

Juan Cole promotes Washington's lies at University of Michigan talk on Syria

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On February 20, Professor Juan Cole, a University of Michigan professor of Middle Eastern history, gave a talk at the university on the subject of the Syrian civil war. His presentation was a remarkable exercise in deceit and intellectual chicanery aimed at whitewashing the role of US imperialism and providing support for the political establishment's anti-Russia campaign.

The talk, entitled "From Damascus to Aleppo: What's Going on in Syria?", was hosted by two University of Michigan student organizations: the Michigan Refugee Assistance Program and Books Not Bombs. It was billed as a teach-in to inform students about "the ongoing conflict in Syria, its complexities, and the overall effect the civil war has had on the region and the globe."

One could scarcely imagine a person less qualified to give such a talk than Cole. After coming to prominence as a critic of the George W. Bush administration and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Cole has since made his peace with US imperialism and become one of its most reliable defenders. On his blog, *Informed Comment*, he has served as both cheerleader and apologist for US-led imperialist interventions, declaring in 2011, "To make 'anti-imperialism' trump all other values in a mindless way leads to frankly absurd positions." He later added, "If NATO needs me, I'm there."

Cole played a particularly filthy role during the Obama administration's bombing of Libya, a criminal act that unleashed immense bloodshed throughout the country. Cole was among the most prominent of supposedly "left" academics who promoted the Obama White House's fraudulent pretexts for launching the war for regime-change against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, claiming the US-led bombing campaign in conjunction with Al Qaeda-linked proxy forces on the ground was a crusade for "human rights."

Cole welcomed the brutal murder of Gaddafi by US-backed Islamist "rebels" and declared the result of the war, which killed at least 50,000 Libyans, a triumph for democracy. He angrily dismissed any suggestion that Washington's motives were linked to Libya's possessing the largest oil reserves of any African country.

He denounced those like the *World Socialist Web Site* who opposed the imperialist slaughter, crudely declaring that "the

Left" needs to "learn to chew gum and walk at the same time." Despite Libya's subsequent descent into chaos, Cole has never accounted for his position, retracted his enthusiastic support for the war, or withdrawn his slanders against those who opposed the US aggression.

The University of Michigan professor has continued his propaganda in behalf of the policies of the CIA and Pentagon, promoting the US-orchestrated war for regime-change in Syria, which has killed hundreds of thousands and turned millions into refugees, as yet another campaign for democracy and "human rights." He has as well joined in the campaign of the intelligence agencies and their allies in the Democratic Party and the media to whip up a war fever against Russia and demonize Russian President Vladimir Putin.

At last week's event, Cole began by saying he would be talking about the Syrian war in an "abstract" way, thereby giving himself license to cherry pick, or ignore, facts as he pleased. He described a Syrian "revolution" led by young people and unemployed farm workers, one aimed at overthrowing "the Baathist state," which he described as "a kind of mixture of the Arab nationalism and communism."

He gave lengthy descriptions of atrocities attributed to the Syrian government and Russia, while saying nothing of the crimes committed by the US-backed, Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias that make up the bulk of the "rebel" fighting force. He dismissed the dominance within the anti-government forces of the al-Nusra Front and other jihadist militias as merely the result of "battlefield alliances."

An example of the impressionism and charlatanry of his analysis was his characterization of the US-backed Kurdish militias, which he described as "a sort of post-communist movement... the dominant political force is a unique leftism. It's feminist and they have female Muslim fighters. It's egalitarian, and some people think it's a little bit fascist."

Discussing the refugee crisis, Cole revealed his attitude toward the international working class, declaring, "Nobody has figured out how to mechanize the picking up strawberries, and I never in my life will ever have a job picking strawberries... and so if the strawberries are going to get picked, it's going to have to be somebody else... They are not taking our jobs when they do that; in fact, they are providing us strawberries." In other

words, refugees should be allowed into the country so as to provide a source of cheap, ultra-exploitable labor.

