

How Propaganda Conquers Democracy

In recent decades, the U.S. propaganda system has grown more and more sophisticated in the art of "perception management," now enlisting not only government PR specialists but careerist journalists and aspiring bloggers to push deceptions on the public, a crisis in democracy that Nicolas J S Davies explores.

By Nicolas J S Davies

Do we live in a country where citizens are critically informed on the issues of the day by media that operate independently of the government? Or do our political leaders deliberately plant a false view of events and issues in the mind of the public that complicit media then broadcast and amplify to generate public consent for government policy?

This is a basic test of democracy for the citizens of any country. But the very nature of modern propaganda systems is that they masquerade as independent while functioning as the opposite, so the question is not as straightforward as it seems.

In *Democracy Incorporated; Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, political scientist Sheldon Wolin examined how America's "managed democracy" has devolved into "inverted totalitarianism," concentrating power and wealth in the hands of a small ruling class more efficiently and sustainably than 20th Century "classical totalitarianism" ever succeeded in doing.

Instead of sweeping away the structures of constitutional government like the Fascists, Nazis or Soviets, this "political coming-of-age of corporate power" has more cleverly preserved and co-opted nominally democratic institutions and adapted them to its own purposes.

Self-serving politicians and parties compete for funding in election campaigns run by the advertising industry, to give political investors the most corrupt President, administration and Congress that money can buy, while courts uphold new corporate and plutocratic political rights to ward off challenges to the closed circle of wealth and political power.

Oligarchic corporate control of the media is a critical element in this dystopian system. Under the genius of inverted totalitarianism, a confluence of corrupt interests has built a more effective and durable propaganda system than direct government control has ever achieved.

The editor or media executive who amplifies government and corporate propaganda and suppresses alternative narratives is not generally doing so on orders from the government, but in the interest of his own career, his company's success in the corporate oligarchy or "marketplace," and his responsibility not to provide a platform for radical or "irrelevant" ideas.

In this context, a common pattern in five recent cases illustrates how the U.S. government and media systematically deceive the public on critical foreign policy issues, to generate public hostility toward foreign governments and to suppress domestic opposition to economic sanctions and to the threat and use of military force.

1. Non-Existent WMDs in Iraq. This is the case we all know about. U.S. officials made claims they knew were false when they made them, and the media faithfully and uncritically amplified them to make the case for war. The result was the destruction of Iraq in a war based on lies. At meetings in 2001, according to Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, CIA Director George Tenet consistently told the National Security Council (NSC) that that the CIA had no "confirming intelligence" that Iraq possessed nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

When Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld laid out the Pentagon's plans to invade Iraq, Tenet reiterated that it was still only speculation that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Eying the junior staffers in the room, Rumsfeld replied, "I'm not sure everyone here has clearance to hear this."

Senior officials knew their case for war was weak and unsubstantiated, but they treated the weakness of their case as a closely guarded state secret to be kept from the public, up to and including staffers at NSC meetings. They set up the Office of Special Plans at the Pentagon to "stovepipe" unvetted intelligence directly to senior officials to bolster the case for war, bypassing the review process that is supposed to filter intelligence for accuracy and reliability.

As the head of MI6 told the British cabinet in July 2002, "the intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy." Chief UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter revealed how MI6 planted unsubstantiated stories in newspapers around the world to make the case for war. In June 2002, the CIA-backed Iraqi National Congress revealed that its "Information Collection Program" was the primary source for 108 media reports on Iraq's WMDs and links to terrorism over the past eight months.

In July 2002, Ritter told CNN, "No one has substantiated the allegations that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction," but CNN enthusiastically – and profitably – joined the rush to war.

When Congress debated the 2002 Iraq war resolution, the administration gave members a 25-page document it advertised as a summary of a new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq. The document was pure propaganda, produced months before the NIE, and included false claims that were nowhere to be found in the NIE, such as that the CIA knew the location of 550 sites in Iraq where chemical and biological agents were stored.

Sen. Bob Graham, D-Florida, chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, begged his colleagues to instead read the classified NIE, dramatically warning them, "Blood is going to be on your hands." Only six Senators and a handful of Representatives did so, but the media clung to the propaganda narrative that the White House and Congress had seen "the same intelligence."

In his 2003 State of the Union speech, President George W. Bush cited gaps in Iraq's accounting for weapons it destroyed in 1991 as a continuing threat, from 25,000 liters of anthrax to 500 tons of Sarin, VX nerve agent and mustard gas. Of all these, only mustard gas would have still been potent 12 years later – if it had existed.

Bush pretended that 81-mm aluminum rocket casings were tubes for centrifuges, a claim already dismissed by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and that Iraq was buying uranium in Niger based on a forgery that the IAEA spotted within hours. But Bush's deceptive fear-mongering was uncritically embraced and amplified by the U.S. media.

Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council in February 2003 contained at least a dozen categorical but false statements about Iraqi weapons, based on recordings and photographs deliberately misinterpreted by the Iraqi National Congress and CIA agents. Security Council members were unconvinced, but the U.S. media uniformly and enthusiastically endorsed Powell's "slam-dunk" case for war.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) found that U.S. media coverage was unashamedly pro-war during the critical weeks leading up to the invasion, with only three anti-war voices among 393 "expert" interviews on major TV networks. A total of 76 percent of interviewees were present or former government officials, of whom only 6 percent were critical of the case for war, even as a CBS poll found that 61 percent of the public wanted to "wait and give the United Nations and weapons inspectors more time."

