

Trump and Revenge of the 'Realists'

Henry Kissinger's potential role as an intermediary between President-elect Trump and Russian President Putin suggests a comeback by the old-line "realists" versus the neocons and liberal interventionists, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

During a holiday getaway to India, I picked up the local newspaper, *The Times of India*, and encountered an article entitled "From Russia with Love" by Indian political observer Swagato Ganguly with the subtitle: "A rapprochement between Putin and Trump could transform the world in 2017."

The author set this prediction within the broader context of a possible return to the "Westphalian principle of sovereignty, which bars intervention in another state's domestic affairs." The article goes on to ask: "What If Trump were to repeat Nixon's rapprochement in reverse? President Nixon's handshake with Chairman Mao in 1972 may have decisively tilted the Cold War in America's favour, as it broke the Chinese away from the Soviet bloc. Today China, rather than Russia is America's principal strategic rival."

This Indian international affairs prognosis was based on Henry Kissinger's identification of the Peace of Westphalia principles as the key to Realpolitik and on implementation of his signature strategy from the past even if Kissinger was not mentioned. Kissinger's strategy was to ensure that Washington was closer to Beijing and to Moscow than either of the two was to one another, a relevant point again given Kissinger's reappearance on the political scene in recent days.

The question of Henry Kissinger's possible designation as a foreign policy adviser to President Donald Trump and specifically as intermediary between Trump and Vladimir Putin for normalization of relations arose after the 93-year-old Kissinger gave a series of interviews to the German newspaper *Bild* and other media in the days before Christmas.

In the less serious media outlets, we heard about Kissinger's special rapport with Putin with whom, we are told, he has met often. These same gossips tell us that in Moscow Kissinger's expertise and experience are held in high regard. All of these glib statements are deeply flawed, however. They are more appropriate to society pages or *People* magazine than to serious discussion of where former Secretary of State Kissinger can and should fit into the evolving foreign policy team that President-elect Trump is assembling, and to what that foreign policy should reasonably resemble.

The superficial comments also ignore the record of Henry Kissinger's policy recommendations on Russia in the decades since the end of the Cold War, which place him squarely among those responsible for getting us into the confrontation with Russia that reached its climax under Barack Obama. And, these comments miss how the times and the challenges we face today are so very different from the late 1960s and early 1970s when Kissinger and Nixon made their very important changes to the architecture of international relations.

Real Positives

But there are some real positives in Henry Kissinger's emergence among Trump's advisers. Kissinger brings an aura of intellectual rigor to the Trump camp as America's best-known thinker and practitioner of the Realist School of international affairs, meaning a foreign policy based on national interest. That is a more accurate and less aggressive packaging than the "America First" slogan, which Donald Trump used during his electoral campaign, though the intent of both terms is identical.

Even Harvard Professor Ernest May, a severe critic of Kissinger over Vietnam War policies, wrote of him in letters published in *The New York Times* in 1994: "Mr. Kissinger's scholarly credentials and public stature give his name on the title page the quality of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

At the same time, beginning in the 1990s, Henry Kissinger modified his message of realism to accommodate the then-dominant American school of idealism, or values-based foreign policy. This mixed message resulted from Kissinger's defending himself from the ridicule of the triumphant neoconservatives who criticized his détente policies of the 1970s for seeking merely to manage relations with the Soviet Union when the overthrow of the "Evil Empire" was entirely possible, as later events had seemingly proven through the uncompromising "promotion of democracy" as practiced by Ronald Reagan.

Thus, the updated Kissinger line was that universal moral principles serve as the ultimate objective of foreign policy, but realism must guide the day-to-day management of international affairs. Lest this seem to be a neat division between tactics and strategy, the two become confused in Kissinger's public stance given that he always has placed primary emphasis on achieving a "balance of power" in the international community, which alone can keep the peace and safeguard the vital interests of all parties.

Thus, it would be fair to say that Kissinger is a realist who at times uses idealist vocabulary to meet the expectations of and to motivate the general public, which is unmoved by considerations of balance of power and *realism*.

Finally, in speaking of the gravitas that Kissinger may bring to the Trump team, he is correctly perceived as a champion of the art of diplomacy, which is another word for compromise and deal-making. It is precisely diplomacy that has been sorely lacking in the U.S. government in recent decades. Under both Republican and Democratic presidents, ideology has held sway at the State Department and in the White House.

Some Negatives

The most severe negative one can say about Kissinger and Russia goes back to the fateful year 1994. In 1993, Boris Yeltsin had made an important visit to Warsaw during which he withdrew all Russian objections to Poland's joining NATO. The clearly understood quid pro quo, which the Kremlin expected for this major concession to U.S. and Polish wishes, was that Russia be named next in line for membership in the club. Indeed, during 1994, the Clinton Administration was weighing that very possibility. At this point, in Congressional testimony, Henry Kissinger delivered strong objections and played a significant role in the defeat of Russia's candidacy.

We get a fairly good idea of Kissinger's reasoning back then in the passages relating to American policy on Russia in the last chapter of his 1994 master work *Diplomacy*. A *realistic* approach to Russia meant America had to look at the respective foreign policy interests and national traditions, and to pay less attention to domestic Russian politics and the personalities of its leaders.

Kissinger said this meant taking into account Russia's long tradition of expansionism, as evidenced by military bases in the former Soviet republics and interventionism in their "near abroad." And as if to drive a stake through the heart of unnecessary chumminess with Moscow, Kissinger reminded his readers that Russia had always stood apart from the Western world. It had no democratic traditions or familiarity with modern market economics. In his words, it did not partake of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Age of Discovery.

Indeed, Kissinger's thinking about Russian history is so clear one might imagine he knows what he is talking about. The question is of key importance because the Realist School is built upon the assumption that one can accurately appraise the strengths of all players and that one has a solid knowledge of the history and traditions of the players. In this it distinguishes itself from idealism, with its focus on universal values and disinterest in regional knowledge.

From Kissinger's own academic career in studying European diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century, Russia should have been on his plate, given that the country was one of the three decisive players in the first half of the century (Holy Alliance) and one of the five or six decisive players in the second half of the

century. However, that was manifestly not the case.

Kissinger is widely reputed to be a voracious reader. Yet, it is obvious that Russia has never and does not now figure among the topics he reads. In *Diplomacy*, for his analysis of Russia, he relied on the very dated Nineteenth Century classics of Russian history like Vasily Klyuchevsky that he read in translation during his graduate student days at Harvard.

Klyuchevsky is unquestionably a good starting point for students of Russian history. He was the father of the historiography that came down to Kissinger in the person of Michael Karpovich, the founder of Russian studies at Harvard. But his notion of Russia's *manifest destiny* of borders moving out across the Eurasian land mass was part of a Liberal and anti-tsarist historiography. By today's standards, reading Klyuchevsky has mainly curiosity value. To put the issue in terms closer to an American reader, it is as if Kissinger were using de Tocqueville as the key source for writing about contemporary America.

Among the main Twentieth Century works on Russia cited in Kissinger are those by his comrade in realism, George Kennan. Notwithstanding Kennan's generally high reputation in Washington, his choice of sources and interpretation of Russia is tendentious in ways that Kissinger was unable to judge, and that is why it is regrettable Kissinger did not read other sources.

Kissinger's argument in *Diplomacy* for the separateness of Russian history may be no more than the conventional wisdom of his times. He speaks of Russia as a paradox, an obvious allusion to Winston Churchill's witticism that Russia was "a riddle wrapped in an enigma." But then Churchill was not a serious scholar and Kissinger is assumed to be one. The notion of separateness is, in fact, misleading if not fallacious.

Kissinger's prescription for a policy vis-à-vis Russia after the Cold War assumed that "imperial expansionism" was the country's defining national tradition. But then the same was true of all the key world powers. Kissinger indulges in tired mystification of Russia drawing on the Nineteenth Century nationalist movement and writers such as Dostoevsky. Such smoke and mirrors writing would be seen as unduly psychological and irrelevant to foreign relations if someone served them up as a description of Germany, for instance. Thus, we read in Kissinger: "The paradox of Russian history lies in the continuing ambivalence between messianic drive and a pervasive sense of insecurity. In its ultimate aberration, this ambivalence generated a fear that, unless the empire expanded, it would implode."

