

# Neocons Have Weathered the Storm

By [Robert Parry](#)

Global Research, March 15, 2014

[consortiumnews.com](http://consortiumnews.com)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

*Official Washington's bipartisan hysteria over Ukraine and Crimea is evidence that the neocons not only weathered the public fury over the Iraq War but are now back shaping U.S. geopolitical strategies*

By the middle of last decade, the storm clouds were building over the neocons: their "regime change" in Iraq was a disaster; President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech was a running joke; news articles were appearing about their "dark side" behavior in the "war on terror"; and the public was tired of the blood and treasure being wasted.

You might have expected that the neocons would have been banished to the farthest reaches of U.S. policymaking, so far away that they would never be heard from again. However, instead of disappearing, the neocons have proved their staying power, now reemerging as the architects of the U.S. strategy toward Ukraine.

Neocons played key behind-the-scenes roles in instigating the Feb. 22 coup that overthrew a democratically elected president with the help of neo-Nazi militias; the neocons have since whipped Official Washington into a frenzy of bipartisan support for the coup regime; and they are pushing for a new Cold War if the people of Crimea vote to leave Ukraine and join Russia.

A few weeks ago, most Americans probably had never heard of Ukraine and had no idea that Crimea was part of it. But, all of a sudden, the deficit-obsessed U.S. Congress is rushing to send billions of dollars to the coup regime in Kiev, as if the future of Ukraine were the most important issue facing the American people.

Even opinion writers who have resisted other neocon-driven stampedes have joined this one, apparently out of fear of being labeled "an apologist" for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Indeed, it is almost impossible to find any mainstream U.S. politician or pundit who has not fallen into line with the belligerent neocon position on Ukraine.

And the skies ahead are even brighter. The neocons can expect to assert more power as President Barack Obama fades into "lame-duck" status, as his diplomatic initiatives on Syria and Iran struggle (in part because the Ukraine crisis has driven a deep wedge between Obama and Putin), as neocon-leaning Democrat Hillary Clinton scares off any serious opposition for the 2016 presidential nomination, and as her most likely Republican presidential rivals also grovel for the neocons' blessings.

But this stunning turn of fate would have been hard to predict after the neocons had steered the United States into the catastrophic Iraq War and its ugly bloodletting, including the death and maiming of tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers and the squandering of perhaps \$1

trillion in U.S. taxpayers' money.

In Election 2006, GOP congressional candidates took a pounding because Bush and the Republicans were most associated with the neocons. In Election 2008, Sen. Hillary Clinton, a neocon-lite who had voted for the Iraq War, lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Sen. Barack Obama, who had opposed invading Iraq. Then, in the general election, Obama defeated neocon standard-bearer John McCain to win the White House.

At that moment, it looked like the neocons were in serious trouble. Indeed, many of them did have to pack up their personal belongings and depart government, seeking new jobs at think tanks or other neocon-friendly non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

More significantly, their grand strategy seemed discredited. Many Americans considered the neocons' dream of more "regime change" across the Middle East — in countries opposed to Israel, especially Syria and Iran — to be an unending nightmare of death and destruction.

After taking office, President Obama called for winding down Bush's wars and doing some "nation-building at home." The broad American public seemed to agree. Even some right-wing Republicans were having second thoughts about the neocons' advocacy of an American Empire, recognizing its devastating impact on the American Republic.

## The Comeback

But the neocons were anything but finished. They had positioned themselves wisely.

They still controlled government-funded operations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED); they held prominent positions inside think tanks, from the American Enterprise Institute to the Council on Foreign Relations to the Brookings Institution; they had powerful allies in Congress, such as Senators McCain, Lindsey Graham and Joe Lieberman; and they dominated TV chat shows and opinion pages, particularly at the Washington Post, the capital's hometown newspaper.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s when they first emerged as a noticeable force in Washington, the neocons had become "insiders." They were both admired and feared for their intellectual ferocity, but — most important for their long-term survival — they had secured access to government money, including the slush fund at NED whose budget grew to over \$100 million during the Bush-43 years.

NED, which was founded in 1983, is best known for investing in other countries' "democracy building" (or CIA-style "destabilization" campaigns, depending on your point of view), but much of NED's money actually goes to NGOs in Washington, meaning that it became a lifeline for neocon operatives who found themselves out of work because of the arrival of Obama.

While ideological advocates for other failed movements might have had to move back home or take up new professions, the neocons had their financial ballast (from NED and many other sources) so their ideological ship could ride out the rough weather.

And, despite Obama's opposition to the neocons' obsession with endless warfare, he didn't purge them from his administration. Neocons, who had burrowed deep inside the U.S. government as "civil servants" or "career foreign service officers," remained as a "stay-

behind” force, looking for new allies and biding their time.

