

Obama Warned to Defuse Tensions with Russia

A group of ex-U.S. intelligence officials is warning President Obama to defuse growing tensions with Russia over Syria by reining in the demonization of President Putin and asserting White House civilian control over the Pentagon.

ALERT MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: PREVENTING STILL WORSE IN SYRIA

We write to alert you, as we did President George W. Bush, six weeks before the attack on Iraq, that the consequences of limiting your circle of advisers to a small, relatively inexperienced coterie with a dubious record for wisdom can prove disastrous.* Our concern this time regards Syria.

We are hoping that your *President's Daily Brief* tomorrow will give appropriate attention to Saturday's warning by Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova: "If the US launches a direct aggression against Damascus and the Syrian Army, it would cause a terrible, tectonic shift not only in the country, but in the entire region."

Speaking on Russian TV, she warned of those whose "logic is 'why do we need diplomacy' ... when there is power ... and methods of resolving a problem by power. We already know this logic; there is nothing new about it. It usually ends with one thing – full-scale war."

We are also hoping that this is not the first you have heard of this – no doubt officially approved – statement. If on Sundays you rely on the "mainstream" press, you may well have missed it. In the Washington Post, an abridged report of Zakharova's remarks (nothing about "full-scale war") was buried in the last paragraph of an 11-paragraph article titled "Hospital in Aleppo is hit again by bombs." Sunday's New York Times totally ignored the Foreign Ministry spokesperson's statements.

In our view, it would be a huge mistake to allow your national security advisers to follow the example of the Post and Times in minimizing the importance of Zakharova's remarks.

Events over the past several weeks have led Russian officials to distrust Secretary of State John Kerry. Indeed, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who parses his words carefully, has publicly expressed that distrust. Some Russian

officials suspect that Kerry has been playing a double game; others believe that, however much he may strive for progress through diplomacy, he cannot deliver on his commitments because the Pentagon undercuts him every time. We believe that this lack of trust is a challenge that must be overcome and that, at this point, only you can accomplish this.

It should not be attributed to paranoia on the Russians' part that they suspect the Sept. 17 U.S. and Australian air attacks on Syrian army troops that killed 62 and wounded 100 was no "mistake," but rather a deliberate attempt to scuttle the partial cease-fire Kerry and Lavrov had agreed on – with your approval and that of President Putin – that took effect just five days earlier.

In public remarks bordering on the insubordinate, senior Pentagon officials showed unusually open skepticism regarding key aspects of the Kerry-Lavrov deal. We can assume that what Lavrov has told his boss in private is close to his uncharacteristically blunt words on Russian NTV on Sept. 26:

"My good friend John Kerry ... is under fierce criticism from the US military machine. Despite the fact that, as always, [they] made assurances that the US Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama, supported him in his contacts with Russia (he confirmed that during his meeting with President Vladimir Putin), apparently the military does not really listen to the Commander in Chief."

Lavrov's words are not mere rhetoric. He also criticized JCS Chairman Joseph Dunford for telling Congress that he opposed sharing intelligence with Russia, "after the agreements concluded on direct orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama stipulated that they would share intelligence. ... It is difficult to work with such partners. ..."

Policy differences between the White House and the Pentagon are rarely as openly expressed as they are now over policy on Syria. We suggest you get hold of a new book to be released this week titled *The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War* by master historian H. W. Brands. It includes testimony, earlier redacted, that sheds light on why President Truman dismissed WWII hero Gen. Douglas MacArthur from command of U.N. forces in Korea in April 1951. One early reviewer notes that "Brands's narrative makes us wonder about challenges of military versus civilian leadership we still face today." You may find this new book more relevant at this point in time than the *Team of Rivals*.

The door to further negotiations remains ajar. In recent days, officials of the Russian foreign and defense ministries, as well as President Putin's spokesman, have carefully avoided shutting that door, and we find it a good sign that Secretary Kerry has been on the phone with Foreign Minister Lavrov. And the

Russians have also emphasized Moscow's continued willingness to honor previous agreements on Syria.

