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The Neocon Hunger for Universal Empire

By Dan Sanchez
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When Bill Kristol watches *Star Wars* movies, he roots for the Galactic Empire. The leading neocon recently caused a social media disturbance in the Force when he tweeted this predilection for the Dark Side following the debut of the final trailer for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Kristol sees the Empire as basically a galaxy-wide extrapolation of what he has long wanted the US to have over the Earth: what he has termed “benevolent global hegemony.”

Kristol, founder and editor of neocon flagship magazine *The Weekly Standard*, responded to baffled critics by linking to a 2002 essay from the *Standard*'s blog that justifies even the worst of Darth Vader's atrocities. In “The Case for the Empire,” Jonathan V. Last made a Kristolian argument that you can't make a “benevolent hegemony” omelet without breaking a few eggs.

And what if those broken eggs are civilians, like Luke Skywalker's uncle and aunt who were gunned down by Imperial Stormtroopers in their home on the Middle Eastern-looking desert planet of Tatooine (filmed on location in Tunisia)? Well, as Last sincerely argued, Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru hid Luke and harbored the fugitive droids R2D2 and C3PO, and so they were “traitors” who were aiding the rebellion and deserved to be field-executed.

A year after Kristol published Last's essay, large numbers of civilians were killed by American Imperial Stormtroopers in their actual Middle Eastern partially-desert homeland of Iraq, thanks largely in part to the direct influence of neocons like Kristol and Last.

The war was similarly justified in part by the false allegation that Iraq ruler Saddam Hussein was harboring and aiding terrorist enemies of the empire like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The civilian-slaughtering siege of Fallujah, one of the most brutal episodes of the war, was also specifically partially justified by the false allegation that the town was harboring Zarqawi.

In reality Hussein had put a death warrant out on Zarqawi, who was hiding from Iraq's security forces under the protective aegis of the US Air Force in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. It was only after the Empire precipitated the chaotic collapse of Iraq that Zarqawi's outfit was able to thrive and evolve into Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). And after the Empire precipitated the chaotic collapse of Syria, AQI further mutated into Syrian al-Qaeda (which has conquered much of Syria) and ISIS (which has conquered much of Syria and Iraq).

And what if the "benevolent hegemony" omelet requires the breaking of "eggs" the size of whole worlds, like how high Imperial officer Wilhuff Tarkin used the Death Star to obliterate the planet Alderaan? Well, as Last sincerely argued, even Alderaan likely deserved its fate, since it may have been, "a front for Rebel activity or at least home to many more spies and insurgents..." Last contended that Princess Leia was probably lying when she told the Death Star's commander that the planet had "no weapons."

While Last was writing his apologia for global genocide, his fellow neocons were baselessly arguing that Saddam Hussein was similarly lying about Iraq not having a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program. Primarily on that basis, the obliteration of an entire country began the following year.

And a year after that, President Bush performed a slapstick comedy act about his failure to find Iraqi WMDs for a black-tie dinner for radio and television correspondents. The media hacks in his audience, who had obsequiously helped the neocon-dominated Bush administration lie the country into war, rocked with laughter as thousands of corpses moldered in Iraq and Arlington. A more sickening display of imperial decadence and degradation has not been seen perhaps since the gladiatorial audiences of Imperial Rome. This is the hegemonic "benevolence" and "national greatness" that Kristol pines for.

"Benevolent global hegemony" was coined by Kristol and fellow neocon Robert Kagan and their 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy." In that essay, Kristol and Kagan sought to inoculate both the conservative movement and US foreign policy against the isolationism of Pat Buchanan.

The Soviet menace had recently disappeared, and the Cold War along with it. The neocons were terrified that the American public would therefore jump at the chance to lay their imperial burdens down. Kristol and Kagan urged their readers to resist that temptation, and to instead capitalize on America's new peerless preeminence by making it a big-spending, hyper-active, busybody globo-cop. The newfound predominance must become dominance wherever and

whenever possible. That way, any future near-peer competitors would be nipped in the bud, and the new “unipolar moment” would last forever.