Obama compounded this “stay-behind” problem with his fateful decision in November 2008 to adopt the trendy idea of “a team of rivals,” including keeping Republican operative (and neocon ally) Robert Gates at the Defense Department and putting hawkish Democrat Hillary Clinton, another neocon ally, at State. The neocons probably couldn’t believe their luck.

### Back in Good Graces

Rather than being ostracized and marginalized – as they surely deserved for the Iraq War fiasco – key neocons were still held in the highest regard. According to his memoir *Duty*, Gates let neocon military theorist Frederick Kagan persuade him to support a “surge” of 30,000 U.S. soldiers into the Afghan War in 2009.

Gates wrote that “an important way station in my ‘pilgrim’s progress’ from skepticism to support of more troops [in Afghanistan] was an essay by the historian Fred Kagan, who sent me a prepublication draft.”

Defense Secretary Gates then collaborated with holdovers from Bush’s high command, including neocon favorite Gen. David Petraeus, and Secretary of State Clinton to maneuver Obama into a political corner from which he felt he had no choice but to accede to their recommendation for the “surge.”

Obama reportedly regretted the decision almost immediately after he made it. The Afghan “surge,” like the earlier neocon-driven Iraq War “surge,” cost another 1,000 or so dead U.S. soldiers but ultimately didn’t change the war’s strategic direction.

At Clinton’s State Department, other neocons were given influential posts. Frederick Kagan’s brother Robert, a neocon from the Reagan administration and co-founder of the neocon Project for the New American Century, was named to an advisory position on the Foreign Affairs Policy Board. Secretary Clinton also elevated Robert Kagan’s wife, Victoria Nuland, to be State Department spokesperson.

Though Obama’s original “team of rivals” eventually left the scene (Gates in mid-2011, Petraeus in a sex scandal in late 2012, and Clinton in early 2013), those three provided the neocons a crucial respite, time to regroup and reorganize. So, when Sen. John Kerry replaced Clinton as Secretary of State (with the considerable help of his neocon friend John McCain), the State Department’s neocons were poised for a powerful comeback.

Nuland was promoted to Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs and took personal aim at the elected government of Ukraine, which had become a choice neocon target because it maintained close ties to Russia, whose President Putin was undercutting the neocons’ “regime change” strategies in their most valued area, the Middle East. Most egregiously, Putin was helping Obama avert wars in Syria and Iran.

So, as neocon NED president Carl Gershman [wrote](#) in the Washington Post in September 2013, Ukraine became “the biggest prize,” but he added that the even juicier target beyond Ukraine was Putin, who, Gershman added, “may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.”

In other words, the ultimate goal of the Ukraine gambit is not just “regime change” in Kiev but “regime change” in Moscow. By eliminating the independent-minded and strong-willed

Putin, the neocons presumably fantasize about slipping one of their ciphers (perhaps a Russian version of Ahmed Chalabi) into the Kremlin.

Then, the neocons could press ahead, unencumbered, toward their original “regime change” scheme in the Middle East, with wars against Syria and Iran.

As dangerous – and even crazy – as this neocon vision is (raising the specter of a possible nuclear confrontation between the United States and Russia), the neocons clearly appear back in control of U.S. foreign policy. And, they almost can’t lose in terms of their own self-interest, whichever way the Ukraine crisis breaks.

If Putin backs down in the face of U.S. ultimatums on Ukraine and Crimea, the neocons can beat their chests and argue that similar ultimatums should be presented to other neocon targets, i.e. Syria and Iran. And, if those countries don’t submit to the ultimatums, then there will be no choice but to let the U.S. bombings begin, more “shock and awe.”

On the other hand, if Putin refuses to back down and Crimea votes to abandon Ukraine and reattach itself to Russia (which has ties to Crimea dating back to Catherine the Great in the 1700s), then the neocons can ride the wave of Official Washington’s outrage, demanding that Obama renounce any future cooperation with Putin and thus clear the way for heightened confrontations with Syria and Iran.

Even if Obama can somehow continue to weave his way around the neocon war demands for the next two-plus years, his quiet strategy of collaborating with Putin to resolve difficult disputes with Syria and Iran will be dead in the water. The neocons can then wait for their own sails to fill when either President Hillary Clinton or a Republican (likely to need neocon support) moves into the White House in 2017.

But the neocons don’t need to wait that long to start celebrating. They have weathered the storm.

*Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 as the Internet’s first investigative magazine. He saw it as a way to combine modern technology and old-fashioned journalism to counter the increasing triviality of the mainstream U.S. news media.*

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