It is rather sad to consider that one of America's great scholar-statesmen of the Twentieth Century was taken in by mystical tripe when formulating and

implementing the nation's policies towards its chief nuclear adversary. This puts into question the validity of attention to history and local specifics, which Kissinger says are distinguishing features of *realism* versus *idealism*, which operates amid universalistic over-simplifications.

Russian Uniqueness?

Henry Kissinger's later writings offering foreign policy recommendations for the world at large and specific major countries in particular display the same wrong footing when dealing with Russia. His 2001 opus facetiously entitled *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* is a case in point. Kissinger breaks the international community into regional groupings and Russia is placed among the "great powers of Asia."

Once again Kissinger tells us "Russia has always been *sui generis* – especially when compared with its European neighbors" – a fancy way of saying Russia is not like the others. His highlighting the "mystical" Russian Orthodox Church and autocracy suggests a trite approach to this complex nation. We hear again of Russia's "creeping expansionism" as a returning theme of Russian history.

Kissinger rightfully faults American policy to Russia for excessive personalization of relations at the expense of sober reflections on respective interests and institutions to drive and implement any rapprochement. But then he falls prey to personalization himself. He characterizes the then new Russian President Vladimir Putin as a KGB operative whose secret police background presupposed a strong national commitment: "It leads to a foreign policy comparable to that during the tsarist centuries, grounding popular support in a sense of Russian mission and seeking to dominate neighbors where they cannot be subjugated."

If this argumentation, this jumping to conclusions, were delivered by anyone other than Henry Kissinger, one might dismiss it offhandedly. What we have here is the soft underbelly of Realpolitik: realism can be only as useful as the expertise and judgment of its practitioner.

At the same time, Kissinger's bark was more fearsome than his bite. In his specific remarks on how America should conduct its foreign policy towards Russia, he urged moderation, continued readiness to assist the country with its transition to democracy and free markets, and attentiveness to Russia's voice in international forums.

Note especially his comment on prospective NATO expansion into the Baltic States, which Kissinger believed in 2001 would be provocative, saying it would put NATO forces within 30 miles of St Petersburg, one of Russia's largest

population centers. He correctly foresaw that “Advancing the NATO integrated command this close to key centers of Russia might mortgage the possibilities of relating Russia to the emerging world order as a constructive member.”

But it is curious that in his 2001 book Kissinger was unable to offer any serious incentives for Russia to behave nobly. He decided even the watered down affiliation of Russia with NATO in the NATO-Russia Council. He believed it gave the Russians too much say and was “not the wisest solution.”

Finally, he dropped all pretense at diplomatic niceties, telling his readers that “NATO is basically a military alliance, part of whose purpose is the protection of Europe against a reimperializing Russia. ... To couple NATO expansion with even partial Russian membership in NATO was, in a sense, merging two contradictory courses of action ... [As] Russia becomes a de facto NATO member, NATO ceases to be an alliance, or becomes a vague collective security instrument.”

Rethinking the Group Think

Having participated actively in keeping Russia out of the security architecture of Europe, Kissinger became alarmed in recent years by the consequences of such exclusion as Russia and the U.S.-led West slid into mutual recriminations and confrontation. From this point on, Henry Kissinger began to play a clearly constructive role in the midst of each successive crisis in relations that threatened war.

The first case was in 2008-09 when bilateral relations hit bottom during and after the Russian-Georgian War. The second has come in 2013 to the present, when in the context of the developments in and around Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. became actively engaged in what is a proxy war, entailing as well economic and information wars.

For instance, in November 2014, Kissinger was one of the few prominent Westerners who dared question the prevailing narrative blaming Putin and Russia almost exclusively for the crisis in Ukraine. Kissinger said, in an interview with the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel, that the West was exaggerating the significance of the Crimean annexation given the peninsula’s long historic ties to Russia.

“The annexation of Crimea was not a move toward global conquest,” Kissinger said. “It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia” as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others suggested.

Kissinger noted that prior to the overthrow of Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, Putin had no intention getting involved in a

crisis in Ukraine, saying:

“Putin spent tens of billions of dollars on the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The theme of the Olympics was that Russia is a progressive state tied to the West through its culture and, therefore, it presumably wants to be part of it. So it doesn’t make any sense that a week after the close of the Olympics, Putin would take Crimea and start a war over Ukraine.”

Instead Kissinger argued that the West with its strategy of pulling Ukraine into the orbit of the European Union was responsible for the crisis by failing to understand Russian sensitivity over Ukraine and making the grave mistake of quickly pushing the confrontation beyond dialogue.

But Kissinger also faulted Putin for his reaction to the crisis. “This does not mean the Russian response was appropriate,” Kissinger said.

Still, Kissinger told Der Spiegel, “a resumption of the Cold War would be a historic tragedy. If a conflict is avoidable, on a basis reflecting morality and security, one should try to avoid it. We have to remember that Russia is an important part of the international system, and therefore useful in solving all sorts of other crises, for example in the agreement on nuclear proliferation with Iran or over Syria. This has to have preference over a tactical escalation in a specific case.”

Kissinger could well bring such a practical perspective to the incoming Trump administration and have the gravitas to force Official Washington to undertake a rethinking of its current Russia-bashing “group think.”

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Hypocrisy Over Alleged Russian ‘Hacking’

As Official Washington rages over alleged Russian hacking of Democratic emails, a forgotten back story is how the U.S. government pioneered the tactics of cyber-war and attacked unsuspecting countries, recalls Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

The psychodrama over the alleged but unsubstantiated Russian hacking of Democratic emails to influence the U.S. presidential election has yet to reach its climax. Already, though, it has earned nomination as the most surreal and passionate work of fiction of the Twenty-first Century.

In all the excitement, it is easy to lose perspective. Perhaps the biggest piece of the untold story is the United States government's pioneering role in electronic surveillance and hacking. We seem to have forgotten that the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency eavesdropped on heads of state in Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Iraq, Venezuela – and, at last count, several score other capitals. Also, the United Nations Secretary General, the President of the European Union Commission, the European Central Bank and God knows whom else.

This was not coincidental. It was part of a calculated strategy approved by two successive Presidents to monitor all electronic communications around the globe. Author James Bamford and other knowledgeable experts have provided us with a detailed history of the program.

Yet, the U.S. – as presented to us by the mainstream media and most commentators reflecting Official Washington – is portrayed as the innocent among the main protagonists. The plot line represents America as the victim of unprovoked cyber aggression by the Russians and, in other circumstances, the Chinese – these attacks coming out of the blue, an aggressive blow in an assumed contest for global dominance between the powers.

Is any of this true? Frankly, we haven't even seen the proof. But let's assume that there is an element of truth to it (leaving apart the nonsense about a Kremlin plot to manipulate and then destroy American democracy).

On the Offensive

Let us recall that it was the United States that launched the first cyber attacks – some years ago by the NSA. This history is detailed in the Snowden documents whose authenticity never has been questioned. We succeeded in trespassing on the computer networks of several Chinese government agencies and individuals. We boasted about our success in intra-governmental communications. Those occurred at a time when related documents now in the public realm revealed the NSA's ambition to tap into every electronic communications network in the world and laid out a program for achieving that goal.

Simultaneously, the United States was launching **offensive assaults** on Iran. The targets there included not just their nuclear research facilities but also critical centers for the oil and gas industry. These are acts of war. Yet there

was never a mandate from any international body for doing so, nor a *casus belli*. We did it in collaboration with the Israelis because we made the unilateral judgment that aggression was in our national interest. Now we are outraged that others are doing what we have done. This is rank hypocrisy. It also is not very bright. For the initial actions made the casual assumptions that the U.S. would always have an advantage; therefore, the setting of norms and rules was unnecessary and undesirable. The same logic operated in regard to drones and targeted assassinations.

Conditions now have changed and the now U.S. is vulnerable to attack. The option of negotiating international rules of the road and perhaps formal regulations is slipping away. We will have to live with the chaotic mess that we have created.

Whatever thinking the NSA did on the subject (and perhaps other agencies) bears an uncanny resemblance to Air Force General Curtis LeMay's attitude toward nuclear strategy: An emphasis on offense because it played to our advantage; defense only in the form of "massive retaliation" which – for Lemay – was the strategic cover for massive first strike; and a conviction that this was an unavoidable zero-sum game played for the highest stakes. In other words, cowboy strategy. And it is cowboy strategic thinking that has ruled in the NSA.

