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America's Journalistic Hypocrites

By Robert Parry

August 16, 2016

Exclusive: The U.S. news media flip-flops on whether international law is inviolate or can be brushed aside at America's whim – and similarly whether killing civilians is justified or not depending on who's doing the killing, says Robert Parry.

Over the past few decades, the U.S. mainstream media has failed the American people in a historic fashion by spinning false or misleading narratives on virtually every important global issue, continuing to this day to guide the nation into destructive and unnecessary conflicts.

To me, a major turning point came with the failure of the major news organizations to get anywhere near the bottom of the Iran-Contra scandal, including its origins in illicit contacts between Republicans and Iranians during the 1980 campaign and the Reagan administration's collaboration with drug traffickers to support the Contra war in Nicaragua. (Instead, the major U.S. media disparaged reporting on these very real scandals.)

If these unsavory stories had been fully explained to the American people, their impression of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush would be far less favorable and the rise of Reagan's neocon underlings might well have been halted. Instead the neocons consolidated their dominance over Official Washington's foreign policy establishment and Bush's inept son was allowed to take the White House in 2001.

Then, one might have thought that the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003 – justified by a legion of lies – would have finally doomed the neocons but, by then, they had deeply penetrated the national news media and major think tanks, with their influence reaching not only across the Republican Party but deeply into the Democratic Party as well.

So, despite the Iraq catastrophe, almost nothing changed. The neocons and their liberal interventionist chums continued to fabricate narratives that have led the United States into one mess after another, seeking more and more “regime change” and brushing aside recommendations for peaceful resolution of international crises.

Cognitive Dissonance

As part of this phenomenon, there is profound cognitive dissonance as the rationales shift depending on the neocons’ tactical needs. From one case to the next, there is no logical or moral consistency, and the major U.S. news organizations go along, failing again and again to expose these blatant hypocrisies.

The U.S. government can stand for a “rules-based” world when that serves its interests but then freely violate international law when it’s decided that “humanitarian warfare” trumps national sovereignty and the United Nations Charter. The latter is particularly easy after a foreign leader has been demonized in the American press, but sovereignty becomes inviolate in other circumstances when Washington is on the side of the killing regimes.

George W. Bush’s administration and the mainstream media justified invading Iraq, in part, by accusing Saddam Hussein of human rights violations. The obvious illegality of the invasion was ignored or dismissed as so much caviling by “Saddam apologists.” Similarly, the Obama administration and media rationalized invading Libya in 2011 under the propagandistic charge that Muammar Gaddafi was planning a mass slaughter of civilians (though he said he was only after Islamic terrorists).

But the same media looks the other way or make excuses when the slaughter of civilians is being done by “allies,” such as Israel against Palestinians or Saudi Arabia against Yemenis. Then the U.S. government even rushes more military supplies so the bombings can continue.

The view of terrorism is selective, too. Israel, Saudi Arabia and other U.S. “allies” in the Persian Gulf have aided and abetted terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, in the war against the largely secular government of Syria. That support for violent subversion followed the U.S. media’s demonization of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Thus, trying to avoid another Iraq-style morass, President Obama faces heavy criticism from neocon-dominated Washington for not doing more to force “regime change” in Syria, although he actually has authorized shipments of sophisticated U.S. weaponry to the supposedly “moderate” opposition, which often operates under Nusra’s command structure.

In other words, it's okay to intervene overtly and covertly when Official Washington wants to do so, regardless of international law and even if that involves complicity with terrorists. But it's different when the shoe is on the other foot.

In the case of Ukraine, any Russian assistance to ethnic Russian rebels under assault from a Ukrainian military that includes neo-Nazi battalions, such as the Azov brigade, is impermissible. International law and a "rules-based" structure must be defended by punishing Russia.

