



Episode 301-Hillary Clinton: The Military-Industrial Candidate

Guest: Kelley Vlahos

December 9, 2014

Kelly Vlahos is a freelance writer and a contributing editor of The American Conservative.

WOODS: How can I not talk to you about an article called “The Military Industrial Candidate”? Was that your title or Dan McCarthy’s?

VLAHOS: You know, I think it was a collaboration there. I believe I mentioned it in the column, but I think that that was an overarching theme of the story itself. And I am going to give credit to one of my sources. I think it was, I don't know, I think it was Mike Lofgren, who I do quote in the story. Mike had been an aide on the Hill and the Budget Committee specifically on national security issues for 30 years. He’s seen everything, and one of the first things he said about Hillary Clinton when I interviewed him about this was that she is the military-industrial candidate—that she is the military-industrial complex’s candidate, meaning that she will go to bat for them specifically on budgets and war issues. So I think that that sort of became a thread throughout the article.

WOODS: We’ll get into the specifics in a minute, but I am amazed at the degree to which the FOX News wing of the electorate is so unaware of Hillary’s real identity. She is in no way a pinko, lefty peacenik in that sense of lefty.

VLAHOS: Well, what’s interesting, and I have to disclose, I do work for FOX News. I am a writer for them, which is I think good, and it helps inform my writing, because I am aware of how the different political interests are viewing candidates, storylines, narratives, what have you. That said, when dealing with Hillary Clinton on the air, what many of these right-wing or conservative media outlets like FOX have been gentle on Hillary because she has been a hawk on the Hill dating back to her Senate days after 9/11. So when she’s not running for office, they are more gentle on her because she often votes the way that they would like on these national security issues. When she does start making moves, or when the storyline is about her potential presidential run, then they start calling her a liberal, and a pinko, or what have you. So you do see that split there on how Hillary is treated. I think inherently they know that Hillary has never been a dove on these issues. She may talk a good game, and that’s where I—personally I get confused at how I look at Hillary. Is she a liberal trapped in a hawk’s clothing, or is she a hawk trapped in a liberal’s clothing? She’s been so great at confusing or at least presenting herself as

two different people most times that I think that you see that in the coverage of her that people don't know whether to treat her as a hawk or a dove, and I think that's to her great advantage. And she is above all a politician. And she's been able to craft a persona in which she is seen as a sort of mother goddess figure where she goes off into the world, and she wants to help women, and she wants to forward human rights in different countries and democracy, but at the same time, she has advocated war time and again to forward those goals, to achieve them. So it's fabulous because she does appeal to both sides. She appeals to the liberals because she's out there talking about women's rights, and then she appeals to the hawks to a certain extent because she has voted for war. She has advocated for war since her husband's days in office.

WOODS: It makes me think she has no principles whatsoever. I can deal with people whose principles are the exact opposite of my own. At least I know where I stand.

VLAHOS: Yeah.

WOODS: But given her whole career and given her obvious lusting after power, it seems to me that she's kind of like John McCain in the sense that I remember McCain saying something along the lines of, and I am going to clean it up a little bit, but if they want their stupid fence on the Mexican border, I'll give them their stupid fence. Whatever these stupid rubes want, I'll hand it to them if that's what it takes for me to get in.

VLAHOS: You know what? I might have to disagree with you there.

WOODS: Oh, good, I'd love to hear it! All right, tell me.

VLAHOS: Personally, I think she has principles. It's just that many of us and many of the people in your audience would be fearful of those principles. I cite in my piece she had done a review in the *Washington Post* of Henry Kissinger's recent autobiography, and she talked incessantly about global world order and how the United States is, and this is very messianic in a way, where it's sort of the beacon that's going to go out and help bring democracy to these countries. It is our responsibility as a nation, as a democratic nation, to go out and help these other countries see the light. I am oversimplifying here, but she really does have that vision that we are a global, capital G, leader, and what I am concerned with, and I think your audience has to be concerned, is how does she get to that point? Well, for Hillary Clinton, she gets to that point in many examples through war and intervention, and I think that if there's any consistency in Hillary Clinton's career, it is her belief that we have this mission, this global mission, and that in many cases she has advocated military intervention to see that go through. So I do think she has principles. It's just those are the very principles I think you and I are nervous about.

WOODS: But yet when she says, at a time when it requires the expenditure of no political capital at all to say so, that in retrospect if I had known then what I know now, I would not have supported the war in Iraq, can we take that seriously?