In the Kremlin's view, Russia has far more skin in the game than the U.S. does. Thousands of Russian dissident terrorists have found their way to Syria, where they obtain weapons, funding, and practical experience in waging violent insurgency. There is understandable worry on Moscow's part over the threat they will pose when they come back home. In addition, President Putin can be assumed to be under the same kind of pressure you face from the military to order it to try to clean out the mess in Syria "once and for all," regardless how dim the prospects for a military solution are for either side in Syria.

We are aware that many in Congress and the "mainstream" media are now calling on you to up the ante and respond – overtly or covertly or both – with more violence in Syria. Shades of the "Washington Playbook," about which you spoke derisively in interviews with the *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg earlier this year. We take some encouragement in your acknowledgment to Goldberg that the "playbook" can be "a trap that can lead to bad decisions" – not to mention doing "stupid stuff."

Goldberg wrote that you felt the Pentagon had "jammed" you on the troop surge for Afghanistan seven years ago and that the same thing almost happened three years ago on Syria, before President Putin persuaded Syria to surrender its chemical weapons for destruction. It seems that the kind of approach that worked then should be tried now, as well – particularly if you are starting to feel jammed once again.

Incidentally, it would be helpful toward that end if you had one of your staffers tell the "mainstream" media to tone down its puerile, nasty – and for the most part unjustified and certainly unhelpful – personal vilification of President Putin.

Renewing direct dialogue with President Putin might well offer the best chance to ensure an end, finally, to unwanted "jamming." We believe John Kerry is correct in emphasizing how frightfully complicated the disarray in Syria is amid the various vying interests and factions. At the same time, he has already done much of the necessary spadework and has found Lavrov for the most part, a helpful partner.

Still, in view of lingering Russian – and not only Russian – skepticism regarding the strength of your support for your secretary of state, we believe that discussions at the highest level would be the best way to prevent hotheads on either side from risking the kind of armed confrontation that nobody should want.

Therefore, we strongly recommend that you invite President Putin to meet with you in a mutually convenient place, in order to try to sort things out and prevent still worse for the people of Syria.

In the wake of the carnage of World War II, Winston Churchill made an observation that is equally applicable to our 21st Century: "To jaw, jaw, jaw, is better than to war, war, war."

* In a Memorandum to President Bush criticizing Colin Powell's address to the UN earlier on February 5, 2003, VIPS ended with these words: "After watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic."

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

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Trump's Blindness Toward Slavery, Jim Crow

Exclusive: Donald Trump's remarkable comments about American blacks never being worse off demonstrated a stunning ignorance of or callousness toward the grotesque evils of slavery and Jim Crow, writes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

The almost daily reports of police killings of African-Americans and resulting community outrage have shined a light on persistent racism in the United States. Yet, in the first presidential debate, Donald Trump was asked what he would do to heal the racial divide and replied: "Bring back law and order."

He added that the use of stop-and-frisk in New York and Chicago "worked very well" and "brought the crime rate way down."

But, as reported in the *New York Times*, "about 90 percent of the people who were stopped were young black or Latino men who had committed no crime whatsoever, according to police data. Of those few who were arrested, the vast majority were charged with nothing more serious than possession of marijuana, not having guns."

When debate moderator Lester Holt noted that stop-and-frisk had been ruled unconstitutional in New York because it "largely singled out black and Hispanic young men," Trump disagreed.

In fact, U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin ruled in the 2013 case of *Floyd v. City of New York* that New York's stop-and-frisk program violated the Fourth Amendment's prohibition on unreasonable searches and seizures since they were conducted without reasonable suspicion. It also violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause because the stops and frisks were racially discriminatory, the judge found.

Darius Charney, lead attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights in *Floyd*,

said, "Stop-and-frisk, as practiced by the NYPD up until 2014, was at its root about equating blackness with criminality and dangerousness, which is exactly the same kind of thinking that has led to all of the horrific and avoidable police shootings of people of color that have captured the nation's attention over the past few years."

Before the debate, Trump had said at a rally that "African-American communities are absolutely in the worst shape that they've ever been in before. Ever. Ever. Ever."