Cole cited figures that spoke to the scope of the catastrophe in Syria, including the 11 million people displaced and nearly half a million dead. However, he presented this as being entirely due to the Syrian and Russian military response. He said nothing about the US bombing campaign, the CIA's support for opposition forces, or the billions of dollars spent by the US to funnel weapons into the country. Based on Cole's dishonest presentation, one would have no idea that the US was even involved in the Syrian civil war.

The decision to militarize the opposition groups was presented as an unfortunate "mistake," one that Cole claims he advised against in a 2012 meeting he attended with opposition leaders called by the European Council on Foreign Relations. Of course, by supporting the regime-change operation while claiming to have opposed its militarization, Cole seeks to have his imperialist cake and eat it too.

During the question and answer period, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter stated, "You gave a presentation on Syria without mentioning the US bombing campaign. You supported the war of the US and NATO on Libya, and that country has been destroyed. Is your failure to mention the US role there an attempt to cover up for its history and for future war crimes as they prepare a new invasion of Syria?"

In response, Cole began by accusing the reporter of "trolling." He then claimed to have supported a "no fly zone" in Libya while opposing "any attempt to bomb Libya into submission or to use it for regime-change." This is a lie, one, moreover, that is contradicted by his own statements at the time.

In a March 2011 blog post, he wrote: "The Libya intervention is legal and was necessary to prevent further massacres and to forestall a threat to democratization in Tunisia and Egypt, and if it succeeds in getting rid of Gaddafi's murderous regime and allowing Libyans to have a normal life, it will be worth the sacrifices in life and treasure."

Cole went on to say that his stance on Libya was "morally and ethically and politically" correct. This despite the fact that the imperialist intervention unleashed chaos in the country, killing tens of thousands and setting off a factional civil war that continues to this day.

According to a January 2017 Human Rights Watch report, "Armed groups, some affiliated with rival governments vying for legitimacy and territorial control, detained, tortured, 'disappeared' and unlawfully killed people with impunity in Libya during 2016... Nearly 500,000 people are internally displaced, the economy and judicial system have collapsed, and hundreds of thousands of foreign migrants and asylum-seekers risk harsh detention and torture as they transit through Libya in the hope of reaching Europe. Although weakened, Islamist militants, including fighters who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), continue to control territory

and commit abuses."

In 2016 alone, at least 4,518 people drowned or went missing while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to escape the bloodshed in Libya. These are the lives that Cole was so eager to "sacrifice" for the sake of overthrowing Gaddafi.

Cole went on to claim that "the United States hasn't been very much involved in Syria," despite the fact that the US dropped more bombs on Syria in 2016 than on any other country. He claimed that "the vast majority of destruction and bombing" was inflicted by the Russian air force, before asking, "Why does Russia always get a pass in these things? What it did in Syria is imperialistic."

He continued the anti-Russian line in his concluding remarks, which focused on President Trump's alleged ties to Putin. "We now have elected a president who has made very clear what his policy is... He's all for [Syrian President] Bashar [al-Assad], and he's buddy-buddy with Putin, and he says, you know, if Russia wants to take care of Syria, let them. So he more or less has acquiesced in Syria being a Russian sphere of influence and in Russia's role in propping up the Bashar al-Assad regime."

This lines Cole up with the McCarthyite campaign being conducted by the military-intelligence complex, Democratic Party, key sections of the Republican Party and media to paint Trump as a "puppet" of Putin. Like Cole, the political establishment is furious at the idea of Syria being anything other than an American "sphere of influence."

The sections of the ruling elite and the state that are leading the campaign against Trump are doing so not on the basis of his assault on democratic rights and his police state crackdown on immigrants, but rather out of concern that he is backing away from the Obama administration's aggressive drive toward military confrontation with Russia.

Cole's evolution from a critic of the Bush administration to a cheerleader for imperialism is not merely the degradation of an individual. He exemplifies the movement of an entire social layer, one that grew comfortably wealthy during the stock market boom of the Clinton, Bush and Obama years, even as the living standards of the vast majority fell. These upper-middle-class layers have largely buried the hatchet with imperialism and embraced "sacrifices in life and treasure" for the sake of US global hegemony, concentrating their efforts on providing imperialist interventions with a "humanitarian" gloss.



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