

Clinton's 'Russia Did It' Cop-out

Exclusive: In a last-ditch effort to salvage Hillary Clinton's campaign, establishment Democrats are slinging McCarthyistic mud, joining in smearing independent journalists and blaming everything on Russia, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Clinton machine – running on fumes after Hillary Clinton's failed presidential bid – is pulling out all remaining stops to block Donald Trump's inauguration, even sinking into a new McCarthyism.

In joining a recount effort with slim hopes of reversing the election results, Clinton campaign counsel Marc Elias cited a scurrilous Washington Post article that relied on a shadowy anonymous group, called PropOrNot, that issued a “black list” against 200 or so Internet sites, including some of the most respected sources of independent journalism, claiming they are part of some Russian propaganda network.

In classic McCarthyistic fashion, no evidence was supplied, simply an anonymous smear. But The Washington Post, which itself has devolved into a neoconservative propaganda conveyor belt, published the attack apparently without contacting any of the targeted groups.

Despite the obvious journalistic problems with [this article](#), the desperate Clinton campaign treated it like a lifeline to its drowning hopes for reversing the outcome of the Nov. 8 election.

Announcing that the Clinton campaign would join the recount started by Green presidential nominee Jill Stein aimed at three key Trump states – Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania – Clinton's campaign counsel Elias mentioned the Post story as one of the reasons.

“The Washington Post reported that the Russian government was behind much of the ‘fake news’ propaganda that circulated online in the closing weeks of the election,” Elias wrote.

Pro-Clinton media outlets piled on. Daily Kos [wrote](#) that “Even if they never touched a voting machine, there's absolutely no doubt: Russia hacked the election.”

Besides the three recounts, the Clinton campaign's last-ditch scheme to blame Russia for Hillary Clinton's failure also involves lobbying the electors to the Electoral College to flip their votes from Trump to Clinton. The argument is

that Trump must be part of some grand Russian conspiracy along with those 200 Web sites.

As bizarre as this conspiracy mongering has become, it is quickly emerging as a new Washington “group think.” All the “smart people” at the major networks and newspapers – as well as many Democratic insiders – are just sure that it’s all true.

They have conflated the hysteria over some “fake news” sites – apparently run by some entrepreneurs who realized that pro-Trump “news” got lots of clicks whether the stories were real or not – with the reality that some independent news sites have questioned the U.S. government’s extreme anti-Russian propaganda.

Plus, there was the claim by James Clapper, the Obama administration’s Director of National Intelligence, that the U.S. intelligence community believes that Russian hackers were responsible for giving Democratic Party emails to WikiLeaks. There, too, however, Clapper has provided no evidence to support his claim, and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has denied receiving the leaked emails from the Russian government.

The Russians Did It!

Nevertheless, the Russians have become the latest scapegoats for why Hillary Clinton lost. It wasn’t that she had severe problems as a candidate, carrying heavy baggage from a long line of controversies and recording extremely high negatives from voters. It couldn’t have been that lots of Americans didn’t like or trust her or that she offered no inspirational message or coherent narrative of how she would govern.

No, it had to be the Russians. Of course, previously, the Clinton campaign had blamed the defeat on FBI Director James Comey, who announced just days before the election that he had reopened an investigation into Clinton’s private email server and then closed the inquiry for a second time, thus reminding voters of Clinton’s self-inflicted email scandal.

Though presumably the Clinton campaign is not suggesting that FBI Director Comey is another Russian agent or “useful fool,” blaming him at least had some evidentiary logic, in that he did reopen and then re-shut the Clinton email investigation.

But the Clinton campaign’s Russian complaint comes across even more like a dog-ate-my-homework excuse, except that it also has this ugly side of accusing professional journalists of treason because they wrote skeptical articles that some anonymous Web site didn’t like.

The complaint about alleged Russian hacking of emails also represents an attempt to divert attention away from the fact that the information published by WikiLeaks appears to be entirely true. By all accounts, the leaks revealed genuine communications between Democratic Party leaders and people in the Clinton campaign.

WikiLeaks also revealed the contents of Hillary Clinton's paid speeches to Goldman Sachs and other special interests, words that she delivered to these groups of insiders but wanted to keep from the American voters.

However, somehow this truthful information has morphed into "fake news" without anyone explaining how that transformation occurred. Through the black magic of simply saying "Russians" a few times, truthful information becomes "fake" and everyone's judgment becomes hopelessly clouded.

The point is that even if the Russians did uncover this information and did deliver it to WikiLeaks, the reason that it was "news" was that Clinton had decided to make millions of dollars in speeches, trading off her government service, and then chose to conceal the contents of her speeches from the public.