Cyber Army

The most revealing article on this appeared in *WIRED* in July 2014 by James Bamford. Army General Keith Alexander, who was NSA director from 2005 to 2014, revealed the full scope of his ambition. Here are some of the article's more noteworthy quotes: "For years, U.S. General Keith Alexander has been amassing a secret cyber army. Now it's ready to attack. ... Alexander's forces are formidable – thousands of NSA spies, plus 14,000 cyber troops. ... Endgame hunts for hidden security weaknesses that are ripe for exploitation."

Plans included a "launch on warning" doctrine calling for a massive cyber-retaliation against anyone who launched a strategic attack on sensitive U.S. computers. Its code name was "MonsterMind." But preparations for the Great Cyber War evidently left no time to keep track of smaller attacks (such as the alleged hacking of Democratic emails) or else its radar was badly defective.

[Also see *THE INTERCEPT* of Oct. 10, 2014, "Core Secrets: NSA Saboteurs in China and Germany" by Peter Maass and Laura Poitras.]

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Details Still Lacking on Russian ‘Hack’

Exclusive: The mainstream U.S. media is all atwitter about Russia having to pay a price for hacking into Democratic emails and supposedly tilting the U.S. election to Donald Trump, but the evidence still is lacking, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Amid more promises of real evidence to come, the Obama administration released a report that again failed to demonstrate that there is any proof behind U.S. allegations that Russia both hacked into Democratic emails and distributed them via WikiLeaks to the American people.

The New York Times, which has been busy flogging the latest reasons to hate Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, asserted, “The F.B.I. and Department of Homeland Security released a report on Thursday detailing the ways that Russia acted to influence the American election through cyberespionage.”

But the actual report fell far short of “detailing” much at all about how the disclosures of the Democratic National Committee’s manipulation of the primaries to hobble Sen. Bernie Sanders and the contents of Hillary Clinton’s Wall Street speeches ended up at WikiLeaks and ultimately became available to American voters.

Most of the 13-page FBI/DHS report was devoted to suggestions on how Internet users can protect their emails from malware, but there was little new that proved that the Russians were the source of the Democratic emails given to WikiLeaks.

The tip-off to how little proof was being offered came in the report’s statement that “The U.S. government assesses that information was leaked to the press and publicly disclosed.” When you read a phrase like “the U.S. government assesses,” it really means the U.S. government is guessing – and the report notably uses a passive tense that doesn’t even assert that the Russians did the leaking.

A well-placed intelligence source told me that there’s little doubt that elements of Russian intelligence penetrated the emails of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta, but the Russians were far from alone. Indeed, placing various forms of malware on computers is a common practice, as average folks who periodically take their laptops to an I.T. professional can attest. There’s always some kind of “spyware” or other malicious code to be discovered.

The source said the more debatable issue is whether Russian intelligence then turned over the emails to WikiLeaks, especially given that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and an associate, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, have stated that the material did not come from the Russian government. Murray has suggested that there were two separate sources, the DNC material coming from a disgruntled Democrat and the Podesta emails coming from possibly a U.S. intelligence source, since the Podesta Group represents Saudi Arabia and other foreign governments.

Future 'Details'

So, The New York Times misled its readers by claiming that the FBI/DHS report released Thursday was "detailing" how the Russians carried out the operation, and a separate Times article essentially acknowledged that the details were still to come.

"A more detailed report on the intelligence, ordered by President Obama, will be published in the next three weeks, though much of the detail – especially evidence collected from 'implants' in Russian computer systems, tapped conversations and spies – is expected to remain classified."

In other words, the FBI/DHS report really didn't have much in the way of details and the "more detailed report" – due out before President Obama leaves office on Jan. 20 – will still be hiding "much of the detail" to justify Obama's retaliation against Russia including new sanctions and expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats or intelligence officers from the United States.

But the Times article does inadvertently make the interesting admission that the U.S. government has penetrated Russian computers, much as the U.S. government accuses Russia of doing to U.S. computers.

But the data purloined by these U.S. "implants" and other clandestinely obtained evidence – assuming there really is any – won't be something that the American people will get to see.

The shell game will continue up to the start of the Trump administration with the apparent goal to hem in President Trump from trying to reach out to Russia to avert a costly and dangerous New Cold War.

But the evidence so far released by the Obama administration still amounts to "trust us."

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "Escalating the Risky Fight with Russia" and "Summing Up Russia's Real Nuclear Fears."]

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](#)).

Summing Up Russia's Real Nuclear Fears

Exclusive: The mainstream U.S. media's relentless Russia-bashing has obscured Moscow's legitimate fears about Washington's provocative nuclear-missile strategies, which could lead to Armageddon, explains Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The conflicts between Washington and Moscow keep on growing: Ukraine and Syria, rival war games, "hybrid" wars and "cyber-wars." Talk of a new Cold War doesn't do justice to the stakes.

"My bottom line is that the likelihood of a nuclear catastrophe today is greater than it was during the Cold War," [declares](#) former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry.

If a new Trump administration wants to peacefully reset relations with Russia, there's no better way to start than by canceling the deployment of costly new ballistic missile defense systems in Eastern Europe. [One such system went live in Romania this May](#); another is slated to go live in Poland in 2018. Few U.S. actions have riled President Putin as much as this threat to erode Russia's nuclear deterrent.

Only last month, at a meeting in Sochi with Russian military leaders to discuss advanced new weapons technology, [Putin vowed](#), "We will continue to do all we need to ensure the strategic balance of forces. We view any attempts to change or dismantle it, as extremely dangerous. Our task is to effectively neutralize any military threats to Russia's security, including those posed by the newly-deployed strategic missile defense systems."

Putin [accused](#) unnamed countries – obviously led by the United States – of "nullifying" international agreements on missile defense "in an effort to gain unilateral advantages."

Moscow has reacted to this perceived threat with more than mere words. It is developing new and deadlier nuclear missiles, [including the SS-30](#), to counter

U.S. defenses. It has rebuffed new arms control negotiations. And it has provocatively stationed nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad to “target . . . the facilities that . . . start posing a threat to us,” as Putin put it last month.

If a new arms race is underway, it’s not for lack of warning. The Russians have voiced their concerns about missile defenses for years and years, without any serious acknowledgment from Washington. From their vantage point, the apparent bad faith of successive U.S. administrations, Democratic as well as Republican, is a flashing red light to which they had to respond.

Russia’s Nightmare

From the earliest days of President Reagan’s Strategic Defense (“Star Wars”) Initiative to make ballistic missiles “impotent and obsolete,” an alarmed Moscow has viewed U.S. efforts to build a missile shield as a long-term threat to their nuclear deterrent.

In 2002, President Bush one-upped Reagan and unilaterally canceled the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972. He did so after Russia’s foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, publicly pleaded with Washington not to terminate this landmark arms control agreement.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Ivanov warned that such a move would set back recent progress in Russian-U.S. relations and destroy “30 years of efforts by the world community” to reduce the danger of nuclear war. Russia would be forced, against its desire for international cooperation, to build up its own forces in response. The arms race would be back in full force – leaving the United States less secure, not more.

But with Russia still reeling from the neoliberal “shock therapy” that it suffered through during the 1990s, the neoconservatives (then in charge of U.S. foreign policy) were confident of winning such an arms race. In 2002, President Bush adopted a National Security Strategy that explicitly called for U.S. military superiority over every other power. To that end, he called on the Pentagon to develop a ground-based missile defense system within two years.

Since then, that program has lined the pockets of major U.S. military contractors without achieving any notable successes. Critics – including the U.S. General Accountability Office, National Academy of Sciences and Union of Concerned Scientists – have blasted the program for failing more than half of its operational tests. Today, after the expenditure of more than \$40 billion, it enjoys bipartisan support mainly as a jobs program.

Russia fears, however, that it’s only a matter of time before the U.S. perfects

its missile shield technology enough to erode the deterrent capabilities of Moscow's nuclear arsenal.

Promoting U.S. Nuclear Primacy

That specter was highlighted in 2006 when two U.S. strategic arms experts declared in the pages of the establishment-oriented Foreign Affairs that the age of nuclear deterrence "is nearing an end. Today, for the first time in almost 50 years, the United States stands on the verge of attaining nuclear primacy. It will probably soon be possible for the United States to destroy the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a first strike. . . . Unless they reverse course rapidly, Russia's vulnerability will only increase over time."