The election of President Barack Obama was a chance for the U.S. to make a clean break from the destructive and deceptive policies of the Bush administration. But the U.S. propaganda system has instead evolved to embrace even more sophisticated techniques of branding and image-making, not least to

build a deep sense of trust into the iconic image of a hip celebrity-in-chief with roots in African-American and modern urban culture.

The contrast between image and reality, so essential to Obama's role, represents a new achievement in managed democracy, enabling him to maintain and expand policies that are the polar opposite of the change his supporters thought they were voting for.

2. Non-Existent WMDs in Iran. Incredibly, after their exposure and embarrassment over Iraq, the U.S. government and media didn't skip a beat but immediately recycled their WMD narrative to justify a similar campaign of sanctions and threats against Iran.

We are finally on a more promising diplomatic trajectory, but it is still taboo for U.S. politicians or media to admit that Iran has almost certainly never had a nuclear weapons program, and the U.S. propaganda narrative still insists that a decade of brutal economic warfare has played a constructive role to "bring Iran to the table." Nothing could be farther from the truth.

A 2012 study by the International Crisis Group found that ever-tightening sanctions had "almost no chance of producing an Iranian climb-down any time soon," and could end up leading to war, not offering an alternative to it – just as in Iraq.

As Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif remarked in November 2014, "The effect of sanctions can be seen in how many centrifuges are spinning in Iran. When we began the sanctions process, Iran had less than 200 centrifuges. Today it has over 20,000." Zarif also reiterated Iran's long-standing position that, "Nuclear weapons don't serve our strategic interests and are against the core principles of our faith."

Trita Parsi (president of the National Iranian American Council), Mohammed ElBaradei (former IAEA director-general), and Gareth Porter (an award-winning investigative reporter/historian) have each written enlightening books that demolish critical elements of the U.S. propaganda campaign against Iran:

In *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy With Iran*, Trita Parsi explained that Obama's "dual-track approach", combining negotiations with sanctions, was a political compromise to appease doves and hawks in Washington. But this was a prescription for failure in the real world, because the two tracks were incompatible and the sanctions track gave the hardliners on both sides the upper hand.

After Brazil and Turkey persuaded Iran to agree to a comprehensive proposal offered by the U.S. only months earlier, the U.S. rejected its own plan because

it would undermine its efforts to pass new sanctions in the UN Security Council. A senior State Department official told Parsi that the main obstacle to resolving the crisis was the U.S. inability to take “Yes” for an answer.

In *The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times*, ElBaradei recounted how the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies kept providing the IAEA with supposed “evidence” of an Iranian nuclear weapons program, but, just as in Iraq, there was nothing there to find.

Despite the “Key Lessons” of UNMOVIC’s final report on Iraq that UN inspection agencies should not be used “to support other agendas or to keep the inspected party in a permanent state of weakness,” nor be given the impossible political task of “proving the negative,” ElBaradei found himself back in exactly that position, even as the IAEA was already fulfilling its legitimate task of monitoring all Iran’s nuclear material and facilities.

Gareth Porter has maybe done more than anyone to expose the bankruptcy of the U.S. propaganda narrative on Iran. In *Manufactured Crisis: the Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, he explained how this entire campaign has been based on falsehoods and fabrications for two decades.

There is no real evidence that Iran has ever taken the first step toward weaponizing its civilian nuclear program, and each suggestion that it has is based on sloppy analysis poisoned by mistrust and false assumptions, or in some cases on evidence actually fabricated by Iran’s enemies, like the infamous “laptop documents” that were most likely supplied by the Mujahedeen-e-Kalq (MEK).

And yet mainstream media reports in the U.S. still parrot the false premises of an unjust campaign of economic warfare that has devastated Iran’s economy and the lives of its people, to say nothing of cyber-warfare, the assassinations of four innocent Iranian scientists, and threats of war.

In the U.S. media narrative, we are still the “good guys,” and the Iranians are still the “bad guys” who can’t be trusted. But, of course, that’s the whole point. The underlying purpose of campaigns like this is to frame U.S. disputes with other countries in Manichean terms to justify brutally unfair and dangerous policies.

3. Sarin Attack at Ghouta in Syria. Hundreds of Syrian civilians were killed by a missile filled with about 60 kg of the nerve agent Sarin on Aug. 21, 2013. U.S. officials immediately blamed the Syrian Army and President Bashar Al-Assad. President Obama was soon ready to launch a massive assault on Syria’s air defenses and other targets, a major escalation of the covert, proxy war he

had been waging since 2011.

Three weeks after the Sarin attack, Obama declared in a televised speech, "Assad's government gassed to death over a thousand people... we know the Assad regime was responsible." Following reports by UN investigators and investigative journalists with good access to U.S. military and intelligence sources, it now seems almost certain that the chemical attack was conducted by Jabhat Al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria) or other rebel forces, with help from either Turkish or Qatari military intelligence.

The missile was fired from a rebel-held area 2 km from its point of impact, only a fraction of the distance to the Syrian military base from where U.S. officials claimed it was fired, and the chemical impurities in the Sarin suggest that it was improvised, not military-grade.