However, instead of criticizing Clinton for her excessive greed and her obsessive secrecy, these Democrats are blaming the Russians, a classic case of sending out a red herring.

The Truth as 'Fake News'

The same point holds true for Secretary of State Clinton's disastrous decision to evade State Department regulations on handling official documents by instead channeling her emails through a private home email server, thus endangering national security secrets. That was her choice. The Russians weren't involved (unless someone thinks that Hillary Clinton is also a "Russian agent" set on sabotaging her own campaign.)

And, regarding WikiLeaks' disclosures that the Democratic National Committee was working hand-in-glove with Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta and others to ensure that the nomination was delivered to Clinton, the problem was not the source of the information, again it was the information itself. Rank-in-file Democrats had every right to expect a legitimate competition for the party's nomination, not a rigged process designed to deliver the prize to the establishment favorite.

The reason for the party's reforms after the raucous 1968 convention was to take the presidential selection out of the hands of party insiders and give it to the voters. What the emails revealed was that the Clinton machine had become the new-age Democratic Party bosses making sure their candidate prevailed.

Again, even if the Russians were behind the hack, they would only have been providing the American people with newsworthy information about how their democracy was being turned into a sham. The Russians didn't create the sham; the Democratic insiders did.

And, regarding the anonymously developed "black list" of independent media sites, there is no evidence there either that these sites were distributing "fake news," the focus of the current mainstream media hysteria. It was just news that PropOrNot – and presumably its fellow-travelers at The Washington Post – didn't like.

As for Consortiumnews, which was one of the sites that was slimed, we are very careful to present well-reported and well-researched information. Granted, it sometimes isn't what the U.S. State Department wants the American people to hear, but that is because the State Department has become a manufacturing center for propaganda and disinformation during both Republican and Democratic administrations.

It is not the job of independent journalists to simply retail the propaganda that the State Department and other agencies of the U.S. government produce, or that any other government produces. But that seems to be the anti-journalistic attitude that we now see at The Washington Post and The New York Times.

Mainstream Media's Shame

Tragically, the mainstream U.S. media has become a major disseminator of endless amounts of "fake news," including highly misleading and false coverage of the Middle East and of the New Cold War. Possibly the most destructive modern case of "fake news" was the reporting by the Post and Times about the existence of Iraq's fictional WMD.

But there are more recent cases. For instance, the Times and Post have studiously ignored the reality of neo-Nazi and other ultranationalists serving as the tip of the spear for the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014. Occasionally, one of their field reporters will mention the inconvenient truth about the Azov and other battalions running around with Swastikas and SS symbols, but the newspapers will then turn a blind eye to this ugly reality or minimize its significance.

So, neo-Nazis are okay in Ukraine – and if any independent news outlet mentions their existence, you end up on a Washington Post-promoted "black list." However, if some claim is made linking Russia to a neo-Nazi outfit or to some coup plotting – no matter how hazy or dubious the claim – it is trumpeted as loudly as possible.

For example, the Post's lead editorial on Friday asserted, "In NATO member Hungary, Russian agents have been fingered for training with a neo-Nazi militia; in the tiny Balkan state of Macedonia, which is on the verge of joining the [NATO] transatlantic alliance, Moscow is accused of plotting a violent coup."

Though the Post admits the evidence is "incomplete," it presses ahead with the allegations. Yet there is no self-awareness or self-criticism; since the Post strenuously supported the violent coup in Ukraine that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich, a putsch spearheaded by armed neo-Nazis, many of whom have since been incorporated into Ukraine's security forces and have received U.S. military training.

In the weeks before the coup, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland was caught conspiring with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt on how to "midwife" or "glue" the change in Ukraine's leadership. "Yats is the guy," Nuland enthused about Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who was indeed installed as prime minister after Yanukovich was forced to flee for his life.

However, simply recalling that history apparently now is forbidden in Official Washington.

Behind the Clinton Machine

There's also the little-discussed issue of how the Clinton machine evolved and currently works. A short version of that history is that the Democrats got pummeled in 1988, in part, because Republicans "weaponized" their advantage in campaign cash to launch devastating attack ads against Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis, including the race-baiting Willie Horton ads.

Sensing that they couldn't beat the Republican money while trying to represent the average citizen, the national Democrats largely abandoned the working class to join the dollar chase. They developed a pro-corporate agenda pushed by the Democratic Leadership Council and its brightest star, Bill Clinton.

After winning in 1992, Clinton and his understudies, the likes of John Podesta, institutionalized this relationship between the Democratic Party and various financial and other special interests. Then, after Clinton left office in 2001, his money machine's business model adapted, with the Clinton Foundation and various Democratic-led Beltway consulting firms expanding or setting up shop.