The authors, Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, added, "Washington's pursuit of nuclear primacy helps explain its missile defense strategy." Missile defense, they pointed out, is not the same as population defense. No conceivable defense could truly protect American cities against an all-out attack by Russia, or even China. Rather, a leaky shield "would be valuable primarily in an offensive context, not a defensive one – as an adjunct to a U.S. first-strike capability, not as a standalone shield."

"If the United States launched a nuclear attack against Russia (or China)," they explained, "the targeted country would be left with a tiny surviving arsenal – if any at all. At that point, even a relatively modest or inefficient missile-defense system might well be enough to protect against any retaliatory strikes, because the devastated enemy would have so few warheads and decoys left."

As if to make that scenario a reality, the Bush administration soon announced plans to install an anti-missile base in Poland and a radar control center in the Czech Republic – ostensibly to counter a nuclear threat from Iran. No matter that Iran had neither nuclear weapons nor long-range ballistic missiles – or that Washington had rebuffed Russia's offer to cooperate on building missile defenses closer to Iran. No, Moscow was supposed to believe President Bush's assurance that "Russia is not the enemy."

Republican hawks in Congress didn't get the message. Said Rep. Trent Franks of Arizona, "This is not just about missile defense; this is about demonstrating to Russia that America is still a nation of resolve . . . and we're not going to let Russian expansionism intimidate everyone."

Yet when Russian officials reacted with alarm, and warned of the potential for a "new Cold War," American news accounts accused them of being "bellicose."

Obama Blows Up the Reset Button

Taking office in 2009, President Obama promised a new era of nuclear sanity. Again, the Russians pleaded for an end to the missile defense program in Eastern Europe. Privately, they expressed a new and genuine concern – that a future U.S. administration could secretly fit interceptor rockets with nuclear warheads and use them to “decapitate” Russia’s top leadership with “virtually no warning time.” Russia’s response: retaliate at the first sign of an incoming strike, without hesitating to check if it’s a false alarm.

Obama and his team didn’t heed the warnings. Instead, they snubbed Putin – and the entire Russian leadership – by marching ahead with the missile shield deployment in Eastern Europe, still insulting Moscow’s intelligence with the pretense that it was a defense against Iran.

Obama’s “reset button” was the first casualty of his nuclear policy. In 2011, a despairing President Dmitry Medvedev warned that Russia would have no choice but to respond exactly as Putin has done, by upgrading the offensive capabilities of Russian nuclear missiles and deploying Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. Still to come may be a Russian withdrawal from the New START treaty, which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed as her greatest accomplishment in the field of arms control.

President Obama never intended to expand his limited missile defense program into an existential threat to Russia’s nuclear deterrent, but he opened that door. Exactly as Moscow has long feared, hawks in Congress now are chomping at the bit to spend what it takes to build an all-out missile defense system, which former Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned would be “enormously destabilizing not to mention unbelievably expensive.”

One 2003 study pegged the possible cost of a full defensive shield covering the United States at more than \$1 trillion. But that’s a small price compared to what could happen if a jittery Russian military command, armed to the teeth with nuclear missiles set on hair-trigger alert to counter a successful U.S. first strike, receives a false warning of just such an attack. Such a scenario has happened more than once.

One of these days such a mistake may prompt an all-out Russian nuclear launch – and then, not even a full missile defense will spare the United States, and much of the world, from devastation.

Jonathan Marshall is author of many recent articles on arms issues, including “How World War III Could Start,” “NATO’s Provocative Anti-Russian Moves,” “Escalations in a New Cold War,” “Ticking Closer to Midnight,” and “Turkey’s Nukes: A Sum of All Fears.”

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As always, thank you for your support.

Robert Parry

Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.

Escalating the Risky Fight with Russia

Exclusive: To box in President-elect Trump, the neocons and liberal hawks are pushing for "crippling sanctions" against Russia that they see as crucial to

their dangerous “regime change” agenda in Moscow, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The neocons and their liberal-interventionist chums never seem to think through one of their “regime change” schemes. It’s enough that they wrote the plan down in some op-ed article or reached a consensus at a think-tank conference. After that, all there is to do is to generate the requisite propaganda, often accompanied by intelligence “leaks” and maybe some heartbreaking photos of children, to rile up the American people so they can be easily herded into the next slaughterhouse.

We’ve seen this pattern play out over and over again, from Iraq to Libya to Syria to Ukraine. You could even go back to the 1980s and the project for arming Afghanistan’s mujahedeen and a collection of international jihadists led by Osama bin Laden, a project enthusiastically supported by both Republicans and Democrats.

The one consistent in these bloody follies is that the neocon/liberal-hawk plans never work out as they were drawn up. Time and again, it turns out that the great idea – looking so good on the op-ed page or sounding so smart at the think-tank conference – wasn’t all that great or smart after all.

Remember how the Iraqis were going to welcome U.S. troops with flowers and how neocon favorite Ahmed Chalabi would be hailed as Iraq’s new leader; or how the murder of Muammar Gaddafi would be followed by the flowering of Libyan democracy; or how enforcing the “must go” edict on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would be accomplished pretty quickly; or how overthrowing democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich was sure to put a stop to Ukraine’s endemic corruption.

Instead, the people in those countries were left bloodied and battered while the areas around them became destabilized, too, now with those social and economic disruptions extending all the way to Europe, which not that long ago was one of the world’s bastions of stability. And, oh, yes, the Afghan operation from the 1980s gave us the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

No Accountability

The neocon/liberal-hawk elitists never seem to get anything right but they are so well-connected that they never are held accountable. They just keep coming up with new gambits, expressed with the same confidence and certainty – all beautifully explained in the next round of op-eds and at the think-tank conferences.

When the new scheme arrives, it's as if the earlier disasters hadn't happened. Across the ideological spectrum, the mainstream media's star reporters act as if the only proper reaction toward the latest brilliant idea is to show undying credulity. The only questions that get asked of politicians are why they aren't intervening faster and going bigger, whether the new plan is to blast the targeted country in a "shock and awe" display or ship weapons to some proxy force which may include jihadists and neo-Nazis or sabotage a country's economy so the people will support a coup out of hunger and desperation.

Time and again, the unhappy country at the receiving end of America's latest "regime change" project ends up wallowing in pools of blood as the international circle of chaos widens. But the U.S. public's attention quickly goes elsewhere, like a child bored with a broken Christmas toy. The targeted country is mostly forgotten, except for the occasional op-ed or think-tank complaint that if only the politicians had started the wars earlier or had dispatched a bigger military force or had kept U.S. soldiers there indefinitely or had done more to undermine some demonized leader, then the neocon/liberal-hawks scheme would have worked out just perfectly. Which sets us up for the next grand idea.

Dropping the Big One

But the next grand idea arguably could be the last one. After several years of intensifying anti-Russian propaganda, the United States reportedly is ready to escalate the New Cold War with Russia by inflicting new punishments in retaliation for the still-unproven allegation that President Vladimir Putin authorized the hacking of Democratic emails and then released them to the American people via WikiLeaks.

Though the Obama administration has yet to provide any public evidence to support the charges, mainstream news outlets – particularly The Washington Post and The New York Times – have lapped up their own leaks from the Central Intelligence Agency, which appears to have been operating under instructions from President Obama to discredit President-elect Donald Trump's victory.

The hope seemed to be that the CIA's claims about Putin's interference in the election could anger enough electors to the Electoral College to prevent Trump from getting the 270 required votes on Dec. 19 and thus toss the selection of a new president into the House of Representatives, which under the Twelfth Amendment would pick from the Electoral College's top three vote-getters (who turned out to be Trump, Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who received four votes from Clinton's electors in Washington State).

Though this Electoral College coup failed – Trump got more than the 270 votes he needed – the CIA's claims about Russian hacking lived on with neocon and

liberal-hawk members of Congress (not to mention pretty much every important op-ed writer and editorialist in America) demanding that Russia be made to pay a heavy price.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, spoke for many of his colleagues when he tweeted, "My goal is to put on President Trump's desk crippling sanctions against Russia."

In a new leak to The Washington Post on Wednesday, Obama administration officials vowed to do just that, readying "a series of measures to punish Russia for its interference in the 2016 presidential election, including economic sanctions and diplomatic censure [as well as] covert actions that will probably involve cyber-operations."