Trump apparently forgot about slavery and Jim Crow. In her 1861 slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs wrote, "Various were the punishments [of slaves] resorted to. A favorite one was to tie a rope round a man's body, and suspend him from the ground. A fire was kindled over him, from which was suspended a piece of fat pork. As this cooked, the scalding drops of fat continually fell on the bare flesh."

When a slave ran away, Jacobs added, bloodhounds tracked him, then "literally tore the flesh from his bones." If a slave resisted going with his new master, Jacobs noted, "The whip is used till the blood flows at his feet; and his stiffened limbs are put in chains, to be dragged in the field for days and days!"

'Insulting' Ignorance

NAACP president Cornell William Brooks said on *CNN* that Trump's comments that blacks are worse off now than ever demonstrated "an insulting degree of ignorance and/or insensitivity," ignoring the lynching of African-Americans, separate drinking fountains, forced seating at the back of the bus, and slavery. Brooks added that Trump's remarks revealed "a profound insensitivity to what we are going through at this very moment."

The head of the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent compared police killings of African-Americans in the United States to lynchings.

"Contemporary police killings, and the trauma they create, are reminiscent of the past racial terror of lynching," Ricardo Sunga III said. He attributed the "current human rights crisis" to "impunity for state violence," noting the working group "is convinced that the root of the problem lies in the serious lack of accountability for perpetrators of such killings despite the evidence."

Human rights experts from New York University Law School, University of Virginia School of Law, and St. Louis University School of Law concur. In a submission to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) for a hearing on

“Excessive Use of Force by the Police against Black Americans in the United States,” they wrote that in 2015, police officers killed at least 1,139 people in the U.S. More than 25 percent of the victims of police violence were black, which is “grossly disproportionate” to their numbers in the national population.

“Impunity and the lack of accountability lie at the heart of a cycle of police violence and discrimination against Black Americans,” the legal experts noted. They added that the legal framework regulating the use of force in the U.S. “does not conform to the requirements of international human rights law or international best practices,” which require law enforcement to “apply nonviolent means before resorting to the use of force.”

If force is “unavoidable,” officers must “exercise restraint in such use and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offense.” In all circumstances where force is used, police must “minimize damage . . . and respect and preserve human life” and dignity. “Intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.”

We see repeated situations in which officers respond to a scene and use deadly force as a first, not a last, resort. Police are trained to shoot to kill, not to incapacitate. They often opt to shoot rather than using tasers, although there is also overuse of tasers.

Officers in San Diego County’s El Cajon knew that Alfred Olango had mental illness. Yet instead of calling the Psychiatric Emergency Response Teams, which is trained to defuse these types of situations, the police responded to Olango’s sister’s call for help earlier this week by shooting him while his hands were in the air.

Three days after Olango was killed, a black man with bipolar disorder was shot and killed by Los Angeles County police following his call for help.

Inherent Police Bias

The IACHR report charged that “deferring to the views of officers” about what constitutes a lawful use of force “runs the risk of allowing their biases – whether explicit or implicit – to define the parameter of the lawful use of force.”

Implicit bias describes unconscious prejudices, attitudes and stereotypes. Researchers at the Yale Child Study Center concluded that implicit bias determines the way teachers deal with African-American male students beginning at four years of age.

“The problem of discriminatory police violence is not simply one of inadequate

training,” the IACHR report continued. “It cannot be separated from systemic racism and inadequate accountability mechanisms.”

“Aggressive police practices are deeply rooted in a history of discrimination against Black Americans and are part of a system of racial and social control,” the report noted. Its authors identify “broken windows” policing, which targets petty crime; racial profiling, in which people of color are “stereotyped as violent criminals or drug abusers”; increasing militarization of police, who use military equipment even when responding to non-violent crime; and “for-profit policing,” where law enforcement raises considerable revenue from fines and criminal and civil forfeiture.

Three sociology professors from Harvard, Yale and Oxford determined that 911 calls decreased by 17 percent in Milwaukee during the year after the 2004 beating of Frank Jude Jr. They found that African-Americans were less likely to call the police after learning that officers “boot-stomped [Jude’s] face, snapped his fingers and pressed pens into his ear canals” because they suspected him of stealing a police badge.