The key to the strategy was always that Hillary Clinton would eventually become president and therefore foreign governments and domestic interests had to stay on the Clintons' good side.

The expectation was that Hillary Clinton would get elected in 2008, but her path

was blocked by the charismatic Barack Obama. Obama, however, bailed the Clinton machine out by naming her Secretary of State. So, the Clinton influence with foreign potentates remained.

After Clinton left the State Department in 2013, the business model still thrived because she was widely viewed as the clear front-runner to succeed President Obama – and both Clintons cashed in by giving speeches to various business groups and foreign interests for several hundred thousand dollars a pop, totaling in the millions of dollars.

You might have thought that the Clinton machine would have shielded Hillary Clinton from this apparent pay-to-play operation but instead she joined Bill Clinton in raking in the dough, a sign of startling arrogance or stunning greed.

The idea that Hillary Clinton could “power through” the obvious conflicts of interest that these speeches presented and that she could hide from the voters what she told Goldman Sachs and other well-heeled groups further revealed an extraordinary hubris. Clinton and her entourage brushed aside demands from Sen. Bernie Sanders and his populist backers that she disclose what she had said to the rich and powerful.

That brazenness made her vulnerable to the WikiLeaks disclosures late in the campaign revealing her friendly advice to Goldman Sachs and the others. Again, the only reason that was “news” was because Clinton and her team had stonewalled public demands for the information earlier. But rather than taking the blame for that judgment, they blamed the Russians.

The next question for the national Democrats is what will replace the Clinton machine or will it just be retooled in some new way that keeps the money pouring in. Clearly, the old business model of hitting up donors with the implicit club of a Hillary Clinton presidency in the closet will no longer work.

That means possibly leaner years for both the Clinton Foundation and Clinton-related businesses, such as the Podesta Group, a lobbying firm led by John Podesta’s brother, Tony, which has collected annual lobbying fees in the tens of millions of dollars.

But the Democrats risk a bleak political future if they don’t break away from the corporatist model that Bill and Hillary Clinton have personified over the past quarter century. Or maybe the Democrats can just keep on blaming the Russians.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Orwellian War on Skepticism”](#); [“The Fake News About Fake News”](#); and [“Washington Post’s ‘Fake News’ Guilt.”](#)]

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](#)).

A Bare-Knuckle Fight Over Recounts

Democrats are trying to stop Donald Trump's inauguration by claiming Russian interference in the election, but the White House sees no evidence and Trump is now challenging the recounts, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

When the Clinton campaign said it would join the recount in three Rust Belt states narrowly lost to Donald Trump, it didn't say its motive was overcoming the vote totals but instead to find out if there was "foreign interference" in the election.

"This election cycle was unique in the degree of foreign interference witnessed throughout the campaign," [wrote](#) Clinton campaign counsel Marc Elias. "The U.S. government concluded that Russian state actors were behind the hacks of the Democratic National Committee and the personal email accounts of Hillary for America campaign officials."

During the campaign Hillary Clinton made no secret of where she thought that foreign interference might be coming from. She repeatedly blamed Russia for trying to sway the election.

When the Green Party's Jill Stein launched her recount campaign in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania (the three states that gave Trump the victory), Stein's announcement [quoted](#) her on her website as saying that because "foreign agents" had "hacked into party databases, private email servers, and voter databases in certain states, many Americans are wondering if our election results are reliable." Stein's page was then updated to eliminate reference to "foreign agents" in her [quote](#).

But her recount [petition](#) filed in Wisconsin begins by saying "it was widely reported that foreign operators breached voter registration databases in at least two states and stole hundreds of thousands of voter records." The petition then says the U.S. intelligence community is "confident" Russia was behind the hacks. There is "well-documented and conclusive evidence of foreign interference

in the presidential race before the election ... [that] call[s] into question the results and indicate the possibility that (a) widespread breach occurred," Stein's lawyers wrote.

In fact the intelligence community has never made public its evidence for independent computer experts to weigh in on. After the election, the Obama administration said it had no proof of Russian interference in the election tallies and that the results "accurately reflect the will of the American people."

Citing Press Articles

Nevertheless, Exhibit A in Stein's petition is an affidavit from Professor J. Alex Halderman, a professor of computer science at the University of Michigan, who alleges that Russia hacked the election. Halderman took part in a conference call with the Clinton campaign last month trying to convince the campaign to seek a recount, which it only did after Stein launched her effort.

Exhibit B from Stein's petition is an article from Wired Magazine about Russia's alleged role in the hack. Exhibit C is a New York Times article quoting DellSecureWorks, a private security firm, saying Russia was behind the hack of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta. The company says Podesta clicked on a phishing link to gain access to his account. The Times relied on the company's word that Russian spies were behind the phishing expedition, without also offering any proof that could be analyzed by other computer security experts.

