

US Presidential Campaign: Can Politicians Transcend “Frozen Thinking” About World Conflicts?

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Global Research, August 28, 2015

[Consortium news](#) 27 August 2015

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

At least since the 1980s – when Ronald Reagan made war seem like fun again and the modern mainstream media took shape – the Democratic Party has lacked a coherent foreign policy, highlighted today by the fact that its top 2016 presidential candidates have largely evaded the topic in favor – almost exclusively – of domestic issues.

Part of the problem is that Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton has a record of pandering to the neoconservatives during her time as a U.S. senator from New York and as Secretary of State. She voted for the Iraq War in 2002 and, while President Barack Obama’s top diplomat, supported what some call “liberal interventionism,” which is barely distinguishable from neoconservatism.

Indeed, arch-neocon Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the infamous Project for the New American Century, said – in his praise of Clinton’s aggressive foreign policy – that he was ready to jettison the term “neoconservative” in favor of the phrase “liberal interventionist.”

Kagan, who was made an adviser to Clinton’s State Department, said in 2014: “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.” [For more, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?”](#)]

So, it’s understandable why Hillary Clinton’s campaign has downplayed the details of how she would conduct foreign policy. Many Democrats, who opposed the Iraq War and are uncomfortable with the hawkishness that Clinton displayed as Secretary of State, would recoil at the prospect of her being a Trojan Horse for Kagan and the neocons to sneak inside another Democratic administration to continue their bloody strategies.

Though Sen. Bernie Sanders, her principal challenger, also has chosen to downplay foreign policy issues in favor of economic ones, the Vermont “democratic socialist” can at least point to his prescient opposition to the Iraq War in 2002.

In [a Senate floor speech](#), Sanders cited five reasons for voting against President George W. Bush’s war resolution: the death and destruction that would result, the dangerous precedent of “a unilateral invasion,” the damage to the war on terror, the “extremely expensive” price tag of “a war and a long-term American occupation,” and the “unintended consequences.”

On the last point, Sanders asked: “Who will govern Iraq when Saddam Hussein is removed and what role will the U.S. play in [an] ensuing civil war that could develop in that country?”

Will moderate governments in the region who have large Islamic fundamentalist populations be overthrown and replaced by extremists? Will the bloody conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority be exacerbated? And these are just a few of the questions that remain unanswered.”

Back-burner Issues

Though right about Iraq, Sanders is unwilling to put forward a comprehensive strategy for dealing with today’s Mideast chaos and other international tensions, including the Ukraine crisis which was partly fomented by Kagan’s neocon wife, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who rose to prominence under the protective wing of Secretary of State Clinton.

When Sanders has spoken about the Mideast, he has framed his comments in ways that make them acceptable to Official Washington but that ultimately make little sense. For instance, in an interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, Sanders suggested that Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich sheikdoms replace the United States as the region’s policeman in the fight against Sunni terrorists in the Islamic State (also called ISIS).

“Saudi Arabia is the third largest military budget in the world,” Sanders said. “They’re going to have to get their hands dirty in this fight. We should be supporting, but at the end of the day this is fight over what Islam is about, the soul of Islam, we should support those countries taking on ISIS.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Sanders’s Screwed Mideast Strategy.](#)”]

Frankly, it’s hard to believe that Sanders is that naïve. A core reality of the Mideast crisis is that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni Gulf states have been the principal funders and ideological supporters of the Sunni extremists who have organized into violent jihadist movements, including Al Qaeda, its Syrian affiliate Al Nusra Front, and a hyper-violent spinoff, the Islamic State.

Vice President Joe Biden blurted out this reality at Harvard’s Kennedy School last October, when he said: “Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc., what were they doing? They were so determined to take down [President Bashar al-] Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” [Quote at 53:20 of [clip.](#)]

Biden had confirmed something that was well-known in the region and inside the U.S. intelligence community, that many of these terrorist groups were supported, directly and indirectly, by elements of Saudi Arabia’s royal family and by oil-rich sheiks around the Persian Gulf who see themselves fighting a sectarian war against Iran and the Shiites. The Vice President later apologized for speaking the truth, but the cat was out of the bag. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Why Islamic State Is Winning.](#)”]

Saudi Arabia’s Dirty Hands

The Saudi role in this regional chaos dates back to its financing of fundamentalist Wahabbi teachings and its encouragement of Iraq’s invasion of Iran in 1980. Later that decade, the

Saudis co-sponsored - with the CIA - the Afghan mujahedeen who fought a Soviet-backed secular government in Kabul. The Afghan conflict poured billions of dollars in weapons into the hands of Islamic extremists, including a Saudi named Osama bin Laden, and created the basis for an international jihadist terror movement called Al Qaeda.

