the present) all with various degrees of disastrous results. [For more details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Yes, Hillary Clinton Is a Neocon”](#) and [“Would a Clinton Win Mean More Wars?”](#)]

Seeking ‘Coercion’

A glimpse of what a Clinton-45 presidency might do could be seen in a recent Politico [commentary](#) by Dennis Ross, a former special adviser to Secretary of State Clinton now working at the staunchly pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

In the article, Ross painted a surreal world in which the problems of the Middle East have been caused by President Obama’s hesitancy to engage militarily more aggressively across the region, not by the neocon-driven decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the similar schemes to overthrow secular governments in Libya and Syria in 2011, leaving those two countries in ruin.

Channeling the desires of right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Ross called for the United States to yoke itself to the regional interests of Israel, Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in their rivalry against Shiite-led Iran.



Image: Dennis Ross, who has served as a senior U.S. emissary in the Middle East.

Ross wrote:

“Obama believes in the use of force only in circumstances where our security and homeland might be directly threatened. His mindset justifies pre-emptive action against terrorists and doing more to fight the Islamic State. But it frames U.S. interests and the use of force to support them in very narrow terms. ...

“The Saudis acted in [invading] Yemen in no small part because they feared the United States would impose no limits on Iranian expansion in the area, and they felt the need to draw their own lines.”

To counter Obama’s hesitancy to apply military force, Ross calls for a reassertion of a muscular U.S. policy in the Middle East, much along the lines that the neocon establishment and Hillary Clinton also favor, including:

-Threatening Iran with “blunt, explicit language on employing force, not sanctions” if Iran deviates from the Obama-negotiated agreement to constrain its nuclear program (the bomb-bomb-bomb-Iran zombie lives!);

-“Contingency planning with GCC states and Israel ... to generate specific options for countering Iran’s growing use of Shiite militias to undermine regimes in the region”;

-A readiness to arm Sunni tribes in Iraq if Iraq’s prime minister doesn’t;

-Establish “safe havens with no-fly zones” inside Syria if Russian President Vladimir Putin does not force Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down.

Employing the classic tough talk of the neocons, Ross concludes, “Putin and Middle Eastern leaders understand the logic of coercion. It is time for us to reapply it.”

One might note the many logical inconsistencies of Ross’s arguments, including his failure to note that much of Iran’s supposed meddling in the Middle East has involved aiding the Syrian and Iraqi governments in their battle against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Or that Russia’s intervention in Syria also has been to support the internationally recognized government in its fight against Sunni extremists and terrorists.

But the significance of Ross’s prescription to “reapply” U.S. “coercion” across the region is that he is outlining what the world can expect from a Clinton-45 presidency.

Clinton made many of the same points in her speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and in debates with Bernie Sanders. If she stays on that track as president, there would be at least a partial U.S. military invasion of Syria, a very strong likelihood of war with Iran, and an escalation of tensions (and possible war) with nuclear-armed Russia.

The logic of how all that is supposed to improve matters is lost amid the classic neocon growling about showing toughness or reapplying “coercion.”

So, the Democratic Party seems to be betting that Hillary Clinton's flood of ugly TV ads against Trump can frighten the American people enough to give the neocons and the neolibers one more lease on the White House - and four more years to wreak their zombie havoc on the world.

*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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