Exhibits D through G – meaning all of Stein's exhibits – are on alleged Russian hacking. One article is about an alleged attempted Russian hack of the 2014, post-coup Ukrainian election.

In her many media appearances since launching the recount campaign, Stein has carefully avoided mentioning Russia, or foreign agents, as she inadvertently did in her initial web posting. But her petition is about nothing else but Russia's alleged hacking of the election.

Scott McLarty, the Green Party national media coordinator, told me in an email last week that the Green Party has "not taken a position on meddling by foreign agents." Since then, top Green Party officials have distanced themselves from Stein, including her running mate, Ajamu Baraka.

"I'm not in favor of the recount," Baraka told CNN. He said he told Stein "it was a potentially dangerous move" because it "would be seen as carrying the water for the Democrats."

Margaret Flowers, the Green's Senate candidate in Maryland, posted an open

letter signed by several prominent party members saying, “While we support electoral reforms, including how the vote is counted, we do not support the current recount being undertaken by Jill Stein.”

The recount, however, does appear to have gotten under the skin of Donald Trump and his allies who, on Friday, went to courts in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, seeking to stop any further examination of the votes. The challenges did not immediately stop the recounts but could create legal complications down the road.

Lobbying the Electors

Since recounts that overturn the vote totals seem unlikely, it appears the Clinton campaign’s Plan B is to use any evidence of tampering that it can pin on Russia to lobby electors to change their votes to Clinton when the Electoral College meets in state capitals on Dec. 19.

Trump won the electoral college 306 to 232. That means 38 Republican electors would have to be convinced to change their vote to Clinton to reach the required 270 to win the White House.

Finding evidence of hacking of election computers that can somehow be blamed on Russia could be crucial for the Clinton team in their effort to convince electors to change their vote.

Russia has been blamed in the U.S. for many things and though proof never seems to be supplied, it is widely believed anyway. It has been accepted as fact by American corporate media, for instance, that Russia invaded Ukraine and had a hand in shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH-17, though the supposed evidence is more argumentative than conclusive.

Emotional appeals to elector’s patriotism and defense of the American system against interference by Russia could make a persuasive argument, however.

At an event at Harvard University on Thursday, Robby Mook, Clinton’s campaign manager, repeatedly blamed Russia for hacking and tampering with the election. “Congress has got to investigate what happened with Russia here,” said Mook. “It is outrageous that a foreign aggressor got involved in our election.”

Robert Reich, labor secretary under President Bill Clinton and a Hillary supporter, argued that one reason the electors should flip to Clinton is to “stop foreign interference in an election.”

Quoting on article, he wrote on Facebook: “The Framers were extremely concerned about infiltration by rivals including Great Britain. In Federalist No. 68,

Hamilton wrote that one major purpose of the Electoral College was to stop the 'desire in foreign powers to gain an improper ascendant in our councils.' He said that the college would, 'Guard against all danger of this sort ... with the most provident and judicious attention' from the electors."

Reich continued: "There's incontrovertible evidence Russia interfered in the campaign by hacking the email accounts of top Democratic officials and cooperating with WikiLeaks' parallel campaign to undermine Hillary Clinton campaign." If such incontrovertible evidence exists, the Obama administration's intelligence community has not shared it with the public.

Clinton operatives are also making her victory by more than 2 million popular votes part of their appeal to electors to switch sides.

Twenty-four states do not legally bind electors to the popular vote in their states. Elsewhere, electors face fines of about \$1,000 if they vote against the will of the people of their states.

Laurence Tribe, a well-known and connected Democratic lawyer, has offered to defend *pro bono* any elector who breaks the law by changing their vote to Clinton. And there are plans to mount a constitutional challenge against the 26 states that legally bind the electors' to their state's popular vote.

Accompanying Media Campaign

The lobbying effort to blame Russia and get the electors to flip their votes is being accompanied by an intense media campaign.

In the announcement that the Clinton campaign would join the recount, campaign counsel Elias aligned the campaign with an unverified Washington Post article based largely on a shadowy, anonymous group that blamed a list of 200 alternative media sites and political groups for spreading Russian propaganda to influence the election, without providing any evidence.

"The Washington Post reported that the Russian government was behind much of the 'fake news' propaganda that circulated online in the closing weeks of the election," Elias wrote.

A Huffington Post article said one of the eight reasons the electors should overturn the election is because "Russian covert action influenced the election."

The staunchly pro-Clinton Daily Kos wrote that "Even if they never touched a voting machine, there's absolutely no doubt: Russia hacked the election."