A New Escalation

This latest U.S. escalation of tensions with nuclear-armed Russia actually culminates at least a half decade of probing by the United States for Moscow's vulnerabilities to "regime change," an operation that appears to have begun around Russia's 2011 elections and continued with protests against Putin's election in 2012, street demonstrations dubbed by the West's media as the "snow revolution," since all these strategies seem to require a "color" or a similar special identification marking.

Former Secretary of State (and defeated Democratic presidential nominee) Hillary Clinton has cited Putin's belief that she orchestrated this interference in Russian politics as his supposed motive for leaking emails that embarrassed her campaign. And, without doubt, the Russian election protests had the strong support of various U.S.-based "non-governmental organizations" that receive funding either from the U.S. government or from U.S. "pro-democracy" foundations.

There is also no doubt that the West's neocons and liberal hawks want desperately to instigate a "regime change" in Moscow, in part, as punishment for Putin interfering in their "regime change" schemes for Syria and Iran.

In 2013, by getting Syria to surrender its chemical weapons, Putin helped thwart plans for a U.S. bombing campaign against the Syrian military in retaliation for a mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus that the Obama administration and Western media immediately blamed on President Assad though later evidence suggested that it was a provocation carried out by Islamic extremists connected to Al Qaeda.

Putin also assisted Obama in securing concessions from Iran regarding the agreement to prevent it from developing a nuclear weapon, which disrupted

Israeli and neocon hopes for a plan to “bomb-bomb-bomb” Iran, as Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, once described.

Putin’s Payback

The neocons and liberal hawks delivered Putin his first dose of payback when they helped orchestrate a putsch in neighboring Ukraine in 2014 that ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, a Hillary Clinton favorite, was caught on an unsecure phone line discussing with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt how they would “glue” or “midwife” a change in government that would put Nuland’s choice, Arseniy “Yats is the guy” Yatsenyuk in power. Meanwhile, the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) sponsored scores of projects inside Ukraine for training activists and funding journalists.

Another key project seeking to undermine Yanukovich’s government was the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Open Society foundation of billionaire currency speculator George Soros.

Amid a massive propaganda barrage, street protests in Kiev and open encouragement from senior U.S. officials, a violent coup on Feb. 22, 2014 – spearheaded by neo-Nazi street fighters – forced Yanukovich to flee for his life and brought Yatsenyuk to power as Ukraine’s prime minister.

When ethnic Russians from Crimea and eastern Ukraine rejected this unconstitutional transfer of power – and Crimeans voted overwhelmingly to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia – the State Department and the mainstream Western media reported this resistance as a “Russian invasion” or “Russian aggression” – prompting the first wave of U.S. economic sanctions to punish Russia.

The European Union was brought into the sanctions regime after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, and the U.S. government immediately blamed Russia. The crash investigation – though technically “Dutch-led” – was effectively put under the control of Ukraine’s unsavory intelligence agency, the SBU, which has among its mandates the protection of Ukrainian government secrets and has been implicated in torturing captured ethnic Russians.

Though I was told that at least some CIA analysts saw the hand of Ukrainian extremists behind the MH-17 shoot-down – and Dutch intelligence reported that the only powerful anti-aircraft missiles in the area that day were under the control of the Ukrainian military – Obama refused to release the details of the U.S. intelligence assessment, allowing the SBU-dominated investigation to pin

the blame on Russia. [See [here](#) and [here](#).]

The U.S.-government-subsidized OCCRP also was involved in the analysis of the so-called “Panama Papers,” a law firm’s purloined financial records that led to front-page stories seeking to tie Putin to off-shored wealth even though Putin’s name was not found in the documents.

The West’s thorough demonization of Putin set the stage for Hillary Clinton’s attempts to delegitimize Donald Trump by portraying him as Putin’s “puppet” because the Republican nominee advocated seeking normalized relations with Russia and cooperating with Moscow on counter-terrorism operations against Islamic State.

The Clinton campaign theme, which I was personally briefed on, sought to convince journalists that Trump was a Russian agent completely under Putin’s control. That theme provided the backdrop for the CIA’s leaked allegations about Russian hacking of the emails of the Democratic National Committee, which revealed how the DNC improperly tilted the primary playing field in favor of Clinton over Sen. Bernie Sanders. A second batch of emails from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta disclosed the contents of Clinton’s paid speeches to Wall Street interests and pay-to-play aspects of the Clinton money machine.

Obama’s Hand

Given Obama’s refusal to let CIA analysts brief reporters about internal CIA dissent questioning the mainstream consensus blaming the sarin attack on Syria and the MH-17 shoot-down on Russia – because those briefings might undercut the prevailing propaganda narratives – it’s a fair assumption that Obama authorized the CIA leaks to The Washington Post and other major media outlets about the alleged Russian hacks.

I’ve also been told that there is some internal CIA dissent against the publicly released claim of Russian responsibility for the Democratic leaks, an analytical dispute that appears to center less on whether Russian intelligence and other entities may have hacked the email accounts than whether Russia then released the material to WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and former British Ambassador Craig Murray, an Assange associate who says he communicated with one of the sources (or a representative) in a meeting in Washington in September, say the emails did not come from the Russian government. Murray also has indicated that the two batches of emails had two different sources, both American, one a disgruntled Democrat and the other possibly from the U.S. intelligence community.

Despite these doubts, the CIA’s leaked claims about alleged Russian

responsibility for the hacks have prompted congressional demands for a thorough investigation, possibly even a special committee like the ones that examined the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals.

Telling the Full Story

If such an inquiry is undertaken – and assuming it's not a pre-packaged deal that starts with the conclusion of Russian guilt and assembles whatever is necessary to "prove" the case – the investigation should also obtain testimony regarding Putin's suspicion that Secretary of State Clinton, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Soros organization had a hand in the aborted "snow revolution" in Moscow from 2011 to 2013.

The investigation also should explore whether Obama assigned the CIA's leadership to leak information to the mainstream media in a failed attempt to reverse the outcome of the U.S. election by trying to stampede the Electoral College into denying Trump the presidency. Under the CIA's charter, it is forbidden to operate domestically or interfere in U.S. politics, a concern that worried President Harry Truman at the CIA's founding.

One of the most serious abuses of the Reagan administration was its systematic politicizing of the CIA's analytical division when it was under the control of CIA Director William Casey and his deputy, Robert Gates.

According to the CIA's then-chief Russia expert Melvin Goodman and other former CIA analysts, the Casey-Gates team broke down the agency's historic tradition of objective analysis and bullied CIA analysts into producing phony intelligence that served President Reagan's ideological agenda.

That corruption continued through both Republican and Democratic presidents, including George W. Bush's "slam-dunk" National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's non-existent WMD and now including Obama's selective release of data on Syria, Ukraine and Russia.

Going to Extremes

As destructive as the past distortion of intelligence has been, the Obama CIA's apparent interference in an attempt to reverse the outcome of a U.S. presidential election arguably ranks with the worst intelligence scandals in U.S. history.

And, compounding the CIA's political intervention is the fact that this controversy has taken on a life of its own as the Obama administration prepares to hit nuclear-armed Russia with a combination of new economic sanctions and covert cyber-attacks, apparently with the goal of heading off any rapprochement

between Putin and Trump.

The neocons and their liberal-hawk allies clearly have in mind plans for making the Russian economy scream and somehow engineering a “regime change” in Moscow despite Putin’s current 80 percent approval ratings. But this latest scheme – like the earlier ones – is almost surely not going to end as its architects have drawn it up.

While the neocons and liberal hawks may dream about some Western-beloved “liberal” being carried into the Kremlin while Putin is dragged away, the likelihood that the Russian people would put up with another round of American-prescribed “shock therapy” – in which Russia’s resources were plundered, Russian life expectancy plunged, and various U.S. “advisers” and hedge funds made out like bandits – is remote.

The far more likely result of Sen. Graham’s “crippling sanctions” would be that a hardline Russian nationalist would rise, lacking Putin’s calculating temperament. Instead of Putin and his famous sang froid, the world would likely be facing some hot-blooded extremist determined to defend the honor of Mother Russia even to the point of pulling out the nuclear codes and pushing the button.

The neocons and liberal hawks may believe they’ve got this New Cold War all figured out, but if their record holds, they could easily be driving the world toward a hot war that would indeed be the war to end all wars – and to end humanity as well.

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).

