

Surrounded by Neocons

They are all the news that fits

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Award winning journalist **James Risen** has [recently described](#) in some detail his sometimes painful relationship with *The New York Times*. His lengthy account is well worth reading as it demonstrates how successive editors of the paper frequently cooperated with the government to suppress stories on torture and illegal activity while also self-censoring to make sure that nothing outside the framework provided by the “war on terror” should be seriously discussed. It became a faithful lap dog for an American role as global hegemon, promoting government half-truths and suppressing information that it knew to be true but which would embarrass the administration in power, be they Democrats or Republicans.

If one were to obtain a similar insider account of goings-on at the other national “newspaper of record” *The Washington Post* it is quite likely that comparable trimming of the narrative also took place. To be sure, the *Post* is worse than the *Times*, characterized by heavily editorializing in its news coverage without necessarily tipping off the reader when “facts” end and speculation begins. In both publications, stories about Iran or Russia routinely begin with an assertion that Moscow interfered in the 2016 U.S. election and that Iran is the aggressor in the Middle East, contentions that have not been demonstrated and can easily be challenged. Both publications also have endorsed every American war since 2001, including Iraq, Libya and the current mess in Syria, one indication of the quality of their reporting and analysis.

A [recent op-ed](#) in the *Times* by **Bret Stephens** is a perfect example of warmongering mischief wrapped in faux expert testimony to make it palatable. Stephens is the resident neocon at the *Times*. He was brought over from the *Wall Street Journal* when it was determined that his neocon colleague David Brooks had become overly squishy, while the resident “conservative” **Russ Douthat** had proven to be a bit too cautious and even rational to please the increasingly hawkish senior editors.

Stephens’ article, entitled *Finding the Way Forward on Iran* sparkles with throwaway gems like “Tehran’s hyperaggressive foreign policy in the wake of the 2015 nuclear deal” and “Real democracies don’t live in fear of their own people” and even “it’s not too soon to start rethinking the way we think about Iran.” Or try “A better way of describing Iran’s dictatorship is as a kleptocracy, driven by impulses that are by turns doctrinal and venal.”

Bret has been a hardliner on Iran for years. Early on in this op-ed he makes very clear that he wants it to be dealt with forcibly because it has “centrifuges, ballistic missiles, enriched uranium [and] fund[s] Hezbollah, assist **Bashar al-Assad**, arm[s] the Houthis, [and] imprison[s] the occasional British or American citizen.” He describes how Iran is a very

corrupt place run by religious leaders and Revolutionary Guards and proposes that their corruption be exposed so that the Iranian people can take note and rise up in anger. And if exposure doesn't work, they should be hammered with sanctions. He does not explain why sanctions, which disproportionately hurt the people he expects to rise up, will bring about any real change.

Stephens cites two of his buddies **Ken Weinstein** of the *Hudson Institute* and **Mark Dubowitz** of the *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies* (FDD), who are apparently experts on how to squeeze Iran. Weinstein prefers exposing the misdeeds of the Mullahs to anger the Iranian people while Dubowitz prefers punitive sanctions "for corruption."

The article does not reveal that Weinstein and Dubowitz are long time critics of Iran, are part of the Israel Lobby and just happen to be Jewish, as is Stephens. The Hudson Institute and the FDD are leading neocon and pro-Israel fronts. So my question becomes, "Why Iran?" The often-heard Israeli complaint about its being unfairly picked on could reasonably be turned on its head in asking the same about Iran. In fact, Iran compares favorably with Israel. It has no nuclear weapons, it does not support any of the Sunni terrorist groups that are chopping heads, and it has not disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of people that it rules over. The fact is that Iran is being targeted because Israel sees it as its prime enemy in the region and has corrupted many "opinion makers" in the U.S., to include Stephens, to hammer home that point. To be sure, Iran is a very corrupt place run by people who should not be running a hot dog stand, but the same applies to the United States and Israel. And there are lots of places that are not being targeted like Iran that are far worse, including good friend and ally of both Jerusalem and Washington, Saudi Arabia.

Oddly enough Stephens, Weinstein and Dubowitz do not get into any of that back story, presumably because it would be unseemly. And, of course and unfortunately, the *New York Times* opinion page is not unique. An interesting recent [podcast interview](#) by *Politico's* Chief International Affairs correspondent **Susan Glasser** with leading neoconservatives **Eliot Cohen** and **Max Boot**, is typical of how the media selectively shapes a narrative to suit its own biases. Glasser, Cohen and Boot are all part of the establishment foreign policy consensus in the U.S. and therefore both hate and fail to understand the Trump phenomenon. Both Cohen and Booth were vociferous founding members of the #NeverTrump foreign policy resistance movement.

Boot describes the new regime's foreign policy as "kowtow[ing] to dictators and undermin[ing] American support for freedom and democracy around the world," typical neocon *leitmotifs*. Glasser appears to be in love with her interviewees and hurls softball after softball. She describes Boot as "fantastic" and Cohen receives the epithet "The Great." The interview itself is remarkably devoid of any serious discussion of foreign policy and is essentially a sustained assault on Trump while also implicitly supporting hardline national security positions. Cohen fulminates about "a very serious Russian attack on the core of our political system. I mean, I don't know how you get more reckless and dangerous than that," while Boot asks what "has to be done" about Iran.

Pompous ass Cohen, who interjected in the interview that "and you know, Max and I are both intellectuals," notably very publicly refused to have any part in a Trump foreign policy team during the campaign but later when The Donald was actually elected suggested that the new regime might approach him with humility to offer a senior position and he just might condescend to join them. They did not do so, and he wrote an angry commentary on

their refusal.

Hating Trump is one thing, but I would bet that if the question of a hardline policy vis-à-vis Russia or the Jerusalem Embassy move had come up Cohen and Boot would have expressed delight. The irony is that Trump is in fact pursuing a basically neocon foreign policy which the two men would normally support, but they appear to be making room for Trump haters in the policy formulation process to push the national security consensus even farther to the right. Indeed, [in another article](#) by Boot at *Foreign Policy* he writes

“I applaud Trump’s decisions to provide Ukraine with arms to defend itself from Russian aggression, to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, to send additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan, and to accelerate former President Barack Obama’s strategy for fighting the Islamic State.”

Cohen meanwhile applauds the embassy move, though he [warns that Trump’s success](#) in so doing might embolden him to do something reckless over North Korea.

Perhaps one should not be astonished that leading neocons appearing in the mainstream media will continue to have their eyes on the ball and seek for more aggressive engagement in places like Iran and Russia. The media should be faulted because it rarely publishes any contrary viewpoint and it also consistently fails to give any space to the considerable downside to the agitprop. It must be reassuring for many Americans to know that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [is preparing](#) itself to deal with the aftermath of a nuclear attack on the United States and it will be sharing information on the appropriate preparations with the American people. There will be a [public session on how to prepare for a nuclear explosion](#) on January 16th.

CDC experts will consider “planning and preparation efforts” for such a strike.

“While a nuclear detonation is unlikely, it would have devastating results and there would be limited time to take critical protection steps,” the Center elaborated in its press release on the event.

That the United States should be preparing for a possible nuclear future can in part be attributed to recent commentary by the “like, really smart” and “very stable genius” who is the nation’s chief executive, but the fuel being poured on the fire for war is the very same neocons who are featured in the mainstream media as all-purpose experts and have succeeded in selling the snake oil about America’s proper role as aggressor-in-chief for the entire world. It would be an unparalleled delight to be able to open a newspaper and not see Bret Stephens, Eliot Cohen, Max Boot or even the redoubtable Bill Kristol grinning back from the editorial page, but I suppose I am only dreaming.

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