If evidence of hacking is found in the recounts, the Clinton campaign would be

greatly aided in lobbying electors with confirmation from the Obama administration that Russia was behind it. But on the day before the Clinton team joined the recount, the Obama administration appeared to throw a wrench into the plan to blame Russia.

The administration said it remained “confident in the overall integrity of electoral infrastructure, a confidence that was borne out,” adding: “As a result, we believe our elections were free and fair from a cyber-security perspective.”

The timing of that statement may have been intended to undermine Clinton as a split was reported between President Obama and Hillary Clinton over whether to have a recount.

Not satisfied with the administration’s conclusion, a group of Democratic senators on Thursday asked that information about Russian hacking should be declassified and released to the public.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest responded that the administration would take a look at the request. But he added that the intelligence community “did not observe an increase in malicious cyber-activity on Election Day from the Russians that was directed at disrupting the casting or counting of ballots.”

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at @unjoe.

Slow Start to Crucial Fund Drive

From Editor Robert Parry: We only do three fund drives a year so as not to impose too much on our readers, but our most important drive comes at the end of each year, setting the parameters for our budget in the year ahead. So far, it’s off to a slow start although the impact of Consortiumnews’ journalism is at an all-time high.

Also remember that we pay our writers for their original articles. That means your donation not only helps pay the Web site’s bills but also enables our

writers to continue to provide millions of readers around the world with valuable insights that otherwise might not exist.

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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.

A Trump Plus: Reduced Tensions with Russia

For many Americans, the choice between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was painful – a classic case of choosing a lesser evil – but William Blum sees at least some hope in Trump’s turning away from war with Russia.

By William Blum

That he may not be “qualified” is unimportant. That he’s never held a government or elected position is unimportant. That on a personal level he may be a shmuck is unimportant. What counts to me mainly at this early stage is that he – as opposed to dear Hillary – is unlikely to start a war against Russia.

His questioning of the absolute sacredness of NATO, calling it “obsolete”, and his meeting with Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, an outspoken critic of U.S. regime-change policy, specifically Syria, are encouraging signs.

Even more so is his appointment of General Michael Flynn as National Security Adviser. Flynn dined last year in Moscow with Vladimir Putin at a gala celebrating RT (Russia Today), the Russian state’s English-language, leftist-leaning TV channel. Flynn now carries the stigma in the American media as an individual who does not see Russia or Putin as the devil. It is truly remarkable how nonchalantly American journalists can look upon the possibility of a war with Russia, even a nuclear war.

(I can now expect a barrage of emails from my excessively politically-correct readers about Flynn’s alleged anti-Islam side. But that, even if true, is irrelevant to this discussion of avoiding a war with Russia.)

I think American influence under Trump could also inspire a solution to the bloody Russia-Ukraine crisis, which is the result of the U.S. overthrow of the democratically-elected Ukrainian government in 2014 to further advance the U.S./NATO surrounding of Russia; after which he could end the U.S.-imposed sanctions against Russia, which hardly anyone in Europe benefits from or wants; and then – finally! – an end to the embargo against Cuba. What a day for celebration that will be! Too bad that Fidel won’t be around to enjoy it.

We may have other days of celebration if Trump pardons or in some other manner frees Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and/or Edward Snowden. Neither Barack Obama nor Hillary Clinton would do this, but I think there’s at least a chance with the Donald. And those three heroes may now enjoy feeling at least a modicum of hope. Picture a meeting of them all together on some future marvelous day with you watching it on a video.

Trump will also probably not hold back on military actions against radical Islam because of any fear of being called anti-Islam. He’s repulsed enough by ISIS to want to destroy them, something that can’t always be said about Mr. Obama.

International trade deals, written by corporate lawyers for the benefit of their bosses, with little concern about the rest of us, may have rougher sailing in the Trump White House than is usually the case with such deals.

The mainstream critics of Trump foreign policy should be embarrassed, even humbled, by what they supported in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Instead, what bothers them about the President-elect is his lack of desire to make the rest of the world in America's image. He appears rather to be more concerned with the world not making America in *its* image.

In the latest chapter of *Alice in Trumpland*, he now says that he does not plan to prosecute Hillary Clinton, that he has an "open mind" about a climate-change accord from which he had vowed to withdraw the United States, and that he's no longer certain that torturing terrorism suspects is a good idea. So whatever fears you may have about certain of his expressed weird policies ... just wait ... they may fall by the wayside just as easily; although I still think that on a personal level he's a [two-syllable word: first syllable is a synonym for a donkey; second syllable means "an opening"]

Trump's apparently deep-seated need for approval may continue to succumb poorly to widespread criticism and protests. Poor little Donald ... so powerful ... yet so vulnerable.