Even after Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials shielded the Saudis from the wrath of the American people. After consulting with Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin-Sultan, Bush agreed to let bin Laden's family members in the United States board the first planes let back into the air, with only perfunctory FBI questioning. Later, Bush suppressed a 28-page section of the congressional 9/11 report about Saudi support for the 19 hijackers, 15 of whom were identified as Saudi nationals. (Obama has continued to withhold those 28 pages.)

But the Saudis were not always happy with Bush's actions. In 2003, when Bush's invasion of Iraq had the unintended consequence of replacing a Sunni autocrat, Saddam Hussein, with Shiite autocrats, the Saudis saw the regional balance of power tilt toward Shiite-ruled Iran, which suddenly had allies in power in Baghdad.

In response, the Saudis stepped up their support of Sunni militant movements in Iraq and then Syria with the goal of frustrating Iraq's government and removing Syria's Assad, an Alawite (a Shiite spinoff sect), and replacing him with a Sunni.

As Saudi Arabia intervened more aggressively in this regional fight against Iran, the Saudi royals reached out to Israel, which shared Riyadh's hostility toward Iran. Israel also favored "regime change" in Syria and saw the war there as a way also to undermine Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, a Shiite force on Israel's northern border. This de facto Saudi-Israeli alliance guaranteed strong support within the U.S. government and media for the effort to remove Assad from power. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal Israeli-Saudi Alliance?](#)"]

The Gulf states also recognized that the most effective fighters against Assad were the Sunni jihadists, especially Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State. Thus, much of the Gulf money and weapons flowed in those directions, as Biden revealed.

So, in regards to Sanders's lament about the need for the super-rich Saudis to "get their hands dirty," the truth is that the Saudis have long been getting their hands not only dirty but bloody.

A Looming Genocide

The Sunni terror groups operating in Iraq and Syria have served essentially as Saudi Arabia's irregular forces fighting a sectarian war against the Shiites. In Syria, these Sunni extremists also have targeted the Christians, Alawites and other minorities for possible extermination if Assad's military collapses.

Besides these proxy forces, the Saudis have intervened directly in Yemen with an indiscriminate bombing campaign against Houthi rebels who follow a version of Shiite Islam. The Saudi attacks have not only killed thousands of civilians but created a humanitarian crisis in the poverty-stricken country on Saudi Arabia's southern border.

Thus, Sanders's idea that - just because the Saudis are rich - they should expand their military operations throughout the region is as dangerous as it is ludicrous. It would guarantee a major escalation of the bloodletting and the chaos. The proposal only serves to

underscore how bereft the Democrats are when it comes to expressing a coherent alternative foreign policy as a challenge to the dominance of the neocons and their liberal-interventionist cohorts.

So, what could be an alternative that would allow Democratic candidates to make sense and avoid being dismissed as unrealistic pacifists or foolhardy isolationists? And no progressive should underestimate the political risk that goes with any deviation from the “tough-guy/gal-ism” of Official Washington. The easiest attack line against anyone advocating restraint and negotiations is a reference to Neville Chamberlain’s “appeasement” of Adolf Hitler at Munich before World War II.

But there are politically savvy ways to counter the power of the neocons and the liberal hawks:

-Stand for transparency in foreign policy. Instead of letting neocons and liberal hawks shape the narratives of foreign crises by demonizing foes and hiding inconvenient truths, demand as much disclosure as possible especially regarding pivotal events. Over the past several decades, the neocons and liberal hawks have monopolized the information flows, allowing them to exaggerate threats beyond what the actual intelligence supports. We have seen this pattern in every crisis, from Iraq’s bogus WMD threat in 2003 to the mystery of who shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine in 2014. American voters would not punish a candidate for insisting that more information be shared with the people.

-On a related point, repudiate the notion that information should be shaped into a strategic weapon of propaganda warfare. It is now a trendy concept inside the State Department and Washington think tanks that clever propaganda can be used as a “soft power” weapon to weaken an adversary. Some liberal interventionists think this “soft power” manipulation of facts is preferable to “hard power” military action, but that misses the point, since deceiving the public, which must include the American people as well as a foreign target audience, is an assault on democracy. Also, as we have seen, propaganda can be a gateway drug to full-scale war.

No Entangling Alliances

-Remind voters about the wisdom of the early U.S. presidents who warned repeatedly against foreign entangling alliances. Endless warfare against exaggerated bogeymen around the world may sound tough during a debate or a talking-head moment on TV but such belligerence inevitably destroys the Republic. A more recent example of how foolhardy hasty interventionism can be is the Iraq War, which was embraced by not only neocons but many liberals who fancied themselves as doves until they realized that their careers might suffer so they reinvented themselves as hawks. As an opponent of the Iraq War, Sanders, in particular, is in a very strong position to hammer away the “geniuses” who gave us the disastrous Iraq War.