Christmas and Endless War

There is a profound contradiction for Christians who celebrate the “prince of peace” at Christmas and then return to the business of endless – and expanding – war the rest of the year, as the Rev. Howard Bess observes.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

Christmastime is a good time for a frank discussion about Christianity and war.

The great issue of Christmas is not whether or not Jesus was born of a virgin but whether his followers will embrace his message of peace on this earth.

My thinking goes to the tradition of the cross. Crucifixion on a cross was a cruel execution practiced daily by the rulers from Rome. For his executioners, Jesus was simply one more rabble-rouser who was disturbing the peace. Jesus practiced non-resistance to the very end. He looked at his murderers; then he looked to the heavens and spoke the words of reconciliation: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

Christian churches (which have often endorsed wars between nations and even wars of conquest) have somehow missed the words of Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: "God...has given us the ministry of reconciliation." There is no reconciliation in killing or in punishment. War and punishment of any kind are an admission of failure.

In April 2016, a large gathering of devout Roman Catholics gathered at the Vatican to discuss "Nonviolence and Just Peace." It was not a gathering of only select Bishops and Catholic hierarchy. Ordinary priests and nuns were there as were devout social scientists, theologians, diplomats and other lay persons who see themselves as peacekeepers.

While the search for world peace goes beyond the issue of war, all participants agreed that what is being done is not working. Included in the non-functional approaches is the centuries old teaching of "Just War." ("Just War" theory within Christianity dates back to Saint Augustine who defended the necessity of war amid the collapsing Roman Empire. The doctrine was refined by Thomas Aquinas in the Thirteenth Century who laid out principles that justified war as long as it was waged by a properly instituted authority, pursued a good and just purpose, and had the ultimate goal of establishing peace.)

Sister Nazik Matty, an Iraqi nun who was driven from her home in Mosul by ISIS, has become a key spokesperson for the movement for Just Peace, telling the conference: "Which of the wars we have been in is a just war? ... In my country there was no just war. War is the mother of ignorance, isolation, and poverty. Please tell the world there is no such thing as a just war. I say this as a daughter of war."

On behalf of Sister Nazik Matty and all others who have been victims of war, I repeat: There is no just war. There is no reconciliation in punishment of any kind. There is no suggestion in the teachings of Jesus that there is any justice to be found in killing or punishment. This is true whether it is a slap in the face of a child by a parent, a bullet in the heart by a murderer, or the touch of a button in a drone control center.

Though I am a proud graduate of Wheaton College, a centerpiece of Evangelical theology and leadership, I have long been out of step with Wheaton's style of Christian orthodoxy. I am a Baptist and have a deep commitment to a diversity that is not allowed in the Wheaton faculty.

Wheaton College taught me to think and nurtured my devotion to Christ, but there is a blight on the Wheaton campus. The ROTC unit at Wheaton trains very bright, capable persons for service in the United States military. The motto of Wheaton College is "For Christ and His Kingdom." Confronting my beloved alma mater is not easy. The Wheaton College motto is compromised as long as the ROTC unit remains on campus.

Alternative Path

I have always found it difficult to be a critic unless I also point to a better way. "War is not the answer" is a meaningless statement without an alternative path proposal. I offer these proposals as a witness to the non-religious and as a challenge to believers of every kind. I write as a devoted follower of Jesus, the peasant teacher from Nazareth and true son of God.

RID OURSELVES OF JUST WAR TEACHINGS IN OUR CHURCHES, COLLEGES AND SEMINARIES. The thinking of Augustine and Aquinas has been advocated for centuries and has no record of success, only failures. There has never been a just war.

EMBRACE THE MINISTRY AND VOCATION OF RECONCILIATION. EXPLORE ITS MEANING AND PURSUE ITS PRACTICE. The kingdom of God is not a gated community or a ghetto. It is not about fences or guard posts. It is about love, kindness and justice.

PRACTICE REPENTANCE AND ABOUNDING GRACE. Blame, accusation, and finger pointing are cancers. Remember and proclaim Jesus's words from the cross.

REPAIR WHAT IS BROKEN AND CREATE, BUILD, AND SHARE WHAT IS NEEDED. We are a throwaway society. War has turned human beings into throwaway things, too. Heal people and create for their benefit.

DEVELOP PERSONAL LIFESTYLES COMPATIBLE WITH THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF JESUS FROM NAZARETH. I return to Matthew, chapters 5-7, for my own benefit and spiritual health. I urge you all to do the same. I pray a blessed new year, full of peace for you all and for all our neighbors in the world.

The Rev. Howard Bess is a retired American Baptist minister, who lives in Palmer, Alaska. His email address is hdbss@mtaonline.net.

Obama's Dive into the Syrian Abyss

The bloody Syrian war got bloodier when President Obama allowed U.S. Mideast allies and hawkish U.S. officials to supply weapons to Sunni jihadists including those fighting alongside Al Qaeda's affiliate, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

President Barack Obama has long been under fire from the U.S. national security elite and the media for failing to intervene aggressively against the Assad regime. But the real strategic blunder was not that Barack Obama didn't launch yet another war in Syria, but that he decided to go along with the ambitions of America's Sunni allies to create and arm a Syrian opposition army to overthrow the regime in the first place.

Now a former Obama administration official who is knowledgeable on the internal discussions on Syria policy, speaking to this writer on condition of anonymity, has shed new light on how and why that fateful decision was made.

The former official revealed that when Obama made the first move toward supporting the arming of Syrian opposition forces, the President failed to foresee the risk of a direct Iranian or Russian intervention on behalf of the Syrian regime in response to an externally armed opposition – because his advisers had failed to take this likelihood into account themselves.

The story of this policy failure begins after military resistance to the Assad regime began in spring and summer 2011. In August 2011, national security officials began urging Obama to call on Assad to step down, according to the former official.

Obama did make a statement suggesting that Assad should step aside, but he made it clear privately that he had no intention of doing anything about it. "He viewed it as simply a suggestion, not a hard policy," the ex-official said.

But soon after that, a bigger issue arose for the administration's policy: how to respond to pressure from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for a U.S. commitment to help overthrow Assad. In September 2011, the Saudis and Turks not only wanted the U.S. to provide arms to the opposition. "They wanted the US to provide anti-aircraft missiles and anti-tank missiles," recalled the ex-official.

Turkey even offered to send troops into Syria to overthrow Assad, but only if the U.S. and NATO agreed to create a "no-fly zone" to protect them. But Obama refused to provide U.S. arms to the Syrian rebels and also opposed the Sunni

foes of Assad providing such heavy weapons.

“He wasn’t willing to go along with anything except small arms,” said the former official.

Apparently to assuage the dissatisfaction of the Sunni allies, then-CIA Director David Petraeus devised a plan, which Obama approved, to help move the small arms from Libyan government stocks in Benghazi to Turkey.

Confirming the 2014 story by Seymour Hersh, the ex-official, recalled, “It was highly secret but officials involved in the Middle East learned of the program by word of mouth.” The combination of those two policy decisions committed Obama – albeit half-heartedly – to the armed overthrow of the Assad regime.

The former administration official confirmed the recollections of both former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Pentagon official Derek Chollet that Obama’s advisers believed Assad’s fall was inevitable. Some of those advisers believed Assad lacked the “cunning and fortitude” to remain in power, as Chollet put it.

Underestimating Iran and Russia

More importantly, when Obama was making crucial Syria policy decisions in September 2011, no one on his national security team warned him that Iran had a very major national security interest in keeping the Assad regime in power that could draw the Iranians into the war, according to the former official.

Obama’s advisers assumed instead that neither Iran nor Russia would do more than offer token assistance to keep Assad in power, so there was no risk of an endless, bloody sectarian war.

“Both Hezbollah and Iran had made noises that they were displeased with Assad’s handling of the crisis, and [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah even said publicly he should take a softer approach,” the ex-official recalled, “so it was believed Iran would not intervene militarily to save him.”

In fact, however, Iran regarded Syria as crucial to its ability to resupply Hezbollah, whose large arsenal of missiles was in turn a necessary element in Iran’s deterrent to an Israeli attack.

“Syria had been Iran’s and Hezbollah’s security in depth,” the ex-official said, but Obama’s advisers “didn’t have a clue” about Iran’s overriding national security interest in preventing Assad’s overthrow by the overwhelmingly Sunni opposition backed by a Sunni international coalition with U.S. support.

