

# The Neocon March on Damascus

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**by Jacob Heilbrunn**

*Here we go again. As Americans prepare to march on Washington, Washington is preparing to march on Damascus. As part of the buildup to war, a chorus of liberal hawks and neoconservatives has issued a new manifesto in—where else?—the *Weekly Standard* [calling upon](#) President Obama to engage in regime change in Syria. Just as they demanded military action to topple Saddam Hussein, so they now are insisting upon the removal of Bashar al-Assad.*

Yet if anything might be calculated to give Obama pause before he embarks upon a bombing campaign, it should be this truculent letter, whose signatories include Fouad Ajami, Elliott Abrams, Paul Berman, Eliot A. Cohen, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Bernard-Henri Levy, Tim Palwenty, James Traub, Eric Edelman, Karl Rove, Dan Senor, Martin Peretz and Leon Wieseltier. (At *Politico*, Dylan Byers astutely [notes](#) that the presence of Wieseltier and Peretz should come as no surprise because, “Wieseltier *et al.* aren’t emissaries from the ‘new’ New Republic, they’re stalwarts of the Old Republic. Wieseltier served on the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq and Peretz led the magazine’s call for military intervention there ([he still thinks it was a good idea](#)).” So there you go. The very same crew, by and large, that declared that Iraq could be transformed into a blossoming democracy in 2003. Now it wants to duplicate its roaring success.

Well, not exactly. For one thing, the letter never mentions the term “democracy.” So it isn’t fair to say that the signatories have remained totally immune to the cataclysmic events they triggered in 2003. Instead, their missive suggests that the “world—including Iran, North Korea, and other potential aggressors who seek or possess weapons of mass destruction—is now watching to see how you respond.” It further suggests “direct military strikes against the pillars of the Assad regime.” And it minutes that America should “train, and arm moderate elements of Syria’s armed opposition, with the goal of empowering them to prevail against both the Assad regime and the growing presence of Al Qaeda-affiliated and other extremist rebel factions in the country.”

These are lofty goals. Obama, for a variety of reasons, including his notorious “red line” statement, is in something of a pickle of his own making, and probably has little choice but respond to Assad’s defiance. But given the tangled nature of the ethnic and religious conflicts in Syria, the confidence of what the *Weekly Standard* deems “experts”—the same kind of experts who got America into Vietnam, incidentally, and whom Daniel Patrick Moynihan more colorfully and accurately dubbed “warrior intellectuals”—exude in this letter may perhaps stir some lingering doubts about the efficacy of their prescriptions, particularly

when considering that the last ministrations they offered essentially left their most recent patient—Iraq—in a state of prostration and life support for almost a decade. But the anfractuositities of Islam and nationalism have never particularly seemed to worry these experts whose faith in their expertise, you could say, remains pretty unruffled, at least if this letter is anything to go by.

If democracy is no longer their lodestar—or if they are too cautious to proclaim it openly—then what is left? The remnants of their doctrine reside in the raw exercise of American power. Both the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and the paper's columnist Bret Stephens make it [crystal clear](#) that the chemical weapons attacks perpetrated by Assad and his goons simply form a convenient *casus belli* for a wider engagement. The *Journal* [says](#), "The real problem isn't the chemical weapons. It is the leader who has used them, Bashar Assad." Scarcely to be outdone, Stephens writes, "What's at stake now is the future of civilization, and whether the word still has any meaning." The Assads, he says, should be polished off, the consequences for their behavior "inescapably fatal." Condign punishment, in other words, is in order.

Well. It is certainly true that the Middle East would be a better place without the Assads. Or would it? The old order represented by the wily Hafez al-Assad, who would have been mortified by the bungling of his children, is crumbling. But the vexed problem in Syria is that no one—not the Obama administration, not the neocon and liberal-hawk "experts"—really knows what would ensue were America successfully to overthrow the regime. The bellicose rantings of Stephens are redolent of Orwell's remark that intellectuals like to fancy themselves with the "whip-hand" on history, meting out punishment to the guilty and setting wrong aright. The road to Damascus could indeed prove a revelation to America's foreign-policy intellectuals, but not necessarily one that would prove a very pleasant experience.

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