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## Obama's Foreign-Policy Self-Enslavement

By Robert Parry

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**Exclusive:** President Obama may have seen his refusal to bomb Syria in 2013 as his “liberation day” from Official Washington’s expectations, but he promptly put himself back into captivity, writes Robert Parry.

In late August 2013, with Barack Obama on the verge of launching retaliatory airstrikes against the Syrian military for its alleged role in a lethal sarin gas attack, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper informed the President that U.S. intelligence doubted that Bashar al-Assad’s government was actually responsible, causing Obama to pull back from the attack.

That new detail was disclosed in Jeffrey Goldberg’s opus for The Atlantic on Obama’s foreign policy, but Goldberg – in an extraordinary display of cognitive dissonance – then wrote the rest of his lengthy article as if he had forgotten his own reporting. He made his story conform to the powerful Washington “group think” that Assad had carried out the attack and thus had crossed Obama’s “red line” against using chemical weapons.

But the disclosure of Clapper’s warning that U.S. intelligence lacked “slam dunk” evidence implicating Assad’s forces confirmed reporting at Consortiumnews and a few other independent news outlets in 2013 – and also underscored how President Obama then joined in lying to maintain the anti-Assad propaganda themes.

Not only did the White House issue a “Government Assessment” on Aug. 30, 2013, trying to pin the blame for the attack on Assad’s regime – and not only did Obama dispatch Secretary of State John Kerry to make the dubious anti-Assad case to the country – but Obama himself asserted Assad’s guilt in his Sept. 24, 2013 address to the United Nations General Assembly.

“It’s an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack,” Obama said. Yet, the President knew that many of his own intelligence analysts doubted that the Assad regime carried out the attack.

In other words, if Obama’s statement is taken literally, he was asserting that much of the U.S. intelligence community was either dishonest or crazy. But, more likely, Obama was just reading the words of a speech prepared by State Department propagandists who understood the need to knock down the growing suspicion that the attack was a provocation committed by Islamist extremists trying to trick the United States to join the war on their side.

Obama must have recognized that his words were deceptive but he didn’t have the integrity or the courage to strike them from the speech. He just went along like a willing puppet of the foreign-policy establishment mouthing falsehoods prepared for him rather than acting decisively as America’s Commander in Chief to protect his own and his nation’s credibility.

Obama’s U.N. speech puts into a different context the narrative that Goldberg presented in The Atlantic article. There, Obama seems to relish his refusal to go along with what he “calls, derisively, ‘the Washington playbook,’” which dictates a military response to foreign challenges like the Syria sarin case.

Goldberg wrote that Aug. 31, 2013, when Obama backed away from the widely anticipated Syrian bombing campaign, “was his liberation day.” But several weeks later, Obama went before the United Nations and denounced as irrational anyone who raised exactly the doubts that had been central to his decision not to bomb.

So, what is one to make of Obama’s passive-aggressive resistance to the military imperative mandated by the “Washington playbook” while succumbing to its propagandistic tactics to justify war? Even as he resisted the demands to bomb, he could not challenge the Washington establishment enough to explain to the American people that U.S. intelligence analysts were uncertain about Assad’s guilt.

Instead, Obama allowed his subordinates to pile on the calumnies against Assad – with Secretary of State John Kerry doing so in belligerent speeches and the White House releasing a “Government Assessment” fingering Assad’s forces – while Obama let those distortions go unchallenged and, indeed, reinforced them in his U.N. speech.

### **Telling the American People**

By contrast, Obama could have taken his case to the American people. He could have given a speech saying that war is too serious and solemn an act for a president to go off half-cocked. He

could have said he would not launch military strikes if the U.S. intelligence community wasn't sure who was guilty.

The American people would have surely understood that point of view – and they would have been empowered by being brought in on what the U.S. government knew and didn't know. Yes, it would have undermined the propaganda campaign then underway to demonize Assad, but if you believe in democracy and the concept of an informed electorate, wouldn't that have been a good thing?