That major error of omission became obvious as the war unfolded. After the city

of Qusayr near the Lebanese border was taken over by the Free Syrian Army in July 2012, opposition forces in southern Syria were able to get military supplies from across the border in Lebanon. It became clear in the months that followed that al-Nusra Front forces (Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate) were heavily involved in that front of the war.

Hezbollah Strikes Back

In May 2013, Hezbollah troops from the Bekaa Valley intervened in support of a regime counteroffensive to retake the city – obviously at Iranian urging. That Iranian-Hezbollah intervention resulted in the biggest defeat of rebel forces of the war up to that time.

But instead of questioning the soundness of the original decision to cooperate with the Sunni coalition's "regime change" strategy, Obama's national security team doubled down on its bet. Secretary of State John Kerry put strong pressure on Obama to use military force against the Assad regime.

That resulted in a public commitment by the Obama administration in June 2013 to provide military support to the opposition for the first time. The deepening commitment nearly led to a new U.S. war against the Assad regime in September, after the chemical attack on the Damascus suburbs in August 2013.

The Obama administration even agreed to the Sunni states' provision of anti-tank weapons to an armed opposition now openly dominated by al-Qaeda's Nusra Front.

That culminated in a Nusra Front-led command's conquest of Idlib province and the subsequent Russian intervention, which the administration's national security team obviously had not anticipated either. Obama and his advisers blundered on Syria in thinking that they were not getting into a high-risk war situation.

But there is a deeper level of explanation for the willingness of Obama and his advisers to go along with the inherent risk of another "regime change" policy – even if Obama was half-hearted about it at best and limited direct U.S. involvement in it.

The administration was unwilling to be at cross-purposes with its Sunni allies, the former official recalled, because of the direct U.S. military interests at stake in its alliances with those three states: the Saudis effectively controlled U.S. access to the naval base in Bahrain, Turkey controlled the airbase at Incirlik, and Qatar controlled land and air bases that had become central to U.S. military operations in the region.

What was a disastrous blunder in terms of the consequences for the Syrian

people, therefore, was the only choice acceptable to the powerful national security institutions that constitute what has become the U.S. permanent war state. Their first concern was to ensure that existing military and intelligence arrangements and relationships were not jeopardized.

And Obama was not prepared to override that concern, despite his well-known skepticism about any arming of anti-Assad rebels in light of the blowback from America's support for the Afghan Mujahedeen in the 1980s.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This article was originally published by Middle East Eye.]

How Israel Misuses the Bible

By fuming over a U.N. resolution against Israel's settlements on Palestinian land, Israeli leaders reveal their final solution for the Palestinians – to deny them property rights and displace them, says moral theologian Daniel C. Maguire.

By Daniel C. Maguire

Danny Danon, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, let the theological cat out of the bag. When the Security Council rebuked Israel for their land thefts (euphemized as "settlements,") Mr. Danon replied with pious indignation: "Would you ban the French from building in Paris?"

There, in all of its effrontery, is the imperial theology that birthed Zionism. David Ben Gurion said of Palestine "God promised it to us." Yitzhak Baer wrote in 1947: "God gave to every nation its place, and to the Jews he gave Palestine."

So in this hallucinatory theology, just as God gave Paris to France the Zionist deity gave Palestine to Jews including the right to build whatever they want wherever they want it. If the Zionist god posted a "Jews only" sign on Palestine, the presence of non-Jews is a sacrilege and their land claims are specious. If nothing is intelligible outside its history, as the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin put it, Ambassador Danon's French allusion can only be understood against this theological backdrop.

Yigal Allon, a commander of the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the

Haganah, the paramilitary force that fought to drive the British from Palestine, did not eschew the language of “cleansing,” a term now used to describe a “crime against humanity.” He boasted that the Zionists were “cleansing” Palestine of Arabs.

The religious goal of Zionism Ben Gurion said is to “secure ... that the whole of Palestine will be Jewish, and not only a part of it.” Joseph Weitz, the administrator responsible for the colonization of Palestine, stated the creed bluntly: “Between ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both people together in this country. ... The only solution is a Palestine ... without Arabs.”

In 1919, a fact-finding mission appointed by President Woodrow Wilson reported that in meetings with Zionists it was clear that the Zionists looked forward to a “complete dispossession of the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine.”

Zionist ersatz theology imagines a capricious god who is into real estate distribution, a god who hands out eternal deeds to people of his choosing. It is the will of the Creator that all others be cleansed and their property rights be negated.

Misunderstanding the Bible

Zionist theology depends on a fallacious exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. The two key words for properly understanding the Bible are *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. Many of the texts of the Bible *describe* the horrors of a barbaric time. They are not normative or in any sense admirable. The Bible is revered for its *prescriptive* texts which imagined with classical excellence a whole new social order where “there shall be no poor among you,” (Deut 15::4) and where swords will gradually be melted down into plowshares as violent power is subdued. In the prescriptive texts we see the beauty of Judaism which Zionism violates.

The Zionists don’t know the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive. They take ugly biblical descriptive texts and use them to make imperial policy. Texts such as this from Deuteronomy: “When Yahweh your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canannites, the Perizzites, the Hivites ... and when Yahweh your God gives them over to you ... you must utterly destroy them. ... Show them no mercy.” (7:1-11, 9:1-5, 11:8-9)

Following the “logic” of such texts, the Palestinians are now the new Hittites, Girgashites and Canaanites to whom no mercy is to be shown or property rights to be honored. Zionist theology dishonors Judaism.

The worst of mad men, said the poet Alexander Pope, is a saint gone mad.

Ironically Jews should know the horrors that religiously motivated people can wreak. Nothing so animates the will for good or for ill like the tincture of the sacred. Christian animus against Jews unleashed slaughters, pogroms, segregation and influenced the anti-Jewish venom that Nazism mechanized with genocidal force.

The survival of Israel living in accord with international law, alongside a Palestinian state, is the goal that has no need of obstructive faux theology. Mr. Netanyahu like the High Priest is rending his garments in outrage, threatening to smite all nations that would challenge Israel's manifest destiny to build in Palestine like the French can build in Paris. A bit of curative theology is needed to correct this brutal and ignorant madness. The Security Council gave the cure a jump start.

Daniel C. Maguire is a Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit institution in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is author of *A Moral Creed for All Christians* and *The Horrors We Bless: Rethinking the Just-War Legacy [Fortress Press]*. He can be reached at daniel.maguire@marquette.edu

A Sour Holiday Season for Neocons

Exclusive: For the past couple of decades, the neocons have ruled the roost of American foreign policy, but they have now suffered some stunning reversals that have left them fuming, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

America's extended Christmas holiday season, stretching through much of November and all of December, has not been a happy time for Official Washington's dominant neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks.

First, they had to lick their wounds over the defeat of their preferred U.S. presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton; then they had to watch as their "moderate" Syrian rebel proxies and their Al Qaeda allies were routed from east Aleppo; and finally they watched in disbelief as the Obama administration permitted passage of a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel's illegal settlements on Palestinian lands.

To say that the neocons and liberal hawks have not taken these reversals well would be an understatement. They have pretty much blamed Clinton's defeat on everyone but themselves and Clinton herself. They have been apoplectic over

Aleppo and their lost dream of “regime change” in Syria. And they have sputtered in outrage over President Obama’s failure to veto the Israeli anti-settlement resolution.

Regarding Clinton’s defeat, her embrace of the neocon/liberal-hawk “regime change” obsessions siphoned off enthusiasm among the peace faction of the Democratic Party, a significant and activist part of the progressive movement.

Clinton’s alignment with the neocon/liberal hawks may have helped her with the mainstream media, but the MSM has lost much of its credibility by making itself a handmaiden in leading the nation to wars and more wars.

Average Americans also could feel the contempt that these elites had for the rest of us. The neocons and liberal hawks had come to believe in the CIA’s concept of “perception management,” feeling that the American people were items to be controlled, not the nation’s sovereigns to be informed and respected. Instead of “We the People,” Official Washington’s elites treated us like “Us the Sheep.”

Though this “perception management” idea took hold during the Reagan administration – largely in reaction to the public’s distrust of U.S. foreign policy following the Vietnam War – it became a bipartisan practice, extending through George W. Bush’s WMD sham about Iraq and into the behavior of the Obama administration in manipulating public opinion about Syria, Libya, Ukraine and Russia, pretty much any country targeted for “regime change.”