The question of motive suggests that this was a rebel "false-flag" attack that almost succeeded in drawing the U.S. deeper into the war, acting as the air force of Al-Nusra and its allies. On the other side, there is no plausible reason why the Syrian government could have expected to gain by conducting such an attack (especially since UN inspectors had just arrived in Damascus to begin a study of another chemical attack that had been blamed on the rebels).

The "Who Attacked Ghouta?" web site is a good effort to bring together and analyze all the evidence, and both Seymour Hersh and Robert Parry have written good articles based on U.S. intelligence sources. But U.S. officials and media pundits still talk as if their dangerous and irresponsible charges are beyond question.

Their assertions are so well established in the U.S. media that they have effectively become part of American popular culture. When Americans think of President Assad, they think "gassed his own people."

When we examine the words and actions of President Obama, Secretary Kerry and other U.S. officials, only one thing is certain: that their expressions of certainty regarding responsibility for the chemical attack were false, both then and now. Like Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Powell, they simply lied when they told the world that the intelligence pointed only in one direction.

As in other cases, this was a deliberate propaganda strategy to so strongly establish a false narrative in the mind of the public that it would be hard to dislodge, even once evidence emerged that it was probably just plain wrong.

As we watch this strategy play out in each of these cases, we can see that Iraq was the exception that proved the rule, the case where U.S. propagandists were caught out and embarrassed before the American public and the whole world. But

this has not stopped them or their successors from doubling down on the same propaganda strategy, nor has its exposure in Iraq rendered it ineffective as a means of misleading the public in other cases.

4. Who shot down Malaysian Airlines MH17? President Vladimir Putin is the latest foreign leader to be targeted by a classic U.S. vilification campaign.

Since the State Department and CIA engineered a violent coup in Ukraine that literally tore that country apart, U.S. politicians and media have marched in lockstep to pretend that the crisis was caused, not by the U.S.-backed overthrow of the elected government, but by Russia's subsequent reintegration of the Crimea based on a popular referendum.

Almost 5,000 people (with some estimates even higher) have been killed as the Western-backed government that seized power in Kiev has dispatched its Army and new National Guard units to attack cities in Eastern Ukraine. It recruited some of them, like the Azov Brigade, from the neo-Nazi Svoboda and Right Sektor militias who provided the muscle for the coup in February.

The Russian-speaking people in the eastern Ukraine expect no mercy or justice from these anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalists, so they fight on despite heavy losses and dire conditions, with limited support from Russia. Like the chemical weapons attack in Syria, U.S. officials and media immediately blamed the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines MH-17 on U.S. enemies and claimed once again that the evidence pointed only in one direction. But once again, the only thing that is sure is that they can't be sure of that.

A Dutch team is leading an investigation, as each side accuses the other of responsibility. Concerns about the impartiality of the investigation have led to calls for a fully independent investigation, including a public online petition. U.S. officials and media claim that the airliner was shot down by a Russian surface-to-air missile fired by Ukrainian rebels.

An alternative narrative is that it was shot down by one of two Ukrainian fighter planes that were reported to be tailing it. The cockpit appears to be riddled with bullet-holes, but these might have been caused by shrapnel from an exploding missile. But the only forces known to have deployed such missiles in the area were Ukrainian government forces, so the Western narrative remains doubtful at best.

Even if the rebels captured and fired a Ukrainian missile, there is no evidence of Russian involvement. Yet the U.S. used Russia's presumed guilt to trigger new U.S. and European Union sanctions against Russia, taking the world ever closer to the "new Cold War" that Mikhail Gorbachev warned of recently in Berlin.

The petition for an independent inquiry reads, "With the U.S. and Russia in possession of 15,000 of the world's 16,400 nuclear weapons, humanity can ill-afford to stand by and permit these conflicting views of history and opposing assessments of the facts on the ground to lead to a 21st century military confrontation between the great powers and their allies."

But by engineering a coup in Ukraine and rejecting reasonable Russian proposals to resolve the crisis, U.S. leaders have deliberately provoked such a confrontation. The U.S. media have provided political cover, blaming everything on Russia and President Putin, to give U.S. leaders the political space to play the most dangerous game known to mankind: nuclear brinkmanship.

5. North Korea vs. Sony? Now the U.S. is imposing new sanctions on North Korea based on claims that it is behind a cyber-attack on the Sony Corporation. Once again, U.S. officials claim to be sure of their accusations. And once again, the only sure thing is that they're only pretending to be sure, in this case risking a new conflict with a government whose actions they've consistently failed to accurately predict or understand for decades.

Cyber-security experts are already challenging the U.S. narrative. Marc Rogers of Cloudflare, who manages cyber-security at hacker conferences, thinks the attack on Sony was probably the work of a vengeful ex-employee. He wrote in an article for Daily Beast, "I am no fan of the North Korean regime. However I believe that calling out a foreign nation over a cyber-crime of this magnitude should never have been undertaken on such weak evidence."

But calling out foreign nations on weak evidence is an essential core element of U.S. propaganda strategy. U.S. officials quickly and loudly establish the narrative they want the public to believe, and leave it to the echo chamber of the complicit U.S. media system to do the rest. The media's roles are then to "work the story" through rote repetition and supporting analysis, and to suppress and ridicule alternative narratives.

U.S. officials believe they can win a global propaganda war, much as they think they won the Cold War. But they seem to be losing the global struggle for hearts and minds. The Obama charm offensive is wearing thin and worldwide opinion polls consistently identify the U.S. as the greatest threat to peace.

