

Why did the New York Times hire neoconservative columnist Bret Stephens?

By Tom Hall
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Last month, the *New York Times* announced that it had hired Bret Stephens, the former *Wall Street Journal* columnist.

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Stephens, whose position at the *Journal* was deputy editor supervising international relations, emerged as one of the most prominent critics within the Republican right of Donald Trump. Stephens declared in several columns in the lead-up to the election that he would be voting for Hillary Clinton. Clinton, for her part, actively courted opponents of Trump from the Republican right and her campaign sent out press releases circulating endorsements of her from these quarters.

Stephens' opposition to Trump stood in marked contrast to the generally favorable reporting he received from the *Wall Street Journal* as a whole (although the newspaper declined to make an official endorsement of him). While there is no evidence that Stephens himself was forced out at the newspaper, the *Atlantic* news magazine published a report in February, based on anonymous sources, that the newspaper's op-ed editor Mark Lasswell was quietly "phased out" for his critical columns on Trump.

Stephens first joined the *Wall Street Journal* in 1998 as an op-ed editor and columnist. After a brief stint away from the newspaper in which he served as editor in chief of the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* in Israel from 2002 to 2004, Stephens returned to the *Journal* as a columnist specializing in international affairs, eventually becoming deputy editor in 2009.

The *New York Times* has long functioned as a journalistic mouthpiece for the military/intelligence apparatus. In recent months, it has given voice to the bitter factional struggle by layers within the American state against the Trump administration.

The opposition to Trump within the editorial pages of the *Times*, the organ of what passes for American "liberalism," is without any democratic or progressive content. It is centered primarily on questions of foreign policy, particularly demands for a more confrontational stance towards Russia and for direct military intervention in the Syrian civil war, where US-backed Islamist militias have suffered serious strategic reversals.

The Democrats and the *Times* have waged this campaign in a de facto alliance with right-wing, neoconservative factions of the Republican Party, including Stephens himself, who oppose the Trump administration on essentially the same pro-war, anti-Russia basis. This is why the *Times* made the decision to hire him.

The basic theme that runs through Stephens' editorials is his endorsement of imperialist violence in defense of the United States' position as world hegemon. He was an ardent supporter of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and has called for an escalation of the US-backed civil war in Syria through direct US intervention. A *Journal* editorial from September 2016, "The Only Syrian Solution," called the US-led bombing of the Balkans in the 1990s a "model" for Syria.

In 2014, Stephens authored a book, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder*, which denounced the supposed reluctance of the Obama administration to use military force (in fact, Obama was the first American president to spend two full terms at war) and called for the continuation and expansion of America's role as "world policeman."

"No great power can treat foreign policy as a spectator sport and hope to remain a great power," Stephens wrote. "A world in which the leading

liberal-democratic nation does not assume its role as the world policeman will become a world in which dictatorships contend, or unite, to fill the breach.”

Stephens is also a staunch defender of Israel. In a *Times* editorial last week reviewing Trump’s state visit to the Middle East, Stephens, while generally positive, singled out for criticism Trump’s delaying of his highly inflammatory pledge to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, which is claimed by both Israel and Palestinians as their capital. His opinion pieces on Israel also often reveal an anti-Arab bigotry. Last year he published an editorial about an incident at the Olympics in Brazil between an Egyptian and Israeli athlete that spurred outrage for referring to “the disease of the Arab mind.”

None of these stances would appear out of place in the columns written by the *Times*’ other opinion writers. The *Times* op-ed writers, who specialize in providing “democratic” and “human rights” justifications for America’s imperialist adventures, have supported every war launched by the United States since the end of the Cold War, and are among the most vocal supporters of direct US intervention in Syria and confrontation with Russia.

The *Times*’ columnists share close connections to the military-intelligence apparatus. This is exemplified by the newspaper’s opinion editor James Bennet, whose father is a former diplomat and head of USAID, the CIA front group implicated in regime-change operations worldwide, and whose brother is the senior senator from Colorado.

In recent months, *Times* editorial pages have played host to numerous columns appealing to the American military and the cabal of ex-generals and corporate executives in Trump’s cabinet to intervene against Trump and, if necessary, remove him from power. Earlier this month, columnist Nicholas Kristof penned an op-ed approvingly citing plans by former president Richard Nixon’s secretary of state’s secret plans to deploy the military to the streets of Washington during the Watergate crisis. In March, Thomas Friedman wrote an open letter to the three generals in Trump’s cabinet, the CIA director and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that floated a proposal for a palace coup.

The paper’s news section has long served as a clearinghouse for unsubstantiated and politically motivated claims by anonymous government officials,

from its uncritical reporting as fact of Bush administration claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to the present campaign over alleged Russian hacking to influence the US election.

While they publish as fact any claim against an official adversary, the newspaper’s editors routinely withhold or downplay stories about crimes committed by the US government itself. This was immortalized in a statement by former executive editor Bill Keller, who declared in 2008, “Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity.”

The hiring of Stephens is not the first rapprochement with the Republican right by the *New York Times*. In 2008, the paper hired William Kristol, the founder of the conservative news magazine *Weekly Standard* and son of the “father” of American neoconservatism Irving Kristol, as a columnist. The arrangement lasted only one year, however, after backlash from readers and colleagues.

Stephens provoked similar outrage with his first column for the *New York Times*, an attack on the academic consensus behind climate change. Public editor Liz Spayd wrote a defensive response to the public indignation, accusing readers and critics of intolerance and of “[rummaging] through his columns for proof” that Stephens is a right-wing ideologue.

Stephens’ hiring further clarifies the right-wing character of the newspaper and the “liberal” Democratic Party milieu for which it speaks. It demonstrates the closeness of the Democrats’ foreign policy to that of the neocon Republican right, and illustrates the thoroughly right-wing content of their opposition to Trump.

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