VLAHOS: Yeah, no, I agree. I do agree with you there, and that is a fantastic example, and many politicians of her ilk have done the same thing in the wake of the Iraq war, where they say—including Henry Kissinger, and if I had been able to write more, had more space in my article, I had to edit it as we all do, but I make a note that Henry Kissinger, who is this lionized figure of national security wisdom and has been since the Vietnam War, which is confusing in itself that someone who was integral in one of the most failed disastrous foreign policy and national security events of our recent memory is lionized in such a way. But even he said: if I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have supported Iraq. You know, of course, Hillary agrees with him, and it makes you wonder, well, if these guys have, and this gal has such wisdom and such experience and such bona fides for military strategy and foreign policy, how could they have gotten that wrong? Well, we know better. We were all lined up with the hawks to intervene in Iraq for political interest just like Hillary's husband was the first one to declare a policy for regime change against Saddam Hussein. So we know why she did it, and then obviously, and you're right, when it was politically expedient to disavow that position during the 2008 election in which she lost against Barack Obama, yeah, she did say, oh, I made a mistake. But you're right. There has been some flip-flopping there on political expediency, but I think the hawk's position is her true position, and it stands on some sort of principle. I just don't agree with it.

WOODS: Now, looking through her tenure as secretary of state, we see ample support for your thesis in the article. Give us the *Reader's Digest*, two-minute overview of Hillary Clinton faced with foreign policy crises and how she deals with them.

VLAHOS: Well, I think that Hillary Clinton—and I think that that warrants a separate article—I think her tenure as Secretary of State is more emblematic of an ineffectual term more so than a hawkish term. I think on the hawk side, she did, she supported all of Obama's policies, and Obama's policies were bombing Libya, getting an intervention there—what's going on with ISIS today—all of the sort of scattered, insurgent counterterrorism operations in north Africa, expanding the footprint there, and of course, Afghanistan. She supported the policies of the surge in Afghanistan. So I think, personally, I don't think she was an effective secretary of state not because she was too bold, too interventionist, too hawkish. I think she was just more cautious, and she I think was more concerned with traveling the world and maybe tamping down little things, and then fixing the democracy at Foggy Bottom here in Washington. I just don't think that she was effective in making any real changes or improvements or reforms in our foreign policy overseas.

That said, in terms of where she actually stepped outside of that norm was when she had advocated on the inside for bombing Syria last summer. She had joined forces with then-CIA Director David Petraeus, and then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in encouraging intervention in Syria, and then she came out last summer and complained that Obama hadn't listened to her and that had created the problem with ISIS today—the crisis in Iraq and Syria today with the growth of ISIS. So somehow if there had been a military intervention in Syria, we would not have ISIS today, and everything, you know, we wouldn't have war in Syria. So that is

where she has sort of made her break with the administration, but it wasn't until after she left that, you know, a lot of this had come out and Leon Panetta came out and said that he would have left a residual force in Iraq—yada, yada, yada.

WOODS: Yeah, let's talk about that, because Panetta had been on board supporting Obama's policies all this time, including drawing down in Iraq, and then all of a sudden saying, well, it was a mistake that the president made; we should have kept troops there. What does that change of heart maybe have to do with a firm called Beacon Strategies?

VLAHOS: Right, well, Beacon Strategies is a consulting firm that was started by some expatriates of the Clinton Administration, Clinton campaign, Clinton staff over the years, which Leon Panetta is now a member of. He is a consultant for Beacon Strategies. They supposedly have informed and advised companies on foreign policy, foreign governments on foreign policy and national security, but have been more or less considered sort of a Clinton cabinet-in-waiting, at least on the foreign policy front, national security front. So that aside, my thesis, which is not original, is that we have heard a lot from Leon Panetta in recent months. He has a new book out in which, in part, he criticizes the president for A, not leaving a residual force in Iraq, something he had actually advocated for withdrawal at the time when he was defense secretary. Now he is saying that the president messed up, and again, that is why we are seeing all of this war and strife in Iraq today. He also complained that the president didn't act on Syria when Mrs. Clinton and David Petraeus had advocated along with himself a year ago. So my thesis is that what we're seeing is one old-time friend helping another, and he perceives her as a potential Democratic candidate for president, maybe even the first woman president, and Panetta, being an old friend of the Clintons, is basically positioning himself, helping her out in the media. Immediately when he had gone out and started criticizing the president at first on *60 Minutes* and other media outlets, conservative commentators, including Karl Rove, and called him a patriot, which I thought was interesting.