Matthew Desmond and Andrew Papachristos, two of the professors who conducted the Milwaukee study, wrote in the *New York Times*: “Each new tragedy contributes to and reawakens the collective trauma of black communities, which have been subjected to state-sanctioned assaults – from slave whippings and lynching campaigns to Jim Crow enforcement and mass incarceration – for generations.”

Clinton’s Proposals

Hillary Clinton has called for police training programs to eliminate implicit bias and proposed a plan “to restore bonds between communities and law enforcement.” She vowed to bring law enforcement and communities together to develop national guidelines on the use of force by police officers, support legislation to end racial profiling, dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, and provide greater transparency and accountability for officer-involved shootings.

All police shootings should be investigated and, if warranted, prosecuted by an independent and impartial special prosecutor. Citizens police review boards should have independent investigators, independent legal counsel, and subpoena power.

“We need an investigative model rather than a review model, where the board does its own investigations rather than just reviewing what the police have done,” Kate Yavenditti, from the National Lawyers Guild and Women Occupy San Diego, told me.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Black Lives Matter movement across the country, which has exposed the way in which local, state and federal governments, the corporate media, and the judicial system actively participate in exonerating the police and demonizing the victim.

The U.N. Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, comprised of top human rights lawyers from around the world, told the U.N. Human Rights Council last week that the United States owes reparations to African-Americans as compensation for “the legacy of colonial history, enslavement, racial subordination and segregation, racial terrorism and racial inequality.”

The working group concluded that U.S. slave labor would be worth about \$5.9 trillion today. But reparations could be provided in the form of “a formal apology, health initiatives, educational opportunities . . . psychological rehabilitation, technology transfer and financial support, and debt cancellation.”

Our society continues to be plagued by the legacy of slavery – the “peculiar institution” – as well as Jim Crow and continuing, pernicious racism. Calls for “law and order” and stop-and-frisk will not heal the wounds, and will only exacerbate the tensions. Yet, that is what Donald Trump has prescribed.

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Clinton Shows a Dovish Side on Nukes

Exclusive: Hillary Clinton, who has carved out a reputation as a war hawk, has quietly voiced opposition to a \$1 trillion plan to modernize America’s nuclear arsenal, including a nuke-tipped cruise missile, notes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Whoever is hacking Hillary Clinton’s emails just did her a big favor, at least with anti-war critics: One newly released message reveals her skepticism about wasteful and dangerous spending on new nuclear weapons in the name of “modernization.” It’s a refreshing change from her usual hawkish stand on national security.

An email leaked to the conservative *Washington Free Beacon* includes an audio

file of Clinton's remarks at a private fundraiser in McLean, Virginia, last February. Asked by a former senior Pentagon official about her willingness to cancel plans for a next-generation nuclear cruise missile program, she replied, "I certainly would be inclined to do that."

"The last thing we need are sophisticated cruise missiles that are nuclear armed," Clinton added.

Current Air Force plans call for spending upward of \$30 billion on the Long Range Stand-Off (LRSO) missile program to acquire 1,000 such weapons. The Air Force says it will begin awarding contracts as early as next summer for the stealthy missiles, which will be launched from bombers more than 2,000 kilometers from their targets.

The LRSO program, in turn, is part of the Obama administration's grandiose plan to spend more than \$1 *trillion* over the next three decades on new land, sea, and air-launched nuclear weapons. That plan calls for building 12 new nuclear-armed submarines, 100 long-range strategic bombers armed with a new class of bombs, and at least 400 silo-based ballistic missiles, in addition to the new cruise missiles.

While nearly every aspect of the administration's plan has garnered criticism, including the sheer improbability of finding enough funds to pay for such an extravagant "all of the above" program, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter delivered a resounding defense during a recent speech at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota, home to Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles, B-52 bombers, and several hundred nuclear-armed cruise missiles.

Offering more rhetoric than substance, Carter insisted that failure to rebuild every leg of America's nuclear force "would mean losing confidence in our ability to deter, which we can't afford in today's volatile security environment."

