

THE STRONGBAD BITE, ACK!: KAGAN'S NEOCON HYPOCRISY

[NB: Note the byline, thanks. /~Rayne]

Neoconservative Robert Kagan's recent op-ed in the Washington Post – The Strongmen Strike Back – made me think of a classic episode of MST3K:

Pick one of Dave Ryder's many names – Big McLargeHuge is my personal favorite – and then imagine Kagan's op-ed as a cheesy, sweeping space opera. A production which the screenwriter and director took far too seriously, expecting the audience to treat it as if it were Oscar worthy.

Yes, authoritarians abound around the world. The U.S. has unfortunately called some of them allies though it shouldn't cater to authoritarian leaders given its values based upon liberal democracy.

While fretting about the emergence of autocrats, Kagan is blind to his own role in the promulgation of authoritarianism. Has he forgotten neoconservatives' insistence the U.S. launch the Iraq War, relying on increased nationalism and authoritarianism in response to 9/11? What blindness; what hypocrisy.

Far worse though, is Kagan's difficulty facing mounting autocracy here at home. To say the rise of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are responses to problems here while ignoring the white nationalist impulse behind them is shallow and uninformed.

- Sanders had the benefit of 20-plus years of anti-Clinton propaganda and eight years of anti-Obama racism greasing the way for him to carpetbag into the Democratic Party.
- Trump had more than 13 years of glitzy production effort by former General Electric property NBC to construct his

BigBlond McStrongboss persona on top of his appeal to the racist element pervasive in white American culture.

Ignoring these factors combined with a feckless GOP field of also-rans is just plain stupid.

Not to mention the role of the GOP-majority Congress' strategy of stifling all rational legislation after they took the reins in 2010.

What's particularly galling in Kagan's overlong and droning piece whining about the rise of authoritarian strongmen is that he doesn't mention Putin by name at all with regard to free and open elections and voting whether in Russia or in the U.S. Not once. Zero. Nada.

Not as a killer of Russian journalists. Not as an assassin of Russian dissidents and political opponents. Not even as the propagandistic image created we might call Punch BigSixPack.

He makes rather thin observations about Putin's autocratic regime, but makes no mention of how this particular strongman interfered with the very thing Kagan wants us to believe he is defending – our liberal democracy.

No acknowledgment at all that this particular strongman made a concerted effort not only to interfere with our democratic processes but to seat a kleptoautocrat as our nation's leader.

Further, Kagan fails to mention the steady attack by the Republican Party at state and national level on our voting rights and infrastructure. The GOP has systematically attacked the foundation of the United States' liberal democracy in which every citizen possesses the right to vote, by way of suppressive voter identification laws to implementation of hackable and inauditable electronic voting machines, to failure to renew the Voting Rights Act and denying voters at the polls by way of fake software check systems.

Yes, fake – when a system does exactly the opposite of what it is allegedly designed to do

as in the case of Crosscheck, it's fake. And the GOP pushed its use across the country, especially where minority citizens lived in greater concentrations.

And none of this was Robert Kagan's concern when bemoaning the alleged decline of liberal democracy.

But he's a historian and he wrote looking at world history, one might say. As if history hasn't also informed us about blind spots in ideology or the possibility historians have their own hidden agendas.

This bit is egregious:

...The world's autocracies, even the "friendly" ones, are acquiring the new methods and technologies pioneered by Russia and China. And, as they do, they become part of the global surveillance-state network. They are also enhancing the power and reach of China and Russia, who by providing the technology and expertise to operate the mechanisms of social control are gaining access to this ever-expanding pool of data on everyone on the planet. ...

The only attribution he makes to the origin of the digital panopticon is a link in that paragraph to a January 17 article in WaPo, How U.S. surveillance technology is propping up authoritarian regimes. Yes, us, the U.S., we are the progenitor of the ubiquitous surveillance state – but not only because of intelligence and defense technology. Our internet platforms offering search tools and social media provide the base on which surveillance thrives.

Kagan never calls out these privately-owned companies, from Facebook to Google, though these companies also played a role in Russia's interference with our elections. Their role is purely incidental, accidental, while Kagan holds China up as an example of social surveillance ubiquity:

Developments in China offer the clearest glimpse of the future. Through the domination of cyberspace, the control of social media, the collection and use of Big Data and artificial intelligence, the government in Beijing has created a more sophisticated, all-encompassing and efficient means of control over its people than Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler or even George Orwell could have imagined. What can be done through social media and through the employment of artificial intelligence transcends even the effective propaganda methods of the Nazis and the Soviet communists. At least with old-fashioned propaganda, you knew where the message was coming from and who was delivering it. Today, people's minds are shaped by political forces harnessing information technologies and algorithms of which they are not aware and delivering messages through their Facebook pages, their Twitter accounts and their Google searches.

What a lack of insight and imagination. Kagan wants us to look abroad to condemn authoritarianism, gear up our foreign policy with defense against 'strongmen' in mind, while failing to live our values here at home on an individual, collective, society-wide basis. The U.S. can't be a legitimate democratic leader when it not only blindly spawns surveillance-as-an-incidental-product, but when creating new forms of old suppressions.

For example:

- North Dakota's GOP-led state legislature demanded the Sioux acquire physical street addresses before they could vote during the midterm election year;
- Florida's Republican legislators submitted a proposal to deny voting rights to former convicts if they have not paid all their fines and fees, constituting a

poll tax on former felons after voters chose to restore rights after imprisonment;

- Georgia’s secretary of state (now governor) refused to recuse himself while running for governor after having conducted racially-biased voter roll purges;
- Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) refused to take up bill H.R. 1 after it passed the House. The bill bolstered voting rights and improved accountability by candidates and incumbents to voters.

If we truly wanted to promote liberal democracy abroad, we need to practice it here at home – put on our own oxygen mask before helping others.

One person who advocated for an improved democracy here was John Dingell. In one of his last op-eds he called for

- the abolishment of the Senate, which dilutes the votes of individuals in populous states;
- automatic and comprehensive voter registration at age 18, to encourage full participation of citizens in voting;
- protection of the press because an electorate can’t make informed decisions without free and open access to information;
- elimination of money from campaigns as it has a corrupt influence on candidates and unduly shapes opinions of the electorate.

Do read Dingell’s op-ed because he expanded upon each of these points I have only summarized. He did far more to encourage liberal democracy here in the U.S. in that one instructive essay as BigJohn TwitterDean than Kagan did in his space opera-ish piece hyping the Autocrat McStrongbads abroad.

This is an open thread.