What I was told at the time — and what the Clapper disclosure in *The Atlantic* confirms — is that in the days after the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack, Obama knew quite well that there were serious questions about who had fired the one home-made, sarin-laden rocket that U.N. inspectors recovered in the Zamalka neighborhood outside Damascus.

However, in the weeks and months after the sarin attack, those of us who criticized the flimsiness of the U.S. "Government Assessment" – I called it a "dodgy dossier" on the day it was released – were derided as "Assad apologists." Meanwhile, the mainstream media and leading "human rights" groups sought to enforce a "group think" justifying the launching of an American-led "humanitarian" war in Syria.

In that behavior, the mainstream American news media revealed that it had learned nothing from the Iraq War disaster when virtually all the leading publications and nearly all the esteemed commentators agreed en masse that Saddam Hussein was hiding WMD stockpiles and that a U.S. invasion was justified. A decade later, these "journalists" showed no more skepticism when the neocons were pushing another "regime change" in Syria.

Yet, there were plenty of reasons to have doubts. There was the Obama administration's refusal to release any of its supposed proof to support its conclusions and the curious absence of Director of National Intelligence Clapper from the public presentation of the administration's *casus belli*.

I reported at the time that the reason for keeping the DNI on the sidelines was that he otherwise might have been asked if there was a consensus in the intelligence community supporting the administration's certitude that Assad's regime was responsible. At that point, Clapper would have had to acknowledge the disagreement from rank-and-file analysts (or face the likelihood that they would speak out).

All of that should have been obvious to any professional journalist if he or she had asked a few probing questions or noted how odd it was that Clapper would not play the role that CIA Director George Tenet did in 2003 when Tenet sat behind Secretary of State Colin Powell to lend credibility to Powell's mendacious U.N. speech regarding Iraq's WMD.

It also made no sense for Assad's forces to use sarin outside Damascus just as U.N. inspectors were arriving to investigate cases of chemical weapons that Assad was blaming on the rebels. Obviously, the attention of the inspectors would be diverted to this sarin attack and American hardliners would use the incident to press Obama to launch a military strike on Assad.

## Overseas Skepticism

To get any such skepticism from mainstream publications, you had to look abroad. For instance, Robert Fisk, a veteran reporter for London's Independent newspaper, found a lack of consensus about whodunit among U.N. officials and other international observers in Damascus despite the career risks that they faced by deviating from the conventional wisdom regarding Assad's guilt.

"In a country indeed a world where propaganda is more influential than truth, discovering the origin of the chemicals that suffocated so many Syrians a month ago is an investigation fraught with journalistic perils," Fisk wrote. "Nevertheless, it also has to be said that grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad's army.

"While these international employees cannot be identified, some of them were in Damascus on 21 August and asked a series of questions to which no one has yet supplied an answer. Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in?

"Having thus presented the UN with evidence of the use of sarin which the inspectors quickly acquired at the scene, the Assad regime, if guilty, would surely have realised that a military attack would be staged by Western nations. ... As one Western NGO put it 'if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God's sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?'"

Later, American aeronautical experts calculated that the one U.N.-recovered sarin-laden rocket could only travel about two kilometers, not the nine kilometers that the Assad-did-it crowd was claiming would trace the flight path back to a Syrian military base.

And, then, in 2014, legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh cited intelligence sources blaming the attack on jihadist rebels possibly collaborating with Turkish intelligence. But Hersh published his article in the London Review of Books because American mainstream publications wouldn't deviate from the Assad-did-it "group think."

We also now know that if Obama had been baited into another war, the U.S. onslaught might have collapsed Assad's military and led to a victory by the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, creating an even worse humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and across the region.

Yet, despite knowing what he knew and understanding many of the risks, Obama went before the United Nations on Sept. 24, 2013, and declared that no reasonable person could doubt Assad's guilt – a lie that has now been confirmed by The Atlantic article's recounting of Clapper's doubt.

Obama's falsehood – expressed to the world community on such a weighty issue of war or peace – fits with the pattern of deceptions of President George W. Bush's administration on Iraq and

his own administration's obsessive use of propaganda (or "strategic communications") on a wide range of topics, including Libya, Ukraine and Russia.