The Trump dilemma, as well as the whole Hillary Clinton mess, could have probably been avoided if Bernie Sanders had been nominated. That large historical "if" is almost on a par with the Democrats choosing Harry Truman to replace Henry Wallace in 1944 as the ailing Roosevelt's vice president. Truman brought us a charming little thing called the Cold War, which in turn gave us McCarthyism. But Wallace, like Sanders, was just a little too damn leftist for the refined Democratic Party bosses.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]

The Orwellian War on Skepticism

Special Report: Official Washington's rush into an Orwellian future is well underway as political and media bigwigs move to silence Internet voices of independence and dissent, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Under the cover of battling “fake news,” the mainstream U.S. news media and officialdom are taking aim at journalistic skepticism when it is directed at the pronouncements of the U.S. government and its allies.

One might have hoped that the alarm about “fake news” would remind major U.S. news outlets, such as The Washington Post and The New York Times, about the value of journalistic skepticism. However, instead, it seems to have done the opposite.

The idea of questioning the claims by the West’s officialdom now brings calumny down upon the heads of those who dare do it. “Truth” is being redefined as whatever the U.S. government, NATO and other Western interests say is true. Disagreement with the West’s “group thinks,” no matter how fact-based the dissent is, becomes “fake news.”

So, we have the case of Washington Post columnist David Ignatius having a starry-eyed interview with Richard Stengel, the State Department’s Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, the principal arm of U.S. government propaganda.

Entitled “The truth is losing,” the column laments that the official narratives as deigned by the State Department and The Washington Post are losing traction with Americans and the world’s public.

Stengel, a former managing editor at Time magazine, seems to take aim at Russia’s RT network’s slogan, “question more,” as some sinister message seeking to inject cynicism toward the West’s official narratives.

“They’re not trying to say that their version of events is the true one. They’re saying: ‘Everybody’s lying! Nobody’s telling you the truth!’,” Stengel said. “They don’t have a candidate, per se. But they want to undermine faith in democracy, faith in the West.”

No Evidence

Typical of these recent mainstream tirades about this vague Russian menace, Ignatius’s column doesn’t provide any specifics regarding how RT and other Russian media outlets are carrying out this assault on the purity of Western information. It’s enough to just toss around pejorative phrases supporting an Orwellian solution, which is to stamp out or marginalize alternative and independent journalism, not just Russian.

Ignatius writes: “Stengel poses an urgent question for journalists, technologists and, more broadly, everyone living in free societies or aspiring to do so. How do we protect the essential resource of democracy – the truth –

from the toxin of lies that surrounds it? It's like a virus or food poisoning. It needs to be controlled. But how?

"Stengel argues that the U.S. government should sometimes protect citizens by exposing 'weaponized information, false information' that is polluting the ecosystem. But ultimately, the defense of truth must be independent of a government that many people mistrust. 'There are inherent dangers in having the government be the verifier of last resort,' he argues."

By the way, Stengel is not the fount of truth-telling, as he and Ignatius like to pretend. Early in the Ukraine crisis, Stengel delivered a rant against RT that was full of inaccuracies or what you might call "fake news."

Yet, what Stengel and various mainstream media outlets appear to be arguing for is the creation of a "Ministry of Truth" managed by mainstream U.S. media outlets and enforced by Google, Facebook and other technology platforms.

In other words, once these supposedly responsible outlets decide what the "truth" is, then questioning that narrative will earn you "virtual" expulsion from the marketplace of ideas, possibly eliminated via algorithms of major search engines or marked with a special app to warn readers not to believe what you say, a sort of yellow Star of David for the Internet age.

And then there's the possibility of more direct (and old-fashioned) government enforcement by launching FBI investigations into media outlets that won't toe the official line. (All of these "solutions" have been advocated in recent weeks.)

On the other hand, if you do toe the official line that comes from Stengel's public diplomacy shop, you stand to get rewarded with government financial support. Stengel disclosed in his interview with Ignatius that his office funds "investigative" journalism projects.

"How should citizens who want a fact-based world combat this assault on truth?" Ignatius asks, adding: "Stengel has approved State Department programs that teach investigative reporting and empower truth-tellers."

Buying Propaganda

After reading Ignatius's column on Wednesday, I submitted a question to the State Department asking for details on this "journalism" and "truth-telling" funding that is coming from the U.S. government's top propaganda shop, but I have not received an answer.

But we do know that the U.S. government has been investing tens of millions of

dollars in various media programs to undergird Washington's desired narratives.

For instance, in May 2015, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) issued a fact sheet summarizing its work financing friendly journalists around the world, including "journalism education, media business development, capacity building for supportive institutions, and strengthening legal-regulatory environments for free media."

