

American Agenda: Permanent War

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Left or Right, it matters not, Mr Parry

A witty and humorous article but the author would do well to research the CFR if he is in some confusion regarding the position of the Post and Times.

The neoconservatives remain powerful in Washington in large part because of their continued influence inside leading opinion-setting journals like the New York Times and the Washington Post, two prestige newspapers that have pressed ahead with the neocon agenda despite serious blows to their credibility in recent years

Sometimes the New York Times and the Washington Post behave like two vintage ocean-liners competing to see which will edge out the other in a competition to become the flagship for American neoconservatism. Think of a cross-Atlantic race between the Titanic and the Lusitania.

The Times was pouring on the coal in Friday's editions, pushing the Obama administration and NATO to finish off the war in Libya. The Times editors seemed most concerned at the prospect of negotiations to resolve the conflict without a clear-cut military victory over Col. Muammar Gaddafi.

"There has been recent talk by all sides about a possible political deal between the rebels and the government," the Times fretted. "We are eager to see an end to the fighting. But Washington and NATO must stand firmly with the rebels and reject any solution that does not involve the swift ouster of Colonel Qaddafi and real freedom for Libyans."

To achieve that desired outcome, the Times called for continued NATO airstrikes against Gaddafi's forces and snuck in an editorial wink at the repeated bombing attacks on his "compound" in Tripoli. Those raids look to be transparent assassination attempts - despite NATO's denials - but have so far missed him while killing one of his sons and three of his grandchildren.

On Friday, Gaddafi responded to the NATO strikes with a warning that his backers might retaliate with their own attacks inside Europe. But the tough-guy editorial writers at the Times editorial-writers were looking forward to Gaddafi's demise and a rebel victory.

"Washington and its partners should also help the rebels start building the political and civil institutions they will need to keep a post-Qaddafi Libya from descending into chaos," the Times wrote. In other words, the Times envisions a long-term NATO presence in a "liberated" Libya.

Neocon Dreams

What becomes clear from a regular reading of the Times and the Post is that the neocons have never given up their grandiose scheme for violently remaking the Middle East in such a way that the energy-rich region will bend more to Western control and be less threatening to Israel.

One might have thought that the twin catastrophes in Afghanistan and Iraq - costing the American people more than 6,000 war dead and probably well over \$1 trillion - might have taught the neocons

a lesson in the dangers of imperial hubris. But it's always off to another war, preceded by another cartoon portrayal of some foreign "tyrant" who must be eliminated.

There is the old saying that "the first casualty of war is truth." But what happens in perpetual war? It would seem that you get a world like Orwell's 1984, where history undergoes endless shape-shifting, some facts forgotten and the historical narrative reconstructed to meet current propaganda needs.

In the United States, at the forefront of this troubling trend have been the New York Times and the Washington Post, two of the nation's most prestigious newspapers. Especially on issues related to the Middle East, these papers often have dropped any pretense of journalistic objectivity or professionalism.

Any extreme allegation directed against a Muslim ruler of an "unfriendly" state is not only tolerated by the Post and the Times but seemingly welcomed.

For instance, in 1990, after falling out of Washington's good graces with his invasion of Kuwait, Iraq's ruler Saddam Hussein was blamed for ripping babies from incubators and other evil acts; by 2002-03, he had become the diabolical madman who planned to share WMD with al-Qaeda and thus inflict mass casualties on the U.S. homeland.

At such war-or-peace moments - when the American people urgently needed accurate information - the editors at the Times and the Post instead were clambering over each other to get on the pro-war bandwagon. Challenges to the propaganda claims came almost exclusively from outside the major national U.S. news outlets and thus received scant timely attention.

Rather than show skepticism, the Times and the Post acted more like conveyor belts for the propaganda.

For instance, during the 2002 run-up to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, the Times fronted a bogus story about Hussein obtaining aluminum tubes for secret nuclear centrifuges. Not to be outdone the Post devoted nearly its entire editorial section to ringing endorsements of Secretary of State Colin Powell's dishonest 2003 speech at the United Nations justifying the Iraq invasion.

After the U.S. conquest of Iraq and the discovery of no WMD stockpiles, the Post's editorial-page editor Fred Hiatt acknowledged that the Post's editorials had reported Saddam Hussein's possession of WMD as "flat fact." He then blithely told the Columbia Journalism Review that "If that's not true, it would have been better not to say it." [CJR, March/April 2004]

You might have thought that such journalistic malfeasance would have resulted in Hiatt's immediate dismissal and public humiliation. But that would assume that the people in charge of the Washington Post weren't onboard, too.

More than eight years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the discovery of the WMD hoax, Hiatt is in the same key editorial position, still at the center of setting Washington's foreign policy agenda, still egging the U.S. government to intervene more aggressively against other Mideast "bad guys," from Gaddafi to Syria's Bashar al-Assad to Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Not to be outdone, the Times has put its opinion sections under the control of Andrew Rosenthal, a neocon both in personal attitude and pedigree. His father was former Times executive editor A.M. "Abe" Rosenthal, a prominent neocon ideologue who veered the paper to the right in the 1980s.

Crumbling 'Wall'

Despite the supposed "wall" between news and opinions, the Times news columns also have taken on a decidedly neocon bent under the eight-year reign of executive editor Bill Keller, who got the Times's top news job in 2003 after getting the Iraq WMD issue totally wrong.