Senators Object

Carter's speech was a belated reply to a letter from 10 prominent progressive senators, including Bernie Sanders, asking President Obama to reconsider his nuclear modernization program. "In particular," they wrote, echoing Clinton's own concerns, "we urge you to cancel plans to spend at least \$20 billion on a new nuclear air-launched cruise missile, the Long Range Standoff weapon, which would provide an unnecessary capability that could increase the risk of nuclear war."

Experts in the arms control community backed them up. "The Air Force does not need a costly new and more capable nuclear-armed cruise missile," said Daryl

Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, “especially if the new long-range penetrating bomber is truly penetrating. We are seeing a return to the days of nuclear excess and overkill.”

Even more authoritative criticism of the LRSO program came from former Secretary of Defense William Perry, who guided development of the current generation of air-launched cruise missiles, and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Andy Weber, who oversaw all nuclear weapons programs in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2014.

They warned that the missiles are not just a waste of money, but could actually put our national security at risk.

“Because they can be launched without warning and come in both nuclear and conventional variants, cruise missiles are a uniquely destabilizing type of weapon,” Perry and Weber observed. Canceling the new cruise missile program, they declared, “would not diminish the formidable U.S. nuclear deterrent in the least” and “could lay the foundation for a global ban on these dangerous weapons.”

British Defense Secretary and Conservative Party politician Philip Hammond offered a similar view in 2013: “A cruise-based deterrent would carry significant risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. At the point of firing, other states could have no way of knowing whether we had launched a conventional cruise missile or one with a nuclear warhead. Such uncertainty could risk triggering a nuclear war at a time of tension. So, the cruise option would carry enormous financial, technical and strategic risk.”

Nuclear War ‘Flexibility’

To such criticisms, the Pentagon has argued chillingly that the new cruise missiles will give the United States greater “flexibility” in fighting a nuclear war – contrary to President Reagan’s common-sense dictum that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”

Clinton has made few firm pledges about nuclear weapons policy, but she told supporters at the private fundraiser that “This is going to be a big issue. It’s not just the nuclear-tipped cruise missile. There’s a lot of other money we’re talking about to go into refurbishing and modernization.”

That event was not the first or only place she has raised questions about the current direction of America’s nuclear policy. At a town hall meeting in September 2015, Clinton expressed admiration for President Dwight Eisenhower’s famous warning about the military-industrial complex and ridiculed the idea of spending a trillion dollars on new nuclear programs.

This January, in Iowa, [Clinton told an activist](#) that the Obama administration's current plan for nuclear modernization "doesn't make sense to me."

Clinton also takes [great pride](#) in her role in negotiating a 2011 nuclear agreement with Russia, which limited the number of strategic nuclear warheads that each side can deploy.

To be sure, history gives little reason for optimism that Clinton would follow through as president on her concerns.

President Obama's transformation from an eloquent advocate of a nuclear-free world to a supporter of unprecedented nuclear spending suggests that the military-industrial complex remains a powerful force.

Still, it's encouraging to know that Clinton isn't a hard-wired hawk, and that at least a few generals and defense lobbyists may be losing sleep over the uncertain future of their prized weapons systems.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including [*The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic*](#) (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "[Obama Flinches at Renouncing Nuke First Strike](#)," "[Dangerous Denial of Global Warming](#)," "[How Arms Sales Distort US Foreign Policy](#)," "[The US Hand in the Syrian Mess](#)"; and "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War](#)."

The Russian View of Trump-Clinton Debate

Russian media is much more nuanced than the U.S. public is led to believe, even showing a perceptive approach to describing the Trump-Clinton presidential debate, as Gilbert Doctorow observed first-hand.

By Gilbert Doctorow

On Sept. 25, I received a phone call at my Brussels home inviting me to Moscow to participate in a political talk show on a state-run station to analyze the first Trump-Clinton debate, which was clearly the flavor of the day for Russian television programming.

I was not surprised when shortly thereafter I got an email invitation to participate in another talk show on a competing state channel also devoted to this subject. As a Russian-speaking "talking head" carrying a U.S. passport and

willing to go to Moscow, I am part of a thin group. Out of consideration of professional ethics, I declined this second invitation but took a rain check to join them on Nov. 9 for a U.S. election postmortem.