On the domestic front, as the lies that clothe our emperor and our empire become ever more transparent, Americans are inevitably growing more skeptical than ever of politicians and the media. Skepticism in the face of propaganda is vital, but the post-WW II record low turnout in the November 2014 election (36.4 percent) suggests that more Americans are reacting to the corruption of our political and media environment with disengagement than with the kind of activism that could

awaken the sleeping giant of democracy.

But this is only one stage of a long and complex history. Growing democratic activism and independent media are the green shoots of a grassroots renewal of democratic politics that offers real solutions to our country's problems, not least to rein in its dangerous and destabilizing foreign policy and the web of lies that sustains it.

One thing we can do, in the words of Bob Dylan, is to let the masters of war and their media hacks know we can see through their masks.

Nicolas J. S. Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. Davies also wrote the chapter on "Obama At War" for the book, *Grading the 44th President: A Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

The Danger of an MH-17 'Cold Case'

Exclusive: The Obama administration continues to drag its feet on releasing U.S. intelligence evidence on who shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 six months ago, a failure that has given the guilty parties time to scatter and has created a new breeding ground for conspiracy theories, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Now more than six months after the shoot-down of a Malaysia Airlines plane over Ukraine, the refusal of the Obama administration to make public what intelligence evidence it has about who was responsible has created fertile ground for conspiracy theories to take root while reducing hopes for holding the guilty parties accountable.

Given the U.S. government's surveillance capabilities from satellite and aerial photographs to telephonic and electronic intercepts to human sources American intelligence surely has a good idea what happened on July 17, 2014, when Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed in eastern Ukraine killing all 298 people onboard.

I'm told that President Barack Obama has received briefings on what this evidence shows and what U.S. intelligence analysts have concluded about the likely guilty parties – and that Obama may have shared some of those confidential findings with the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak when they

met on Dec. 24 in Hawaii.

But the U.S. government has gone largely silent on the subject after its initial rush to judgment pointing fingers at ethnic Russian rebels for allegedly firing the missile and at the Russian government for supposedly supplying a sophisticated Buk anti-aircraft battery capable of bringing down the aircraft at 33,000 feet.

Since that early flurry of unverified charges, only snippets of U.S. and NATO intelligence findings have reached the public and last October's interim Dutch investigative report on the cause of the crash indicated that Western governments had not shared crucial information.

The Dutch Safety Board's interim report answered few questions, beyond confirming that MH-17 apparently was destroyed by "high-velocity objects that penetrated the aircraft from outside." Other key questions went begging, such as what to make of the Russian military radar purporting to show a Ukrainian SU-25 jetfighter in the area, a claim that the Kiev government denied.

Either the Russian radar showed the presence of a jetfighter "gaining height" as it closed to within three to five kilometers of the passenger plane as the Russians claimed in a July 21 press conference or it didn't. The Kiev authorities insisted that they had no military aircraft in the area at the time.

But the 34-page Dutch report was silent on the jetfighter question, although noting that the investigators had received Air Traffic Control "surveillance data from the Russian Federation." The report also was silent on the "dog-not-barking" issue of whether the U.S. government had satellite surveillance that revealed exactly where the supposed ground-to-air missile was launched and who may have fired it.

The Obama administration has asserted knowledge about those facts, but the U.S. government has withheld satellite photos and other intelligence information that could presumably corroborate the charge. Curiously, too, the Dutch report said the investigation received "satellite imagery taken in the days after the occurrence." Obviously, the more relevant images in assessing blame would be aerial photography in the days and hours before the crash.

In mid-July, eastern Ukraine was a high priority for U.S. intelligence and a Buk missile battery is a large system that should have been easily picked up by U.S. aerial reconnaissance. The four missiles in a battery are each about 16-foot-long and would have to be hauled around by a truck and then put in position to fire.

The Dutch report's reference to only post-crash satellite photos was also

curious because the Russian military released a number of satellite images purporting to show Ukrainian government Buk missile systems north of the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk before the attack, including two batteries that purportedly were shifted 50 kilometers south of Donetsk on July 17, the day of the crash, and then removed by July 18.

Russian Claims

Russian Lt. Gen. Andrey Kartoplov called on the Ukrainian government to explain the movements of its Buk systems and why Kiev's Kupol-M19S18 radars, which coordinate the flight of Buk missiles, showed increased activity leading up to the July 17 shoot-down.

The Ukrainian government countered these questions by asserting that it had "evidence that the missile which struck the plane was fired by terrorists, who received arms and specialists from the Russian Federation," according to Andrey Lysenko, spokesman for Ukraine's Security Council, using Kiev's preferred term for the rebels.

Lysenko added: "To disown this tragedy, [Russian officials] are drawing a lot of pictures and maps. We will explore any photos and other plans produced by the Russian side." But Ukrainian authorities have failed to address the Russian evidence except through broad denials.

On July 29, amid escalating rhetoric against Russia from U.S. government officials and the Western news media, the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity called on President Obama to release what evidence the U.S. government had on the shoot-down, including satellite imagery.

"As intelligence professionals we are embarrassed by the unprofessional use of partial intelligence information," the group wrote. "As Americans, we find ourselves hoping that, if you indeed have more conclusive evidence, you will find a way to make it public without further delay. In charging Russia with being directly or indirectly responsible, Secretary of State John Kerry has been particularly definitive. Not so the evidence. His statements seem premature and bear earmarks of an attempt to 'poison the jury pool.'"