WOODS: Yeah.

VLAHOS: And FOX News, too, had, you know, had reacted to Panetta's revelation in a very positive manner. So I think, ultimately, that helped Hillary Clinton because she's able to A, distance yourself from the president from who she worked for. Also positioned herself as more hawkish than Obama, and I think she ultimately needs to do that if she is going to be a strong presidential candidate in 2016. For as much as you and I would like to see someone who has more of a Rand Paul type, and I think that I am a supporter of Rand Paul, but just in terms of foreign policy more cautious, non-interventionist policy—we love that, right? But poll after poll has shown that somebody that shows tough, strong, national security bonafides on the presidential campaign usually has the advantage. Maybe not every year, I think, probably you and I would agree that Obama had beaten in part in 2008 because there was a such backlash at the time against the Iraq war, and good timing, you know? Help them out, but typically when I talk to people who are smarter than me on this issue, on political issues, is that you know, for as

much as we hate it, the person that shows like the backbone that looks strong—the person that’s going to pick up the red phone at midnight and respond to a crisis is the one that has the electoral advantage.

WOODS: I definitely get that. I think that’s partly because the public has been conditioned to think this way and because nationalism is such a poisonous force and all that, but also because we haven’t seen a really articulate response to these people. Somebody like Mitt Romney standing on stage repeating platitudes should be—rhetorically anyway—smashed into the floor by somebody saying, look, every single thing you’ve called for has obviously made things worse. Mitt Romney, if you were trying to spread radical Islam, how could you do a better job than we’ve done already? Somebody getting up there—and Romney is not prepared to answer any of that—could actually change things, but I am afraid that right now all we’ve got are mealy-mouthed people who are afraid of saying the wrong thing and want to be 20% less Romney than Romney, then Romney is going to win. Romney is going to win. He’ll run again, and he’ll beat anybody who is too scared to stray from the plantation on these issues.

VLAHOS: Right, and right, and then if you’ll recall the last nomination process in 2012 where all the Republicans were lined up. We take—obviously take Ron Paul into this equation. But they had to outdo each other on how hawkish they would be, to the point where they were outright advocating bombing North Korea I think at one point. So by the time you get through that process, Hillary Clinton, anything she says will look more measured, more articulate, more intellectual than anything those guys are saying, even though what it’s really advocating is just the status quo when it comes to military and foreign policy issues.

WOODS: I talked to Bruce Fein once, and he said that the one thing that would make running for president fun would be being in the debates with foreign policy knowledge and wiping the floor with everybody else. That’s what I want to see someday. That would be nice to see. Now, I don’t think I’m going to see it in the Democratic Party, and the reason is that I think that Nixon was right in the early ’70s. He knew that the reason that there were all these antiwar protests was because of the draft. If I get rid of the draft for all these people who say “I’m out on the streets for the principled reason that it’s wrong to kill all these foreigners,” they really just wanted to save their own rear ends. Now, there’s nothing wrong with that. In no way am I opposed to people who want to save their own rear ends. But I am opposed to people who claim that they are standing for principle, but when their own comfort is assured, they disappear. Likewise, since that decision to take the draft off the table, antiwar has not been as big of an issue as it used to be, and I wonder are there enough Democrats who care about peace who won’t jump onto the Hillary bandwagon? I am not talking about the people at *Counterpunch*. There are 12 of those. How many among the Democrat Party? Are there enough to be an obstacle to Hillary?

VLAHOS: Well, you know what? You know, I don’t know if you’ve talked about this lately on your show, but there were some. Jim Webb, a conservative Democrat out of Virginia, has

launched an exploratory committee for president. I did a story on this for FoxNews.com, and I talked to veterans, and I talked to conservatives because they are my friends, and so I had to pull this together, and I kind of knew where I wanted to go with this because we all know that Democrats will vote for Democrats, but I wanted to know about independent conservatives voting for Jim Webb. To a person they said we don't know if he has a shot, but I'll vote for that guy because I don't want to see Hillary getting the nomination because they feel that he has got the bona fides. He's a Marine. He worked under the Reagan Administration as secretary of the Navy, and he's been vocal about non-interventionist issues. He voted against the Iraq war. He refused to get in line to be seen with the president when he first was elected senator. His son was fighting in Iraq. I don't know if you remember this story, but all the freshmen were getting in line to get their picture taken with Bush, and he wouldn't get in line.