The political talk show that was the first to invite me, called "Sixty Minutes," is entirely new, launched at the start of the fall television season and runs daily Monday through Friday. Its name self-consciously recalls a similarly named long-running American television news program, though the format here is not pure news but more talk show.

Yet, the program borrows much from its American namesake. It's slick, show-biz in visual impact with well-researched scripts that the presenters, a husband and wife team of widely known young and bold journalists, Yevgeny Popov and Olga Skabeyeva, deliver with panache.

The show on Tuesday evening – a day after the debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – was not ideal, but I was grateful to my hosts for being brought to Moscow for the event. The invitation forced me to get up in the middle of the night, European time, to watch the Clinton-Trump debate from beginning to end and to direct my full attention to it, which I would not otherwise have done.

It also forced me to read the Russian press fairly thoroughly on my way to Moscow in order to anticipate the angle of interest there. And most importantly, once I was on the panel, it gave me an insider's look into how Russia's elites view the contest between Trump and Clinton, not only from what was said during the show but also from our exchanges in the breaks and immediately after the broadcast in the relaxation room with snacks before we headed our various ways.

The premise of the show's producers was that the debates would hold great interest for a good many Russians because their country has figured large in the U.S. campaigns of both parties.

The Clinton camp has repeatedly and publicly accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of interfering in the U.S. political process. Russian hackers were blamed for the very embarrassing publication of internal emails from the Democratic National Committee showing a bias against the candidacy of Bernie Sanders during the primaries. Moreover, Clinton and her assistants have portrayed Trump as a kind of modern-day "Manchurian candidate" who would betray American interests to Putin, his supposed friend.

For his part, Donald Trump publicly criticized the Establishment position of escalating conflict with Russia and China to which Hillary Clinton has long contributed. He has said that he saw nothing wrong in redirecting relations to cooperation and has praised the Russian military action against the Islamic

State jihadists in Syria.

Trump also has made clear his accommodative stance on Russia's reunification with Crimea. Plus, Trump challenged directly the relevance today of NATO with its focus on countering Russia's recovery of its great power status, coming at the expense of distracting from the threat of Islamic terrorism. Trump broadly hinted at a possible reduced U.S. presence if not withdrawal altogether from the alliance for failing to carry its own weight in the common defense.

All of these aspects of the American campaign have been brought to the attention of the broad Russian public by its mass media over recent months.

Assessing the Russian Role

The proposed message of the talk show's producers last Tuesday night was Russia as an important factor in the U.S. debates, which they measured by the number of times each of the candidates made reference to Russia. There is some merit to this argument, given that only a few separate countries were mentioned by either candidate during their 90 minutes: Russia, China and Iran in descending order of frequency.

However, the two contexts for mention of Russia – the alleged hacking of the DNC server and the renewal of a nuclear arms race – were both old news. The far more striking feature of the debates was the failure of either candidate to raise and discuss the alarming escalation in verbal confrontation between the two countries in and on the sidelines of the United Nations Security Council over the preceding two weeks.

During that time you had U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power calling Russian action in and around Aleppo "barbarism." And you had Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stating in an interview that it seemed the Pentagon was no longer under the control of the White House. This type of rhetoric from both sides marks a 30-year low point in relations and could be described as what you hear just before countries engage in hostilities.

The escalating confrontation with Russia had two book-ends. It began one day into the cease-fire when a U.S.-led air attack on an isolated Syrian Army position at Deir Ezzor resulted in the death of more than 60 Syrian soldiers. At the other end, a week later, was the combined Syrian and Russian heavy bombing of East Aleppo, which Power denounced.

The show's hosts must be congratulated for trying hard to convey the essence of American political culture to their audience, and they did some effective research to this end. Whereas French and other Western media devoted coverage on the day after the debates to the physical appearances of the candidates,

Russia's "Sixty Minutes" tweaked this aspect of the debates to find politically relevant commentary.