USAID estimated its budget for "media strengthening programs in over 30 countries" at \$40 million annually, including aiding "independent media organizations and bloggers in over a dozen countries," In Ukraine before the 2014 coup ousting elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installing a fiercely anti-Russian and U.S.-backed regime, USAID offered training in "mobile phone and website security," skills that would have been quite helpful to the coup plotters.

USAID, working with currency speculator George Soros's Open Society, also has funded the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which engages in "investigative journalism" that usually goes after governments that have fallen into disfavor with the United States and then are singled out for accusations of corruption. The USAID-funded OCCRP collaborates with Bellingcat, an online investigative website founded by blogger Eliot Higgins.

Higgins has spread misinformation on the Internet, including discredited claims implicating the Syrian government in the sarin attack in 2013 and directing an Australian TV news crew to what appeared to be the wrong location for a video of a BUK anti-aircraft battery as it supposedly made its getaway to Russia after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014.

Despite his dubious record of accuracy, Higgins has gained mainstream acclaim, in part, because his "findings" always match up with the propaganda theme that the U.S. government and its Western allies are peddling. Higgins is now associated with the Atlantic Council, a pro-NATO think tank which is partially funded by the U.S. State Department.

Beyond funding from the State Department and USAID, tens of millions of dollars more are flowing through the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, which was started in 1983 under the guiding hand of CIA Director William Casey.

NED became a slush fund to help finance what became known, inside the Reagan administration, as "perception management," the art of controlling the perceptions of domestic and foreign populations.

The Emergence of StratCom

Last year, as the New Cold War heated up, NATO created the Strategic Communications Command in Latvia to further wage information warfare against Russia and individuals who were contesting the West's narratives.

As veteran war correspondent Don North reported in 2015 regarding this new StratCom, "the U.S. government has come to view the control and manipulation of information as a 'soft power' weapon, merging psychological operations, propaganda and public affairs under the catch phrase 'strategic communications.'

"This attitude has led to treating psy-ops – manipulative techniques for influencing a target population's state of mind and surreptitiously shaping people's perceptions – as just a normal part of U.S. and NATO's information policy."

Now, the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress are moving to up the ante, passing new legislation to escalate "information warfare."

On Wednesday, U.S. congressional negotiators approved \$160 million to combat what they deem foreign propaganda and the alleged Russian campaign to spread "fake news." The measure is part of the National Defense Authorization Act and gives the State Department the power to identify "propaganda" and counter it.

This bipartisan stampede into an Orwellian future for the American people and the world's population follows a shoddily sourced Washington Post article that relied on a new anonymous group that identified some 200 Internet sites, including some of the most prominent American independent sources of news, as part of a Russian propaganda network.

Typical of this new McCarthyism, the report lacked evidence that any such network actually exists but instead targeted cases where American journalists expressed skepticism about claims from Western officialdom.

Consortiumnews.com was included on the list apparently because we have critically analyzed some of the claims and allegations regarding the crises in Syria and Ukraine, rather than simply accept the dominant Western "group thinks."

Also on the "black list" were such quality journalism sites as Counterpunch, Truth-out, Truthdig, Naked Capitalism and ZeroHedge along with many political sites ranging across the ideological spectrum.

The Fake-News Express

Normally such an unfounded conspiracy theory would be ignored, but – because The Washington Post treated the incredible allegations as credible – the smear has

taken on a life of its own, reprised by cable networks and republished by major newspapers.

But the unpleasant truth is that the mainstream U.S. news media is now engaged in its own fake-news campaign about “fake news.” It’s publishing bogus claims invented by a disreputable and secretive outfit that just recently popped up on the Internet. If that isn’t “fake news,” I don’t know what is.

Yet, despite the Post’s clear violations of normal journalistic practices, surely, no one there will pay a price, anymore than there was accountability for the Post reporting as flat fact that Iraq was hiding WMD in 2002-2003. Fred Hiatt, the editorial-page editor most responsible for that catastrophic “group think,” is still in the same job today.

Two nights ago, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews featured the spurious Washington Post article in a segment that – like similar rehashes –didn’t bother to get responses from the journalists being slandered.

I found that ironic since Matthews repeatedly scolds journalists for their failure to look skeptically at U.S. government claims about Iraq possessing WMD as justification for the disastrous Iraq War. However, now Matthews joins in smearing journalists who have applied skepticism to U.S. and Western propaganda claims about Syria and/or Ukraine.

While the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament begin to take action to shut down or isolate dissident sources of information – all in the name of “democracy” – a potentially greater danger is that mainstream U.S. news outlets are already teaming up with technology companies, such as Google and Facebook, to impose their own determinations about “truth” on the Internet.