WOODS: Yeah, I remember that.

VLAHOS: And Bush noticed, and he came over, and he was like, hey Jim, how is your son? He goes, I'd rather not talk to you. That's my business. And he goes, when are you going to get our boys out of Iraq? And Bush said, that's not what I asked you. I asked you how your son was. And I forget the exact response to that, but it wasn't nice.

WOODS: See, that to me shows somebody—I don't want to get caught up with politicians and enthusiasm for politicians, but normally you just completely fold and melt in the presence of the president, and somebody who refuses to do that and refuses to get star struck does get my attention. I will at least put it that way.

VLAHOS: And what also gets my attention and I think gets a lot of independent conservatives' attention and veterans is that he was able to prove that you can be pro-veteran without being pro-war, and you can do it in a way that's really smart and effective and actually productive. And when he was elected to the Senate, he had pushed with the author, and he pushed for reforms to the GI Bill. Now, there's a lot of flaws to that GI Bill, probably unforeseen, but that could be another show. But the point was that his first order of business was going to bat for the veterans, and then his second order of business—and this has hardly been covered by the media because it wasn't sexy enough—but he had headed a commission of wartime contracting with Claire McCaskill in which they had pored through all of the contracts that we had overseas, all of the private contractors, what they were doing, how much money was being lost, billions of dollars being lost. It's all there in black and white. And he spent many hearings going through this because they wanted to get their hands, and hearts, and minds around all this money that we spent over there that they lost, and they came up with some good stuff. Unfortunately, the media didn't cover it. So we probably will make the same mistakes again in the next war. But that is what he concentrated on, and also on prison reform. So I think that he actually did some good work.

But the bottom line is, he's not some mealy-mouthed or squishy liberal who just basically hates the military, hates veterans, anything to do with war. He actually has a really good argument against intervention, but he's very pro-military. He knows that we need a strong defense to defend the country, abiding by the constitutional responsibility to defend the country. But getting into all these endless wars to solve problems, every problem that we have overseas needs to be settled with boots on the ground and guns and bombs and drones: he doesn't abide by that. I think that is appealing to people who might be a Democrat and can't stand the idea of electing Hillary because she is a hawk.

WOODS: Right, well, yeah, the Jim Webb story is definitely an interesting one, and I'm glad you raised it. Before I let you go, Kelley, I want to ask you: as somebody who's spent a lot of time, I mean, years and years you've been writing as a journalist, and I want to know especially these days when you're a freelancer—you have a connection with *The American Conservative Magazine* as I do, and you mentioned FoxNews.com. What have you found to be the pros and cons of the growth of the Internet for the freelance writer?

VLAHOS: Well, I think I'll start off with the cons. The growth of the Internet in concert with the collapse of the economy in 2008 has obliterated the freelance market. In terms of the money that I would make per story, it's gone down exponentially. It's not something I could do and raise a family. I will just put it that way. I think you have your upper echelon of freelance writers who might be writing for *Vanity Fair* or *Us*—your top glossy magazines—and there's a really small percentage of those who can eke out a living because they demand a high price per story, but the vast majority of freelance writers don't make much money. The market has just hit bottom in terms of what websites are paying for content, for original content. What I've found is that original content is not valued the way it was say 10 years ago. So people regurgitate content that they find on the Internet. They use aggregators. They have kids right out of college who, not putting them down, but with very little experience in the business, just basically cobbling together stories and slapping a byline on it or not even a byline on it for employers. I found that the quantity is valued over quality.

So you have a lot of websites now that are just hiring people to basically just rewrite copy as opposed to going out and finding freelancers to write for them and then paying them a decent wage for that. Of course, the positive is that we have so much access to information now that we didn't have as a freelancer, as a reporter. Obviously, it's so much easier to access documents and files and data. Whereas, when I first started out in the business over 20 years ago, you'd have to actually go to city hall, you'd have to get things faxed—so you'd have to do a lot more like on-the-street gumshoeing, which I kind of miss those days a little bit, but on the most part the access. And I am able to promote my stories on essentially a live basis now through Twitter, for example, I use that. That's the chief way of getting my stories out, on Twitter, and back in the day even 10 years ago a story would come out, and sometimes I'd feel

like it was going into a black hole, especially if it was going to a small, tiny niche audience. So I think that there's definitely pros and cons.