What made this neocon dream seem within reach was the indifference of post-Soviet Russia. The year after the Berlin Wall fell, the Persian Gulf War against Iraq was the debut “police action” of the unipolar “Team America, World Police.” Paul Wolfowitz, the neocon and Iraq War architect, considered it an immensely successful trial run. As Wesley Clark, former Nato Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, recalled:

“In 1991, [Wolfowitz] was the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy—the number 3 position at the Pentagon. And I had gone to see him when I was a 1-Star General commanding the National Training Center. (...)

And I said, “Mr. Secretary, you must be pretty happy with the performance of the troops in Desert Storm.”

And he said: “Yeah, but not really, because the truth is we should have gotten rid of Saddam Hussein, and we didn’t ... But one thing we did learn is that we can use our military in the region—in the Middle East—and the Soviets won’t stop us. And we’ve got about 5 or 10 years to clean up those old Soviet client regimes—*Syria*, Iran, Iraq—before the next great superpower comes on to challenge us.”

The 1996 “Neo-Reaganite” article was part of a surge of neocon literary activity in the mid-90s. It was in 1995 that Kristol and John Podhoretz founded *The Weekly Standard* with funding from right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Also in 1996, David Wurmser wrote a strategy document for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Titled, “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” it was co-signed by Wurmser’s fellow neocons and future Iraq War architects Richard Perle and Douglas Feith. “A Clean Break” called for the overthrow of Iraq as a “means” of “weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria.” Syria itself was a target because it “challenges Israel on Lebanese soil.” It primarily does this by, along with Iran, supporting the paramilitary group Hezbollah, which arose in the 80s out of the local resistance to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and which continually foils Israel’s ambitions in that country.

Later that same year, Wurmser wrote another strategy document, this time for circulation in American and European halls of power, titled “Coping with Crumbling States: A Western and Israeli Balance of Power Strategy for the Levant.”

In “A Clean Break,” Wurmser had framed regime change in Iraq and Syria in terms of Israeli regional ambitions. In “Coping,” Wurmser adjusted his message for its broader Western audience by recasting the very same policies in a Cold War framework.

Wurmser characterized regime change in Iraq and Syria (both ruled by Baathist regimes) as “expediting the chaotic collapse” of secular-Arab nationalism in general, and Baathism in particular. He concurred with King Hussein of Jordan that, “the phenomenon of Baathism,” was,

from the very beginning, “an agent of foreign, namely Soviet policy.” Of course King Hussein was a bit biased on the matter, since his own Hashemite royal family once ruled both Iraq and Syria. Wurmser argued that:

“...the battle over Iraq represents a desperate attempt by residual Soviet bloc allies in the Middle East to block the extension into the Middle East of the impending collapse that the rest of the Soviet bloc faced in 1989.”

Wurmser further derided Baathism in Iraq and Syria as an ideology in a state of “crumbling descent and missing its Soviet patron” and **“no more than a Cold War enemy relic on probation.”**

Wurmser advised the West to put this anachronistic adversary out of its misery, and to thus, in Kristolian fashion, to press America’s Cold War victory on toward its final culmination. Baathism should be supplanted by what he called the “Hashemite option.” After their chaotic collapse, Iraq and Syria would be Hashemite possessions once again. Both would be dominated by the royal house of Jordan, which in turn, happens to be dominated by the US and Israel.

Wurmser stressed that demolishing Baathism must be the foremost priority in the region. Secular-Arab nationalism should be given no quarter, not even, he added, for the sake of stemming the tide of Islamic fundamentalism.

Thus we see one of the major reasons why the neocons were such avid anti-Soviets during the Cold War. It is not just that, as post-Trotskyites, the neocons resented Joseph Stalin for having Leon Trotsky assassinated in Mexico with an ice pick. The Israel-first neocons’ main beef with the Soviets was that, in various disputes and conflicts involving Israel, Russia sided with secular-Arab nationalist regimes from 1953 onward.

The neocons used to be Democrats in the big-government, Cold Warrior mold of Harry Truman and Henry “Scoop” Jackson. After the Vietnam War and the rise of the anti-war New Left, the Democratic Party’s commitment to the Cold War waned, so the neocons switched to the Republicans in disgust.