In the heady days after Colin Powell's UN speech, Keller penned an article for the Times magazine entitled "The I-Can't-Believe-I'm-a-Hawk Club" embracing nearly every major lie told by the Bush administration to justify war. But Keller not only escaped any accountability, he was awarded the executive editor's slot, arguably the most prestigious job in U.S. journalism.

In news columns since then, Keller has continued pursuing a neocon agenda, especially promoting propaganda against Muslim "enemies."

When Keller assigned himself to cover Iran's 2009 election, he coauthored a "news analysis" that opened with an old joke about Ahmadinejad looking into a mirror and saying "male lice to the right, female lice to the left," disparaging both his Islamic conservatism and his rise from the street.

After Ahmadinejad won reelection, the Times, like most other U.S. news organizations, took up the cause of anti-Ahmadinejad rioters who were deemed "pro-democracy" demonstrators, even though more objective analysts concluded that Ahmadinejad indeed did win the election and the protesters were actually seeking to overturn those valid results.

Though widely ignored by the major American news media, a study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland found little evidence to support allegations of fraud or to conclude that most Iranians view Ahmadinejad as illegitimate.

PIPA analyzed multiple polls of the Iranian public from three different sources, including some before the June 12, 2009, election and some afterwards. The study found that in all the polls, a majority said they planned to vote for Ahmadinejad or had voted for him. The numbers ranged from 52 to 57 percent just before the election to 55 to 66 percent after the election.

"These findings do not prove that there were no irregularities in the election process," said Steven Kull, director of PIPA. "But they do not support the belief that a majority rejected Ahmadinejad."

An analysis by former U.S. national security officials Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett reached a similar conclusion. They found that the "personal political agendas" of American commentators caused them to side with the anti-Ahmadinejad protesters. [See Consortiumnews.com's "How US Media Botched Iran's Election."]

The dubious narrative of the "fraudulent" Iranian election fit with the neocon insistence on "regime change" in Iran, which currently sits near the top of Israel's enemies list.

Neocon opinion leaders, including key commentators for the Times and the Post, have pushed repeatedly for an escalation of U.S. covert operations to destabilize Iran's government if not for a joint Israeli-U.S. military strike on Iran's nuclear and military installations.

The Libyan War

Similarly, the editorialists at the Times and the Post have been at the forefront of demanding regime change in Libya, repeatedly urging President Barack Obama to support anti-Gaddafi rebels with

close-combat attack aircraft for mowing down Libyan troops.

Those opinions also have spilled over into biased coverage in the news columns. Both newspapers have treated Libya's alleged role in downing Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 as another "flat fact" when there is strong doubt among many people who have followed that case that Libya had anything to do with the terrorist attack.

It is true that a special Scottish court in 2001 convicted Libyan agent Ali al-Megrahi for the bombing - while acquitting a second Libyan - but the case against Megrahi was falling apart in 2009 before he was released on humanitarian grounds because he had been diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer.

In retrospect, the court's verdict in 2001 appears to have been more a political compromise than an act of justice. One of the judges told Dartmouth government professor Dirk Vandewalle about "enormous pressure put on the court to get a conviction."

After the testimony of a key witness was discredited, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission agreed in 2007 to reconsider Megrahi's conviction out of a strong concern that it was a miscarriage of justice. However, under more political pressure, the review was proceeding slowly in 2009 when Scottish authorities agreed to release Megrahi on medical grounds.

Megrahi dropped his appeal in order to gain an early release in the face of the cancer diagnosis, but that doesn't mean he was guilty. He has continued to assert his innocence and an objective press corps would reflect the serious doubts regarding his conviction.

However, the news columns of the Times continue to treat Libya's guilt in the Lockerbie case as an indisputable fact.

Yet, it's a safe bet that if you inserted the name of a U.S. ally in place of Libya, the Times would have relegated the Megrahi conviction to the loony bin of conspiracy theories or at least stuck it in the category of gross miscarriages of justice.

But, it seems, the American people must be forever prepped with reasons to justify using U.S. military force to right some perceived wrong and take out some designated "bad guy."

While there's no question that plenty of reasons exist to disapprove of the various "strong men" in the Middle East and elsewhere around the world, selective outrage is the essence of effective propaganda. Putting a harsh spotlight on one person or country - while leaving similar situations elsewhere in the dark - allows the ratcheting up or down of anger and tensions.

In a healthy democracy, independent news organizations would play a corrective role, showing skepticism toward the Official Line and questioning Washington's motives as one would those of any interested party.

Instead - for much of the past three-plus decades - the Post, the Times and other U.S. news outlets have been jockeying with each other to demonstrate the greatest "patriotism," the strongest condemnation of America's "enemies," and a remarkable gullibility toward propaganda generated by U.S. and Israeli policymakers.

Though it's true that individual American journalists have faced career retribution for stepping out of line from the Official Line, the pattern of high-level media bias has become so clear for so long

that one has to conclude that the Post, the Times and many other news outlets are not just being coerced into serving as propaganda vehicles but are doing so willingly.

The obvious conclusion is that many senior news executives share the world view of the neoconservatives, thus giving those war hawks enduring influence in the power centers of Washington even when the sitting U.S. president may not be one of their own.

For the New York Times and the Washington Post, it may seem like the smart play to continue competing for the status of neocon flagship publication. However, like the ill-fated ocean-liners - Titanic and Lusitania - the Times and the Post may be ignoring other risks around them as they steam ahead, compromising their journalistic credibility.

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