So, when this establishment tried to force Hillary Clinton’s coronation down the nation’s throat, enough Americans choked at the idea – even to the extent of voting for the eminently unqualified Donald Trump – to deny Clinton the White House. Indeed, many Americans who reluctantly did vote for Clinton did so only because they considered Trump even more unfit to lead the nation. The two candidates were in a fierce competition for who would arouse the most public revulsion.

No Self-Reflection

But the neocons and liberal hawks are not ones for self-reflection and self-criticism. They move from one disaster to the next, finding others to blame and justifying their own failures by publishing self-apologias in the editorial pages of The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal.

Thus, for the past several weeks, we have witnessed daily meltdowns across the mainstream media as neocons and liberal interventionists fume about all the forces that conspired to deny them their God-given right to select who runs America.

The mainstream media ranted about a few incidents of “fake news” – concocted stories designed to get lots of clicks from Trump supporters – despite its own long history of publishing false and misleading stories. The MSM then tried to tar with that “fake news” broad brush serious independent Web sites that simply displayed professional skepticism toward propaganda emanating from the U.S. State Department.

The smear blurred the “fake news scandal” with what was deemed “Russian propaganda.” Anyone who wouldn’t march in lockstep with the State Department’s messaging must be a “Kremlin stooge.” Mainstream media outlets even began demanding that major technology companies, such as Facebook and Google, join in establishing a modern-age Ministry of Truth for the Internet that would punish independent Web sites that didn’t toe the Official Line.

Then, there was the hysteria over the CIA’s still-unproven claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin oversaw a scheme to hack into Democratic emails and expose embarrassing facts, such as the Democratic National Committee’s tilting the primary playing field to favor Clinton over Sen. Bernie Sanders, the contents of Clinton’s paid speeches to her Wall Street benefactors, and pay-to-play features of the Clinton money machine.

Though this information all appeared to be true – and revealed dubious or improper actions by Democratic officials and the Democratic presidential nominee – this truth-telling was also mixed in with the “fake news scandal” and other excuse-making for why Clinton lost. Her defeat was Putin’s fault. It was also FBI Director James Comey’s fault for chastising Clinton for her “extremely careless” handling of U.S. government secrets because she insisted on using a private email server as Secretary of State. And, of course, there was the supposed over-reaction to Clinton calling many Trump supporters a “basket of deplorables.”

In other words, the Clinton campaign appears to have been done in by various people telling the truth about a variety of unsavory aspects of Hillary Clinton’s behavior and decision-making. If none of these facts had come out before the election, the thinking was that Clinton would have won and the neocons/liberal hawks could have continued and even expanded their dominion over U.S. foreign policy.

Yet, to me, the biggest head-scratcher about Clinton’s disastrous campaign was why – after she left the State Department in 2013 – did she jump into the sleazy business of collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars for brief speeches to Wall Street and other special interests.

Her prospective presidency was crucial to the Clinton business model of

soliciting huge donations and fees from corporations and foreign governments to the Clinton Foundation and to allied consulting firms, such as the Podesta Group. These corporate and foreign leaders were pre-paying for “access” to the future U.S. president. However, instead of shielding Clinton from the grubby business of collecting the money herself, she was dispatched to join in the money grabbing.

This greed or hubris left millions of Americans troubled by what a restoration of Clinton control of the Executive Branch might mean. Whether Trump was sincere or not, he hit a nerve when he talked about “draining the swamp.”

‘Regime Change’ Reversals

The neocons and liberal hawks also watched their “regime change” plans for Syria – something that has been on their agenda since the mid-1990s – collapse with this month’s fall of east Aleppo to Syrian government troops, backed by Russia and Iran.

In the battle for Syria, the Obama administration, other Western governments and Persian Gulf states illegally armed a melange of rebels and terrorists. But the West and its allies also deployed state-of-the-art propaganda techniques in which government agencies and like-thinking private foundations invested tens of millions of dollars in training Syrian activists to use social media to rally international support.

This propaganda strategy reached its apex in Aleppo, which was portrayed in Western media as a case of the Syrian government and its allies willfully slaughtering helpless children. The fact that the “moderate” rebels were operating under the command structure of Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, was almost blacked out from the West’s mainstream media coverage.

The last piece of coal in the neocon/liberal-hawk stocking came last week with the U.N. Security Council’s repudiation of Israel’s illegal settlement building on Palestinian lands. Though the Obama administration only abstained from the vote, the lack of a U.S. veto enabled the resolution to pass unanimously, 14-0.

Again, the neocons erupted in fury. Rather than acknowledge that Israel had brought this condemnation on itself by its illegal actions, the neocons lashed out at Obama and the world for not taking Israel’s side. The neocon editors of The Washington Post decried Obama’s decision as “a dangerous parting shot at Israel.”

“It will encourage Palestinians to pursue more international sanctions against Israel rather than seriously consider the concessions necessary for statehood,

and it will give a boost to the international boycott and divestment movement against the Jewish state, which has become a rallying cause for anti-Zionists," the Post lamented.

"At the same time, it will almost certainly not stop Israeli construction in the West Bank, much less in East Jerusalem, where Jewish housing was also deemed by the resolution to be 'a flagrant violation under international law.'"

Similarly, the neocon editors of the Wall Street Journal labeled Obama's abstention his "Anti-Israeli Tantrum," claiming that the non-vote was simply an extension of his "personal pique at adversaries," in this case toward Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Like virtually all neocons, the Post's and Journal's editors insist that the U.S. government always stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel though that usually means that Netanyahu stands wherever he wants and U.S. officials sidle up to him.

Though neocons always blame the Palestinians for not making the concessions that Israel demands – and thus holding them at fault for the moribund peace process – the reality is that the Israeli leadership has no intention of reaching a reasonable two-state solution with the Palestinians and hasn't for at least two decades.

A Fig Leaf

The mirage of a two-state solution has simply been a fig leaf for neocons and their liberal allies to cite as an excuse for allowing Israel's steady gobbling up of Palestinian land to continue apace.

The reality is that Israel is on a steady march to become a full-scale apartheid state in which Palestinians are kept as either stateless or second-class citizens indefinitely. When these facts on the ground can no longer be obfuscated or denied, then the world will have little choice but to engage in the sort of moral and economic pressure that confronted racist South Africa in the 1980s.

At that point, peaceful pressure, such as boycott and divestiture, will be the most reasonable steps to convince Israel that it has veered off onto a dangerously racist course that can't be justified simply by mystical allusions to ancient biblical text.

But the American neocons and their liberal-interventionist junior partners seem more committed to defending Israeli interests than American interests. So, they denounce any international criticism of Israel as "anti-Israel" or "anti-

Semitic,” a smear that has for years terrified politicians and journalists in Official Washington but may now be so overused and abused that it is no longer taken seriously.

The other grave danger from this neocon manipulation of America on behalf of Israeli interests is that this behavior will revive the historical evil of actual anti-Semitism, a threat that could be avoided now by convincing Israel to act like a responsible global partner, not a racist rogue state.

There is some hope among hardline pro-Israeli Americans that Donald Trump will support Israel as it encroaches more and more onto Palestinian lands. But the neocons and liberal hawks recognize that Trump’s “America First” rhetoric is implicitly critical of undertaking more “regime change” projects against governments on Israel’s enemies list.

By appointing a pro-settler American lawyer, David Friedman, as ambassador to Israel, Trump also may be, in effect, giving Netanyahu encouragement to cast aside the “two-state” fig leaf and reveal his territorial ambitions in all their nakedness.

The neocons, of course, would still find arguments to defend Israeli apartheid – we’d hear about what animals the Palestinians are, much as we heard about the savagery of South Africa’s blacks from defenders of white supremacy – but that might finally be pushing beyond what the modern world could tolerate.

Thus, 2016 is ending on a decidedly sour note for the neocons and liberal interventionists. They had high hopes that 2017 would mark the beginning of an escalated “regime change” adventure in Syria and the start of their “mother of all regime change” schemes for destabilizing nuclear-armed Russia and somehow staging a “color revolution” in Moscow, all while Hillary Clinton took the relationship with Israel “to the next level” as she promised in her speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Now, the neocons and liberal hawks find themselves on the outside looking in and one can expect their anger to be voiced at increasing decibels across the mainstream media. But whether anyone still takes them seriously is another question.

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).