However, the Obama administration failed to make public any intelligence information that would back up its earlier suppositions. In early August, I was told that some U.S. intelligence analysts had begun shifting away from the original scenario blaming the rebels and Russia to one focused more on the possibility that extremist elements of the Ukrainian government were responsible.

A source who was briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts told me that they had

found no evidence that the Russian government had given the rebels a BUK missile system. Thus, these analysts concluded that the rebels and Russia were likely not at fault and that it appeared Ukrainian government forces were to blame, although apparently a unit operating outside the direct command of Ukraine's top officials.

The source specifically said the U.S. intelligence evidence did not implicate Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko or Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk but rather suggested an extremist element of the armed forces funded by one of Ukraine's oligarchs. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Flight 17 Shoot-down Scenario Shifts](#)" and "[Was Putin Targeted for Mid-air Assassination?](#)"]

But then chatter about U.S. intelligence information on the shoot-down faded away. When I recently re-contacted the source who had been briefed by these analysts, the source said their thinking had not changed, except that they believed the missile may have been less sophisticated than a Buk, possibly an SA-6.

What was less clear was whether these analysts represented a consensus view within the U.S. intelligence community or whether they spoke for one position in an ongoing debate. The source also said President Obama was resisting going public with the U.S. intelligence information about the shoot-down because he didn't feel it was ironclad.

A Dangerous Void

But that void has left the debate over whodunit vulnerable to claims by self-interested parties and self-appointed experts, including some who derive their conclusions from social media on the Internet, so-called "public-source investigators." The Obama administration also hasn't retracted the early declarations by Secretary Kerry implicating the rebels and Russia.

Just days after the crash, Kerry went on all five Sunday talk shows fingering Russia and the rebels and citing evidence provided by the Ukrainian government through social media. On NBC's "Meet the Press," David Gregory asked, "Are you bottom-lining here that Russia provided the weapon?"

Kerry: "There's a story today confirming that, but we have not within the Administration made a determination. But it's pretty clear when there's a build-up of extraordinary circumstantial evidence. I'm a former prosecutor. I've tried cases on circumstantial evidence; it's powerful here." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Kerry's Latest Reckless Rush to Judgment.](#)"]

But some U.S. intelligence analysts soon offered conflicting assessments. After Kerry's TV round-robin, the Los Angeles Times [reported](#) on a U.S. intelligence

briefing given to several mainstream U.S. news outlets. The story said, “U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [a Buk anti-aircraft missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Mystery of a Ukrainian ‘Defector.’”](#)]

In October, Der Spiegel reported that the German intelligence service, the BND, had concluded that Russia was not the source of the missile battery that it had been captured from a Ukrainian military base but still blaming the rebels for firing it. The BND also concluded that photos supplied by the Ukrainian government about the MH-17 tragedy “have been manipulated,” Der Spiegel reported.

And, the BND disputed Russian government claims that a Ukrainian fighter jet had been flying close to MH-17 just before it crashed, the magazine said, reporting on the BND’s briefing to a parliamentary committee on Oct. 8, which included satellite images and other photography. But none of the BND’s evidence was made public, and I was subsequently told by a European official that the evidence was not as conclusive as the magazine article depicted. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Germans Clear Russia in MH-17 Case.”](#)]

So, it appears that there have been significant disagreements within Western intelligence circles about precisely who was to blame. But the refusal of the Obama administration and its NATO allies to lay their evidence on the table has not only opened the door to conspiracy theories, it has threatened to turn this tragedy into a cold case with the guilty parties whoever they are having more time to cover their tracks and disappear.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions

Today’s American foreign policy “elite” rarely thinks through the dangerous consequences of its “tough-guy” actions, including its new plan to provoke

economic and political chaos in nuclear-armed Russia, a “strategy” that is also spreading pain and disorder to Europe, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

Last month, as President Barack Obama prepared to sign tougher sanctions legislation aimed at Russia, the top White House economist, Jason Furman, boasted that the West’s economic warfare was already bringing Russia to its knees.

“If I was chairman of President (Vladimir) Putin’s Council of Economic Advisers, I would be extremely concerned,” Furman said. Declaring that Putin and his circle were “between a rock and a hard place in economic policy,” Furman crowed that “the combination of our sanctions, the uncertainty they’ve created for themselves with their international actions and the falling price of oil has put their economy on the brink of crisis.”

There’s no denying the perilous state of Russia’s economy. One month earlier, Russia’s Finance Minister Anton Siluanov had predicted that sanctions and lower oil prices would cost the Russian economy as much as \$140 billion, equal to about 7 percent of GDP. Over the course of 2014, the ruble lost 46 percent of its value, only to drop another 7 percent on the first day of trading in 2015. Russia’s central bank estimates that the country suffered net capital outflows of \$134 billion last year, setting the stage for a painful depression.

“We are going through a trying period, difficult times at the moment,” Putin conceded to a large group of international reporters only days after Furman’s comments.

But as scholars and pundits have been telling us for years, in today’s globalized world, no major problem, economic, political, or military, stays local for long. Punishing Russia for its annexation of Crimea and its continuing support for Ukrainian rebels is likely to create a host of unintended and costly repercussions for the United States and Europe.