However, in this pathetic narrative, Obama comes across less as a willful liar than a weak executive who won't assert control over his own foreign policy or even cross out words in a prepared speech that he knows are false. Instead of taking command, he drags his heels on going to war in Syria, gets badgered by his own subordinates and by the neocon-dominated foreign-policy establishment, before finally saying no. Then, Obama doesn't even dare let the American people in on why he made the decision that he did.

## **The Sullen Teen**

I sometimes picture Obama's conduct of foreign policy by envisioning the President as a sullen teen-ager on a family vacation, sitting in the back seat of the car complaining that he'd rather be hanging out with his friends. This unhappy teen lets others do the driving but occasionally throws enough of a temper tantrum to make continuation of the trip impossible.

But Obama's passive-aggressive behavior didn't even change after his "liberation day" on Aug. 31, 2013. He continued to let his subordinates set the direction of his foreign policy. For instance, he agreed to covert weapons deliveries to Syrian rebels, who were operating in tandem with Islamist extremists, including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, to appease the neocons and the liberal hawks, though that strategy worsened the Syrian bloodshed and drove millions of refugees into Turkey and Europe.

When neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland helped orchestrate the overthrow of Ukraine's elected president in February 2014 and sparked a new and costly Cold War with Russia, Obama again went along.

Obama even joined in demonizing Russian President Vladimir Putin though Putin played key roles in two of Obama's most important foreign policy successes, getting Assad to surrender his chemical weapons arsenal (as a way to defuse that crisis) and persuading Iran to accept tight limits on its nuclear program (arguably Obama's signature diplomatic accomplishment).

Yet, rather than hold back Nuland and her cohorts as they pulled off a "regime change" on Russia's border, Obama let this dangerous policy go forward, amid propagandistic charges of "Russian aggression" and personal insults directed at Putin. A White House spokesman even mocked Putin's tendency to sit with his legs spread.

Last year, when Islamic State terrorists blew up a Russian charter plane over the Sinai killing 224 people, mostly Russian citizens, Obama couldn't resist citing the deaths to chide Putin for having intervened militarily in Syria in support of the government.

At a Dec. 1, 2015 news conference in Paris, Obama expressed his lack of sympathy as part of a bizarre comment in which he faulted Putin for somehow not turning around the Syrian conflict during the previous month while Obama and his allies have been floundering in their "war" against the Islamic State and its parent, Al Qaeda, for years, if not decades.

“The Russians now have been there for several weeks, over a month, and I think fair-minded reporters who looked at the situation would say that the situation hasn’t changed significantly,” Obama said. “In the interim, Russia has lost a commercial passenger jet. You’ve seen another jet shot down. There have been losses in terms of Russian personnel. And I think Mr. Putin understands that, with Afghanistan fresh in the memory, for him to simply get bogged down in a inconclusive and paralyzing civil conflict is not the outcome that he’s looking for.”

It is hard to imagine any other time when a Western leader behaved so callously in the face of a terrorist atrocity. But mocking Putin is always good politics in Official Washington, no matter what the circumstances.

However, Obama’s prognosticating skills about a costly Russian failure left a lot to be desired. In early 2016, with Russian air support, the Syrian army notched victory after victory against the Syrian rebels, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State. The successes led to a fragile cease-fire and a delicate reopening of peace talks as well as to Putin’s surprise announcement that he was withdrawing the bulk of the Russian military force.

Rather than the pointless “quagmire” that Obama smugly foresaw, Putin seemed to have achieved a successful strategic maneuver at relatively modest cost, a marked contrast to Obama’s meandering approach to the Syrian crisis in which he has fed the violence by having the CIA deliver weapons while also blocking his advisers’ more extreme war plans.

Yet, by failing to level with the American people about the relevant facts and his strategic reasoning, Obama continues to come across as a confused and conflicted chief executive. Though he may have seen his refusal to bomb Syria on Aug. 31, 2013, as his “liberation day,” Obama put himself back into captivity over the past two-plus years, shackled at the feet of the neocons and liberal hawks who still dominate Washington’s foreign-policy establishment.