The U.S. news media failed its readers again with its one-sided coverage of the 2014 coup that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich, who had undergone another demonization process from U.S. officials and the mainstream press. So, the major U.S. news outlets cheered the coup and saw nothing wrong when the new U.S.-backed regime announced an "Anti-Terrorism Operation" – or ATO – against ethnic Russian Ukrainians who had voted for Yanukovich and considered the coup regime illegitimate.

In the Western media, the "white-hatted" coup regime in Kiev could do no wrong even when its neo-Nazi storm troopers burned scores of ethnic Russians alive in Odessa and spearheaded the ATO in the east. Everything was Russia's fault, even though there was no evidence that President Vladimir Putin had any pre-coup role in destabilizing the political situation in Ukraine.

Indeed, the evidence was clear that the U.S. government was the one seeking "regime change." For instance, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland was caught on an intercepted phone call conspiring with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt regarding who should take power – "Yats is the guy," she said about Arseniy Yatsenyuk – and discussing how to "midwife" and "glue this thing." The coup followed a few weeks later, with Yatsenyuk emerging as the new prime minister.

U.S. Exceptionalism

The U.S. news media acts as if it is the unquestionable right of the U.S. government to intervene in the internal affairs of countries all over the world – whether through subversion or military invasion – but the U.S. media then gets outraged if anyone dares to resist Washington's edicts or tries to behave in any way similar to how the U.S. government does.

So, regarding Ukraine, when neighboring Russia intervened to prevent massacres in the east and to let the people of Crimea vote in a referendum on seceding from the new regime in Kiev, the U.S. government and media accused Putin of violating international law. National borders, even in the context of a violent coup carried out in part by neo-Nazis, had to be respected, Official Washington piously announced. Even the 96 percent will of Crimea's voters to rejoin Russia had to be set aside in support of the principle of state sovereignty.

In other words, if Putin shielded these ethnic Russians from violent repression by Ukrainian ultra-nationalists, he was guilty of "aggression" and his country needed to be punished with harsh sanctions. U.S. neocons soon began dreaming of destabilizing Russia and pulling off another "regime change," in Moscow.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed Ukrainian regime prosecuted its ATO, bringing heavy armaments to bear against the eastern Ukrainian dissidents in a conflict that has claimed some 10,000 lives including many civilians. The Ukrainian conflict is one of the worst bloodlettings in Europe since World War II, yet the calls from neocons and their liberal-hawk pals is to arm up the Ukrainian military so it can – once and for all – crush the resistance.

Early in the crisis, New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristof, who has cultivated a reputation as a caring humanitarian, was eager to send more weapons to the Kiev regime and to western Ukrainians (who include his father's relatives) so they could kill their ethnic Russian neighbors in the east – or “go bear-hunting,” as Kristof put it. By calling Russians “bears,” Kristof was likening their slaughter to the killing of animals.

Yet, in a recent column, Kristof takes a very different posture regarding Syria, where he wants the U.S. military to invade and create so-called “safe zones” and “no-fly zones” to prevent the Syrian army and air force from operating against rebel positions.

Sovereignty means one thing in Ukraine, even following a coup that removed the elected president. There, national borders must be respected (at least after a pro-U.S. regime had been installed) and the regime has every right kill dissenters to assert its authority. After all, it's just like hunting animals.

But sovereignty means something else in Syria where the U.S. government is called on to intervene on one side in a brutal civil war to prevent the government from regaining control of the country or to obviate the need for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. In Syria, “regime change” trumps all.

Selective Outrage

In the column, Kristof noted other conflicts where the United States supposedly should have done more, calling the failure to invade Syria “a stain on all of us, analogous ... to the eyes averted from Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, to Darfur in the 2000s.”