Unlike some targets of U.S. sanctions, like Cuba or North Korea, Russian’s economy is big enough to matter. Its free-fall may well drag the precarious EU economies part way down with it.

Asked by Bloomberg whether the world could see a financial contagion result from Russia’s economic plight, West Shore Funds Chief Global Strategist James Rickards said, “I think we will. This resembles 1997-98 more than it resembles the 2007-8 panic. Remember that started in Thailand in June 1997, then it spread to Indonesia, then to South Korea, blood on the streets in both place, people were killed in riots, then it spread to Russia. . . . It was the classic example

of contagion.”

Rickards added, “there’s a lot of dollar-denominated corporate debt [in Russia] that they may not be able to pay. . . . If that stuff starts to default, who owns it? Well, it’s owned by U.S. mutual fund investors, it’s in 401Ks, some of it’s in European banks. If you own Banco Santander and Banco Santander has a big slug of Russian corporate debt, how does it go down? They can point a finger at the Russians, but when that debt goes down, it’s going to come back to haunt us.”

That’s hardly a fringe concern. Thomas Friedman has also sounded the alarm: “Russia’s decline is bad for Russians, but that doesn’t mean it is good for us. When the world gets this interconnected and interdependent, you get a strategic reverse: Your friends, through economic mismanagement (see Greece), can harm you faster than your enemies.

“And your rivals falling (see Russia and China) can be more dangerous than your rivals rising. If Russia, an economy spanning nine time zones, goes into recession and cannot pay foreign lenders with its lower oil revenues, and all this leads to political turmoil and defaults to Western banks, that crash will be felt globally.”

Europe’s Doubts

European leaders appear to be having second thoughts about the wisdom of playing a game of economic chicken when their own national economies are so weak. Austrian, French, German and Italian leaders, meeting at a Brussels summit in December, all warned that Russia’s financial crisis could blow back against their own economies.

“The goal was never to push Russia politically and economically into chaos,” said Germany’s Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel.

In a similar spirit, French President François Hollande told a radio interviewer that sanctions, which included the cancellation of the delivery of two Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia, were both unnecessary and counterproductive.

“Mr. Putin does not want to annex eastern Ukraine,” Hollande said. “What he wants is to remain influential. What Mr. Putin wants is that Ukraine not become a member of NATO.” As for sanctions, Hollande said, “I’m not for the policy of attaining goals by making things worse. I think that sanctions must stop now.”

Such concerns did not dissuade Congress last month from unanimously passing tough new bans on financing and technology transfers, along with \$350 million in

arms and military equipment to the Ukraine and \$90 million for anti-Putin propaganda and political operations in Russia. Former Rep. Dennis Kucinich noted that this momentous legislation passed the House of Representatives late at night with only three members present.

Careful What You Wish For

Promiscuous use of sanctions against Russia and a host of other international targets ironically could come back to haunt the United States by undermining the very neo-liberal principles it has championed for decades to undergird U.S. economic expansion.

Putin sounded more like a leader of the Trilateral Commission than an ex-KGB officer when he warned last fall, "Sanctions are already undermining the foundations of world trade, the WTO rules and the principle of inviolability of private property. They are dealing a blow to [the] liberal model of globalization based on markets, freedom and competition, which, let me note, is a model that has primarily benefited precisely the Western countries.

"And now they risk losing trust as the leaders of globalization. We have to ask ourselves, why was this necessary? After all, the United States' prosperity rests in large part on the trust of investors and foreign holders of dollars and U.S. securities. This trust is clearly being undermined and signs of disappointment in the fruits of globalization are visible now in many countries."

Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group and foreign affairs columnist for *Time* magazine, echoed Putin's comments in his recent global survey, "Top Risks 2015," which warned that "American unilateralism is stoking dangerous trends" around the world. "I'm very far from a pessimist, but for the first time since starting the firm in 1998, I'm starting to feel a serious undercurrent of geopolitical foreboding."

With regard to economic sanctions, Bremmer observed, "The most important near-term challenge is the damage inflicted on transatlantic relations. Europe will become more frustrated with an American unilateralism that Europe (and European banks) must pay for. Also, the U.S. could well slap new sanctions on Russia and/or Iran, eliciting a backlash in 2015.

"Over the longer term, though, others will diversify away from reliance on the dollar and U.S.-dominated institutions, particularly in East Asia, where China has the muscle and the motive to create its own institutions, and where there is less dollar-denominated debt to complicate the process. . . .

"And a fat tail concern for 2015, also related to the rise of strategic sectors:

Governments targeted by sanctions will increasingly treat companies that comply with them as instruments of American power. This will expose these firms to heightened risks of retaliation from regulatory harassment to contract discrimination to cyber-attacks. The U.S. financial sector is particularly vulnerable on this count.”

Political Repercussions

The long-term consequences of such sanctions could extend far beyond the cost to our own and other Western economies. Already U.S.-Russian cooperation on arms control has been imperiled. Pushed to the wall, Russia may decline to continue its essential cooperation with regard to resupply corridors into Afghanistan, the Iran nuclear negotiations, and a political settlement in Syria, all of which rank far higher in any rational list of priorities than the fate of the Eastern Ukraine.