-This is harder but be prepared to stand in the way of the next propaganda-driven stampede against some demonized foreign “enemy.” To do so requires some political courage. You will surely be called a “(fill-in-the-blank) apologist,” but respond by noting the much greater danger of another “group think.” Remind people how other Orwellian “five minutes hate” sessions against various foreign leaders led the United States into terrible mistakes and bloody misjudgments.

-Sometimes, non-governmental organizations with labels asserting their commitment to “human rights” or “democracy promotion” can be very successful in focusing attention on some particularly offensive act in a target country (while ignoring similar or worse offenses in “friendly” countries). Remember, this is how propaganda works – by using selective outrage. Not all NGOs are fair-minded observers. Some are fronts for governments and special interests.

-Stress the value of “realism” in foreign policy, i.e., the concept of weighing the cons as well as the pros of some intervention. Just because taking action at some passion-filled moment may feel good, it doesn’t necessarily do good.

-Reflect on how America does best, both economically and geopolitically, when countries are at relative peace and have achieved some prosperity. America’s greatest “soft power” is its ability to sell its products to the world and to benefit from the symbiosis that comes when people around the world appreciate U.S. inventiveness and innovation. By destabilizing entire regions and promiscuously imposing economic sanctions, the U.S. government disrupts these positive relationships. Perhaps a new slogan could be: “Make money, not war.”

Just as police domestically should work on conflict resolution rather than pulling out their tasers and guns, U.S. diplomats should concentrate on deescalating crises rather than swaggering in with harsh rhetoric, sanction threats and “regime change” strategies.

-Though this point is risky, suggest that America might benefit from rearranging its alliances in the Middle East, confronting Saudi Arabia over its covert support of terrorism and demanding that Israel finally resolve its disruptive conflict with the Palestinians. As part of this shift, the United States could encourage Iran to play a stabilizing role in Iraq and Syria and push both governments to share power more equitably with Sunnis, thus undercutting jihadist violence. Russia, with its influence in Iran and Syria, could be helpful, too.

What’s Possible?

But can an alternative foreign policy really be built around truth-telling, resistance to “perception management” and respectful diplomacy even toward adversarial governments? Obviously, a big problem is the U.S. news media which tends to hype whatever propaganda is being spread about some designated villain and then berates anyone who dares suggest that there might be two sides to the story.

Building a more independent and fair-minded media will be a long-term project. Right now, challenges to the latest “group think” are confined mostly to some Internet sites and small-audience radio shows. And there’s the additional confusion because some hip Internet sites are simply the latest fad in propaganda, essentially fronts for the same misinformation that gets spread by the mainstream media except operating behind the façade of “civic journalism” or some innocent-sounding goals like “fighting corruption” and “protecting human rights.”

Yet, despite all the difficulties that a politician would confront if he or she chose to strike out in a more peaceful and more truthful direction, there is urgency to undertake this mission.

For one, continued U.S. confusion over the civil war in Syria – whether it be Hillary Clinton’s

fanciful notions about arming the non-existent “moderate” rebels or Bernie Sanders’s silly idea about demanding that Saudi Arabia subdue the Mideast by force – could lead to a genuine catastrophe if the black flag of Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State is raised over Damascus.

Between Al Qaeda plotting new terror attacks on the West and the Islamic State chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other “heretics,” there might be little choice for the U.S. president – whoever he or she is – to intervene on a massive scale, launching a new hopeless war that could well be the final death blow to the American Republic.

Even more dangerous is the showdown with nuclear-armed Russia over Ukraine. Since February 2014 when Assistant Secretary of State Nuland plotted “regime change” in Kiev, the American public has been fed a steady diet of anti-Russian propaganda with the special demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Though a resolution to the Ukrainian civil war should have been relatively simple – autonomy for ethnic Russians in the east and respect for Crimea’s secession referendum from Ukraine – the extreme rhetoric about “Russian aggression” and the West’s imposition of economically disruptive sanctions have ratcheted up tensions and raised the possibility of a nuclear war.

Though all might hope that cooler heads will prevail before the nuclear codes come out, the West’s “tough-guy/gal-ism” over Ukraine has contributed to less existential though still serious problems, including the risk of another global financial meltdown because the sanctions have helped stall Europe’s already sluggish recovery from the Wall Street crash of 2008.

At this moment when the world’s economy needs more commerce and more consumer buying power, the Ukraine crisis has contributed to less business and less spending, dragging down the economies of China and the United States as well as Europe.

Meanwhile, the neocon-liberal-hawk-driven chaos of the Middle East has added to Europe’s budgetary and political pressures by flooding the Continent with refugees and migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Africa. Not only is this humanitarian crisis deepening Europe’s economic woes, it is threatening to splinter the Continent’s fragile unity with many countries refusing to open their borders to these waves of humanity.

Given these cascading dangers, it is well past time for American politicians of both parties to get serious about practical ways to ease geopolitical tensions, not exacerbate them. Instead, pretty much all we’re getting from Republicans and Democrats is more unrealistic tough talk.

*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](#)). 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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