According to investigative reporter Jim Lobe, the neocons got their first taste of power within the Reagan administration, in which positions were held by neocons such as Wolfowitz, Perle, Elliot Abrams, and Michael Ledeen. They were especially influential during Reagan’s first term of saber-rattling, clandestine warfare, and profligate defense spending, which Kristol and Kagan remembered so fondly in their “Neo-Reaganite” manifesto.

It was then that the neocons helped establish the “Reagan Doctrine.” According to neocon columnist Charles Krauthammer, who coined the term in 1985, the Reagan Doctrine was characterized by support for anti-communist (in reality often simply anti-leftist) forces around the whole world.

Since the support was clandestine, the Reagan administration was able to bypass the “Vietnam Syndrome” and project power in spite of the public’s continuing war weariness. (It was left to

Reagan's successor, the first President Bush, to announce following his "splendid little" Gulf War that, "by God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all!")

Operating covertly, the Reaganites could also use any anti-Communist group they found useful, no matter how ruthless and ugly: from Contra death squads in Nicaragua to the Islamic fundamentalist mujahideen in Afghanistan. Abrams and Ledeen were both involved in the Iran-Contra affair, and Abrams was convicted (though later pardoned) on related criminal charges.

Kristol's "Neo-Reaganite" co-author Robert Kagan gave the doctrine an even wider and more ambitious interpretation in his book *A Twilight Struggle* :

"The Reagan Doctrine has been widely understood to mean only support for anticommunist guerrillas fighting pro-Soviet regimes, but from the first the doctrine had a broader meaning. Support for anticommunist guerrillas was the logical outgrowth, not the origin, of a policy of supporting democratic reform or revolution everywhere, in countries ruled by right-wing dictators as well as by communist parties."

As this description makes plain, neocon policy, from the 1980s to today, has been every bit as fanatical, crusading, and world-revolutionary as Red Communism was in the neocon propaganda of yesteryear, and that Islam is in the neocon propaganda of today.

The neocons credit Reagan's early belligerence with the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. But in reality, war is the health of the State, and Cold War was the health of Soviet State. The Soviets long used the American menace to frighten the Russian people into rallying around the State for protection.

After the neocons lost clout within the Reagan administration to "realists" like George Schultz, the later Reagan-Thatcher-Gorbachev detente began. It was only after that detente lifted the Russian siege atmosphere and quieted existential nuclear nightmares that the Russian people felt secure enough to demand a changing of the guard.

In 1983, the same year that the first *Star Wars* trilogy ended, Reagan vilified Soviet Russia in language that *Star Wars* fans could understand by dubbing it "the Evil Empire." Years later, having, in Kristol's words, "defeated the evil empire," the neocons Reagan first lifted to power began clamoring for a "neo-Reaganite" global hegemony. And a few years after that, those same neocons began pointing to the sci-fi Galactic Empire that Reagan implicitly compared to the Soviets as a lovely model for America!

Fast-forward to return to the neocon literary flowering of the mid-90s. In 1997, the year after writing "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy" together, Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan co-founded The Project for a New American Century (PNAC). The 20th century is often called "the American century," largely due to it being a century of war and American "victories" in those wars: the two World Wars and the Cold War. The neocons sought to ensure that through the never-ending exercise of military might, the American global hegemony achieved through those wars would last another hundred years, and that the 21st too would be an "American century."

The organization's founding statement of principles called for "a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity" and reads like an executive summary of the founding duo's "Neo-Reaganite" essay. It was signed by neocons such as Wolfowitz, Abrams, Norman Podhoretz and Frank Gaffney; by future Bush administration officials such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby; and by other neocon allies, such as Jeb Bush.

Although PNAC called for interventions ranging from Serbia (to roll back Russian influence in Europe) to Taiwan (to roll back Chinese influence in Asia), its chief concern was to kick off the restructuring of the Middle East envisioned in "A Clean Break" and "Coping" by advocating the first step indicated in those documents: regime change in Iraq.

The most high-profile parts of this effort were two "open letters" published in 1998, one in January addressed to President Bill Clinton, and another in May addressed to leaders of Congress. As with the statement of principles, PNAC was able to garner signatures for these letters from a wide range of political luminaries, including neocons (like Richard Perle), neocon allies (like John Bolton), and other non-neocons (like James Woolsey and Robert Zoellick).