As Bremmer warned, “A Kremlin that feels antagonized and isolated but not substantially constrained is a dangerous prospect. An aggressively revisionist yet increasingly weak Russia will be a volatile actor on the global stage in 2015, posing a top risk to Western governments and businesses throughout the year.” He predicted the possibility of more stealth cyber-attacks, confrontations with NATO, and tighter bonding between Russia and China at the expense of the West.

If, as many Russians believe, the real aim of sanctions is regime change, just as President Richard Nixon promoted a military coup against Chile’s Salvador Allende by ordering policies to “make the economy scream”, most observers agree the West could end up with a far more antagonistic regime post-Putin.

In the short run, of course, sanctions simply inflame Russian nationalism and bolster Putin’s popularity. But in the longer run, observed Russia expert Angus Roxburgh in *The Guardian*, “Pouring fuel on Kremlin clan wars that we barely understand would be the height of folly. We have no idea what the outcome might be and it could be much worse than what we have at present.”

The longer the Ukraine conflict simmers, the more extremists on both sides gain leverage. Writing last September in *The Moscow Times*, Natalia Yudina noted that “a significant number of right-wing Russian radicals are now actively fighting in Ukraine. Whereas they previously took part in social networks, historic war battle reenactment groups and all sorts of quasi-military training camps, they are now gaining real-world combat experience.

“Following the conclusion of the conflict, most will inevitably return to Russia, where their long-standing dreams of staging a ‘Russian revolt’ or

'white revolution' will no longer seem so difficult an accomplishment. And that means that one more consequence of this war will be a sharp escalation of activity by right-wing radicals , only this time, in Russia itself."

Without a crystal ball, we have no way of knowing whether the new cold war with Russia will thaw or go into a deeper freeze. But it seems abundantly clear that economic sanctions and political confrontation over the fate of the Eastern Ukraine magnify the risks to global order far out of proportion to any real U.S. and Western interests.

It's worth remembering, with the centenary of World War I just past, that economic collapse and social disruption are more likely to sow the seeds of extremism and conflict than to make the world safe for democracy. If policy makers look to history for policy guidance, they would be well advised to study the lessons of Versailles rather than staying fixated on those of Munich.

Jonathan Marshall is an independent researcher living in San Anselmo, California. His last articles for Consortiumnews were "[Unjust Aftermath: Post-Noriega Panama](#)"; "[The Earlier 9/11 Acts of Terror](#)"; and "[America's Earlier Embrace of Torture](#)."

The Battle over Dr. King's Message

From the Archive: Martin Luther King Day is a rare moment in American life when people reflect even if only briefly on the ideals that guided Dr. King's life and led to his death. Thus, the struggle over his message is intense, pitting a bland conventional view against a radical call for profound change, says Brian J. Trautman.

By Brian J. Trautman (Originally published on Jan. 20, 2014)

Most Americans know Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the Twentieth Century's most revered voices for racial equality, the charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement, who gave the famous "*I Have A Dream*" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Perhaps they even know a thing or two about his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Campaign.

This knowledge, by and large, derives from compulsory education and mainstream media. It is significantly less likely, however, that very many Americans know much at all, if anything, about King's radical and controversial activities related to the issues of poverty and militarism, particularly the latter.

King highlighted three primary forms of violence, oppression and injustice in American society and across the world: poverty, racism and militarism. He referred to these as the "triple evils," and considered them to be interrelated problems, existing in a vicious and intractable cycle, and standing as formidable barriers to achieving the Beloved Community, a brotherly society built upon and nurtured by love, nonviolence, peace and justice. King posited that when we resisted any one evil, we in turn weakened all evils, but that a measurable and lasting impact would require us to address all three.

King's work to educate about and eradicate poverty was among his greatest passions. In "*The Octopus of Poverty*," a statement appearing in *The Mennonite* in 1965, King observed, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it." Accordingly, "the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."

He strongly believed "the rich nations," namely the United States, had a moral responsibility to care for its most vulnerable populations, noting that such "nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed." King held, "ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation," and maintained that "no individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.'"

In late 1967, King announced the Poor People's Campaign, an innovative effort designed to educate Americans on poverty issues and recruit both poor people and antipoverty activists for nonviolent social change. The priority of the project was to march on, and to occupy, if you will, Washington and to demand the Congress pass meaningful legislation to improve the social and economic status of the poor, through directed measures such as jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, decent homes, a fair minimum wage, and education.

Alas, Dr. King was assassinated only weeks before the actual march took place. And while the march went ahead as planned in May of 1968, it is thought that the lack of substantive change to result was due in large part to King's absence. Still, a positive outcome of the initiative was a heightened public awareness of the nation's growing poor population.

Perhaps most controversial were King's positions on militarism and U.S. foreign policy. In "*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*" published in 1967, King said of war and its consequences: "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped, psychologically deranged, cannot be

reconciled with wisdom, justice and love.” He cautioned that “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

King’s most pointed speech against militarism was “*Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*,” delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated. While King’s popularity among political allies and his inner circle was already beginning to wane because of his increasing public criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the growing war in Vietnam, the *Beyond Vietnam* speech was to become his most public dissent of the war to date, a war still largely unopposed by the majority.

To speak out in opposition to the war, he acknowledged, was personally necessitated, asserting, “because my conscience leaves me no other choice.” With such a call to conscience, “a time comes when silence is betrayal.” And in the present day, argued King, “that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.”