To make their point, presenter Yevgeny Popov came on stage in a blue suit and blue tie very similar in coloring to Trump's, while co-presenter Olga Skabeyeva was wearing a garment in the same red hue as Hillary. They proceeded to note that these color choices of the candidates represented an inversion of the traditional colors of the Democratic and Republican parties in American political tradition.

And they took this a step further by declaring it to be in line with the inversion of policies in the electoral platforms of the candidates: Hillary Clinton has taken over the hawkish foreign policy positions of the Republicans and their neoconservative wing; and Donald Trump has taken over the dovish foreign policy positions normally associated with Democrats.

Moreover, Trump also has gone against the free-trade policies that were engrained in Republican ideology until now, while often rejected by Democrats with their traditional backers from labor unions. All of these observations are essentially correct and astute. It was curious to hear them coming from Russian journalists, when they are largely missed by West European and American commentators.

Of course, a talk show is only partly formed by its producers and presenters. The greater part of the program is the opinions put forward by the invited panelists.

As is typical of such shows, the panel changed slightly during the course of the three 20-minute segments, with some panelists replaced by others who were waiting on the benches for their turn. And of the seven or eight on stage at any one time, two or three were foreigners. I was one of two Americans, and the third foreigner was a Brit, the long-time Moscow correspondent of *Newsweek* magazine.

Russians Debating Russians

Sometimes foreigners are important to the Russian talk shows to add pepper and salt. In this case, we were largely decorative. The lion's share of the program was shared between the Russian politicians and journalists on the panel who very ably demonstrated that Russian elites are split down the middle on whether Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton is their preferred next occupant of the Oval Office.

The reasons given are not what you hear within the U.S.: that Trump is vulgar, that Trump is a bigot and misogynist. Instead the Russian Trump-skeptics were

saying that he is impulsive and cannot be trusted to act with prudence if there is some mishap, some accidental event occurring between U.S. and Russian forces in the field, for example.

They also expressed the cynical view that Trump's positions in the pre-election period are purely tactical, to differentiate himself from all competitors first in his own party during the primaries and now from Clinton. In that view, Trump could turn out to be no friend of Russia if elected.

A direct answer to these changes came from the pro-Trump members of the panel, best enunciated by the senior politician in the room, Vyacheslav Nikonov, a Duma member from Putin's United Russia party, the chair of the Education Committee in the Sixth Duma. He is also chair of a government-sponsored organization of Russian civil society, Russian World, which looks after the interests of Russians and Russian culture in the diaspora abroad.

Nikonov pointed to Trump's courage and determination which scarcely suggest merely tactical considerations driving his campaign. According to Nikonov, Trump has gone up against the entire U.S. political establishment, against the whole of corporate mainstream media and has been winning. Nikonov pointed to the surge in Trump poll statistics in the couple of weeks preceding the debate. And he ticked off the four swing states which Trump needs to win and where his fortunes had been rising fast. Clearly, this presentation was carefully prepared, not something casual and off-the-cuff.

During this exchange between doubters and backers of Trump, one doubter spoke of Trump as a "non-systemic" politician, which may be loosely interpreted as meaning he is anti-establishment. But in the Russian context it has an odious connotation, for instance, applied to Alexei Navalny and certain members of the American- and European Union-backed Parnas political movement, including its head Mikhail Kasyanov. The word suggests seditious intent.

In this connection, Nikonov put an entirely different spin on who Trump is and what he represents as an anti-establishment figure. But maybe such partiality runs in the family. Nikonov is the grandson of Molotov, one of the leading figures who staged the Russian Revolution and governed the young Soviet state.

Who won the first Trump-Clinton debate? Here the producers of "Sixty Minutes" gave the final verdict to a *Vesti* news analyst from a remote location whose image was projected on a wall-sized screen. We were told that the debate was a draw: Trump had to demonstrate that he is presidential, which he did. Clinton had to demonstrate she had the stamina to resist the onslaught of a 90-minute showdown with Trump and she also succeeded.

In summation, the talk show analysis of the first U.S. presidential debate that I saw up close in Moscow may have been more glitzy and had less gravitas than Charlie Rose's postmortem session at Bloomberg TV, but it was, in its own way, a value to its audience, which probably numbered in the tens of millions.

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