The open letters characterized Iraq as "a threat in the Middle East more serious than any we have known since the end of the Cold War," and buttressed this claim with the now familiar allegations of Saddam building a WMD program.

Thanks in large part to PNAC's pressure, regime change in Iraq became official US policy in October when Congress passed, and President Clinton signed, the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. (Notice the Clinton-friendly "humanitarian interventionist" name in spite of the policy's conservative fear-mongering origins.)

After the Supreme Court delivered George W. Bush the presidency, the neocons were back in the imperial saddle again in 2001: just in time to make their projected "New American Century" of "Neo-Reaganite Global Hegemony" a reality. The first order of business, of course, was Iraq. But some pesky national security officials weren't getting with the program and kept trying to distract the administration with concerns about some Osama bin Laden character and his Al Qaeda outfit. Apparently they were laboring under some pedestrian notion that their job was to protect the American people and not to conquer the world.

For example, when National Security Council counterterrorism "czar" Richard Clarke was sounding the alarm over an imminent terrorist attack on America, the neocon Wolfowitz was uncomprehending. As Clarke recalled, the then Deputy Defense Secretary objected:

"I just don't understand why we are beginning by talking about this one man, bin Laden."

Clarke instructed him that:

"We are talking about a network of terrorist organizations called al-Qaeda, that happens to be led by bin Laden, and we are talking about that network because it and it alone poses an immediate and serious threat to the United States."

This simply did not fit in the agenda-driven neocon worldview of Wolfowitz, who responded:

“Well, there are others that do as well, at least as much. Iraqi terrorism for example.”

As Peter Beinart recently wrote :

“During that same time period, the CIA was raising alarms too. According to Kurt Eichenwald, a former *New York Times* reporter given access to the Daily Briefs prepared by the intelligence agencies for President Bush in the spring and summer of 2001, the CIA told the White House by May 1 that “a group presently in the United States” was planning a terrorist attack. On June 22, the Daily Brief warned that al-Qaeda strikes might be “imminent.”

But the same Defense Department officials who discounted Clarke’s warnings pushed back against the CIA’s. According to Eichenwald’s sources, “the neoconservative leaders who had recently assumed power at the Pentagon were warning the White House that the C.I.A. had been fooled; according to this theory, Bin Laden was merely pretending to be planning an attack to distract the administration from Saddam Hussein, whom the neoconservatives saw as a greater threat.”

By the time Clarke and the CIA got the Bush administration’s attention, it was already too late to follow any of the clear leads that might have been followed to prevent the 9/11 attacks.

The terrorist attacks by Sunni Islamic fundamentalists mostly from the Saudi Kingdom hardly fit the neocon agenda of targeting the secular-Arab nationalist regimes of Iraq and Syria and the Shiite Republic of Iran: especially since all three of the latter were mortal enemies of bin Laden types.

But the attackers were, like Iraqis, some kind of Muslims from the general area of the Middle East. And that was good enough for government work in the American idiocracy. After a youth consumed with state-compelled drudgery, most Americans are so stupid and incurious that such a meaningless “connection,” enhanced with some fabricated “intelligence,” was more than enough to stampede the spooked American herd into supporting the Iraq War.

As Benjamin Netanyahu once said, “America is a thing you can move very easily.”

Whether it steering the country into war would be easy or not, it was all neocon hands on deck. At the Pentagon there was Wolfowitz and Perle, with Perle-admirer Rumsfeld as SecDef. Feith was also at Defense, where he set up two new offices for the special purpose of spinning “intelligence” yarn to link Saddam with al-Qaeda and to weave fanciful pictures of secret Iraqi WMD programs.

Wurmser himself labored in one of these offices, followed by stints at State aiding neocon-ally Bolton and in the Vice President’s office aiding neocon-ally Cheney along with Scooter Libby.

Iran-Contra convict Abrams was at the National Security Council aiding Condoleeza Rice. And Kristol and Kagan continued to lead the charge in the media and think tank worlds.

And they pulled it off. Wurmser finally got his “chaotic collapse” in Iraq. And Kristol finally had the beginnings of an untrammelled, hyper-active hegemony striding through the world like a colossus.

The post-9/11 pretense-dropping American Empire even had Dick Cheney with his Emperor Palpatine snarl preparing Americans to accept torture by saying:

“We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will.”