In the speech King calls the United States “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” and questions why money is being spent to wage war on foreign lands against foreign people while the war on poverty at home was being neglected, financially and otherwise. The major media of the time denounced the speech and King lost a great deal of support among his colleagues and the American people for it.

We owe it ourselves and our children and grandchildren, as well as our communities and nation to learn and teach about and take up King’s efforts focused not only on ending racism but all three of the evils against which he untiringly stood. Only then will we find ourselves closer to achieving King’s dream of the Beloved Community.

A small but important step toward this goal is to volunteer, as my family and I do, with a charitable and progressive cause on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, a national day of service.

Brian J. Trautman writes for [PeaceVoice](#), is a military veteran, an instructor of peace studies at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and a peace activist. On Twitter @TrautBri.

MLK and the Curse of ‘Moderation’

From the Archive: When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail to focus national attention on the injustice of segregation, he was stung by criticism

from Christian clergy who feared upsetting the status quo and urged “moderation,” prompting his historic rejoinder from the Birmingham jail, as Rev. Howard Bess recalls.

By Rev. Howard Bess (Originally published Jan. 24, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr. was my contemporary, a person whom I supported in his demand for full inclusion of people of color in the life of America. Yet, as that history played out, I did not fully realize the greatness of King and the significance of the events of the late Fifties and the early Sixties.

As we look back on those events, there are an endless number of reasons why Dr. King’s statue stands on the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, and why King’s birthday is a national holiday.

I have read his writings, and his “I Have a Dream” speech is etched on my heart and mind. But I believe his letter to clergy, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” is his greatest communication articulating his cause and one of the great documents of American history.

I marvel at the document because it was written from a jail cell where King had no access to reference materials. The date of the letter was April 16, 1963, when the modern civil rights movement for people of color was still relatively young, but the movement was becoming stronger and the opposition was becoming more entrenched.

The letter came from what was stored in King’s maturing mind. He wrote on whatever scraps of paper he could find, addressing the letter to “My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” a group of clergy who had written a letter to King to discourage his coming to Birmingham. These clergy counseled patience and moderation and questioned why King, as an “outsider” had come to their Alabama community.

In the letter, King wrote, “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’” Then, he responded by saying that Negroes had waited long enough and that “moderation” was not useful in righting wrongs of segregation that had been inflicted on African-Americans over generations:

“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian

call for aid.”

In the letter, King called not for moderation or patience but for non-violent and peaceful extremism, arguing that clergymen , the very people who should be at the forefront calling for justice in the name of Jesus, were betraying the Christian gospel by calling for moderation and gradualism. King wrote:

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.”

Disappointing Churches

King’s letter moves on to express his “disappointment with the churches.” King was an ordained Baptist minister, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He had been nurtured and educated by churches and their institutions. He loved the churches, knew church history, and knew that movements to reform society and to deliver society from injustice many times had come from churches and clergy. He wrote:

“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

“I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the

church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

“When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

“In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings.

“Over and over I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?’

“Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”

Pinnacle of a Message

Most reviewers of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. see his “I Have a Dream” speech as the high point of his career. I beg to differ. Birmingham and the letter may have been the pinnacle of his career as he confronted not simply society but Christian churches and their clergy.

The Letter from Birmingham Jail was published in leading Christian publications and in the nation’s most read newspapers. His confrontation with moderation was blunt yet gracious. Segregation and injustice were not his primary targets,

rather he turned his searchlight of truth-telling on all those who took refuge in moderation.

Not many of those clergy in Birmingham may have understood the significance of King's rejoinder, but a large part of the nation took note. Many believe that it was the Letter from Birmingham Jail that pushed President John F. Kennedy to initiate civil rights legislation.

Moderation in the face of injustice has been the great disease of Christian churches. The vast majority of Christian clergy are hiding behind the mission of saving souls while ignoring the social teachings of Jesus, the one they claim to serve as their Lord. These clergymen play the game of advocating the cause of social justice but only with great moderation.

On a related front, I have been involved in the struggle for full acceptance of people who are gay for over 40 years. I have taken my lumps because of my outspoken insistence that gay people be fully accepted in the life of our churches and in American society.

I have been shunned, had employment disrupted and was dis-fellowshipped, not because I am gay but for speaking out about injustice toward gays. In recent years, however, full acceptance of gay people in America has made great progress, though we still have a long way to go.

Kind, loving, peaceful extremists for justice are in short supply in our nation and especially in our Christian churches.

In the Jan. 13, 2014 edition of Sports Illustrated, columnist Phil Taylor took on the National Football League for its tolerance of homophobia in the league. He cited the case of punter Chris Kluwe, formerly of the Minnesota Vikings. No one was suggesting that Kluwe is gay. He is, however, a vocal advocate of gay marriage and full rights for LGBT persons. His coach counseled him toward moderation. Even though he was identified as one of the league's best punters, Kluwe is now unemployed, a free agent.

Taylor's column makes the case that the National Football League is homophobic from headquarters to owners, to coaches, to the locker room. Gay players (there are believed to be many) in the NFL will remain tightly closeted.

Justice was a centerpiece of the life work of Jesus. As Americans we confess that justice is for all, even in the NFL. Yet, "moderates" will never make the dream of justice-for-all a reality. It turns out that the path to hell is not paved with good intentions; it is paved with moderation.

The Rev. Howard Bess is a retired American Baptist minister, who lives in

Palmer, Alaska. His email address is hdbss@mtaonline.net.