Note again the selectivity of Kristof's moral outrage. He doesn't call for a U.S. invasion of Israel/Palestine to protect the Palestinians from Israel's periodic “mowing the grass” operations. Nor does he suggest bombing the Saudi airfields to prevent the kingdom's continued bombing of Yemenis. And, he doesn't protest the U.S.-instigated slaughter in Iraq where hundreds of thousands of people perished, nor does he cite the seemingly endless U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Like many other mainstream pundits, Kristof tailors his humanitarianism to the cause of U.S. global dominance. After all, how long do you think Kristof would last as a well-paid columnist if he advocated a “no-fly zone” inside Israel or a military intervention against Saudi Arabia?

Put differently, how much professional courage does it take to pile on against “black-hatted” U.S. “enemies” after they've been demonized? Yet, it was just such a “group think” that cleared the way for the U.S. invasion of Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein, a decision embraced by

“liberal hawks” as well as neoconservatives and touching off mass suffering across the Mideast and now into Europe. Some estimates put the Iraqi dead at over one million.

So, it’s worth remembering how The New Yorker, The New York Times and other supposedly “liberal” publications hopped on George W. Bush’s Iraq War bandwagon. They became what Kristof’s former boss, Bill Keller, dubbed “the I-Can’t-Believe-I’m-a-Hawk Club.” (Keller, by the way, was named the Times executive editor *after* the Iraq WMD claims had been debunked. Like many of his fellow hawks, there was no accountability for their gullibility or careerism.)

Kristof did not join the club at that time but signed up later, urging a massive bombing campaign in Syria after the Obama administration made now largely discredited claims accusing Bashar al-Assad’s government of launching a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

We now know that President Obama pulled back from those bombing plans, in part, because he was told by U.S. intelligence analysts that they doubted Assad was responsible. The preponderance of evidence now points to a provocation by Al Qaeda-connected rebels to trick the United States into intervening in the civil war on their side, but the mainstream U.S. media continues to report as “flat fact” that Obama failed to enforce his “red line” against Assad using chemical weapons.

Though the Kristof-endorsed bombing campaign in 2013 might well have played into Al Qaeda’s hands (or those of the Islamic State) and thus unleashed even a worse tragedy on the Syrian people, the columnist is still advocating a U.S. invasion of Syria, albeit dressed up in pretty “humanitarian” language. But it should be clear that nice-sounding words like “safe zones” are just euphemisms for “regime change,” as we saw in Libya in 2011.

Forgetting Reality

The U.S. news media also often “forgets” that Obama has authorized the training and arming of so-called “moderate” Syrian rebels with many of them absorbed into the military command of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and with sophisticated U.S. weapons, such as TOW anti-tank missiles, showing up in the arsenals of Nusra and its jihadist allies.

In other words, beyond the selective outrage about morality and international law, we see selective reporting. Indeed, across American journalism, there has been a nearly complete abandonment of objectivity when it comes to reporting on U.S. foreign policy. Even liberal and leftist publications now bash anyone who doesn’t join the latest version of “the I-Can’t-Believe-I’m-a-Hawk Club.”

That means that as the neocon-dominated foreign policy establishment continues to push the world toward ever greater catastrophes, now including plans to destabilize nuclear-armed Russia (gee, how could that go wrong?), the U.S. news media is denying the American people the objective information needed to rein in the excesses.

Virtually nothing has been learned from the Iraq War disaster when the U.S. government cast aside negotiations and inspections (along with any appreciation of the complex reality on the

ground) in favor of tough-guy/gal posturing. With very few exceptions, the U.S. media simply went along.

Today, the pro-war posturing has spread deeply within the Democratic Party and even among some hawkish leftists who join in the fun of insulting the few anti-war dissenters with the McCarthyite approach of accusing anyone challenging the “group think” on Syria or Russia of being an “Assad apologist” or a “Putin stooge.”

At the Democratic National Convention, some of Hillary Clinton’s delegates even chanted “USA, USA” to drown out the cries of Bernie Sanders’s delegates, who pleaded for “no more war.” On a larger scale, the mainstream U.S. news media has essentially ignored or silenced anyone who deviates from the neocon-dominated conventional wisdom.