Or, as Ignatius puts it in his column reflecting Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Stengel’s thinking, “The best hope may be the global companies that have created the social-media platforms.

“‘They see this information war as an existential threat,’ says Stengel. ... The real challenge for global tech giants is to restore the currency of truth. Perhaps ‘machine learning’ [presumably a reference to algorithms] can identify falsehoods and expose every argument that uses them. Perhaps someday, a human-machine process will create what Stengel describes as a ‘global ombudsman for information.’”

Ministry of Truth

An organization of some 30 mainstream media companies already exists, including not only The Washington Post and The New York Times but also the Atlantic

Council-connected Bellingcat, as the emerging arbiters – or ombudsmen – for truth, something Orwell described less flatteringly as a “Ministry of Truth.”

The New York Times has even editorialized in support of Internet censorship, using the hysteria over “fake news” to justify the marginalization or disappearance of dissident news sites.

It now appears that this 1984-ish “MiniTrue” will especially target journalistic skepticism when applied to U.S. government and mainstream media “group thinks.”

Yet, in my four decades-plus in professional journalism, I always understood that skepticism was a universal journalistic principle, one that should be applied in all cases, whether a Republican or a Democrat is in the White House or whether some foreign leader is popular or demonized.

As we have seen in recent years, failure to ask tough questions and to challenge dubious claims from government officials and mainstream media outlets can get lots of people killed, both U.S. soldiers and citizens of countries invaded or destabilized by outsiders.

To show skepticism is not the threat to democracy that Undersecretary Stengel and columnist Ignatius appear to think it is.

Whether you like or dislike RT’s broadcasts – or more likely have never seen one – a journalist really can’t question its slogan: “question more.” Questioning is the essence of journalism and, for that matter, democracy.

[In protest of the Post’s smearing of independent journalists, RootsAction has undertaken a petition drive, which can be found here.]

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).

Trump’s Trouble with the Truth

President-elect Trump’s refusal to accept the fact that he lost the popular vote by more than two million doesn’t augur well for his ability to tell the truth in other cases, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Just when we may have started to hope that the excesses of Donald Trump's campaign will give way to a more sober and reasonable mode of behavior once in office, the President-elect has a way of lurching back to the familiar excesses, usually with an outburst on Twitter.

This past weekend it was his return to the Big Lie with the accusation that millions of people voted illegally in this month's election. It was an assertion so far removed from truth that the *New York Times* dispensed with journalistic political correctness and described the assertion correctly and accurately in a headline as "baseless."

Maybe Trump was calculatedly laying groundwork for the enactment at the state level of additional voter suppression laws. Maybe it was another instance of his using an attention-getting blurt to attract attention away from other matters, such as disarray in his transition operation or conflict-of-interest issues involving his business interests.

More likely it was a less calculated and less controlled lashing out by a notoriously thin-skinned man who abhors losing and has been seeing his losing popular vote margin grow to well over two million votes – without regard to how such a lashing out assists Russian efforts to discredit the workings of American democracy.

There are many other sad things that could be said about the consequences for those workings of having a leader with so little regard for truth, which encourages further entrenchment of falsehood in politics and public affairs. In this respect Trump is both a symbol and arch-facilitator of a malevolent trend that led the *Oxford English Dictionary* to make "post-truth" its word of the year.

Problems with Lying

But consider for the moment one significant consequence for U.S. foreign relations: the greater disinclination of foreign governments and peoples to believe what the United States says. A significant ingredient of the pursuit of U.S. interests abroad is being weakened.

Daniel Drezner has explained part of the problem, citing John Mearsheimer's research on lying by leaders and how they usually have good reason not to lie to other governments, and how credible commitment is a key component of deterrence. But it is not just deterrence, and keeping others from doing what we don't want them to do, that is involved.

Being able to make credible promises, and getting others to do what we want them to do as part of cooperative arrangements, also requires others to believe that

one's leader speaks truthfully and has every intention of following through on positive commitments. Here Trump's record of lying complements in the most deleterious way his business record of repeatedly stiffing vendors and sub-contractors – another habit of his that does not appear to be ending.

A fundamental underlying fact about the exercise of U.S. power overseas is that most of the time it is exercised not by the United States directly, physically doing things. Most of the time its exercise involves other states perceiving the U.S. ability to do certain things and believing it will do those things under certain conditions. That in brief is why credibility matters.

At stake is not just the reputation of any one occupant of the White House. The credibility of the U.S. president affects the credibility of the United States. And the perceptions that matter are those held not only by foreign governments but also by foreign publics.

A reputation for lying by the person at the top exacerbates what are already widespread and unhelpful tendencies of many people overseas not to believe what the United States says are its reasons for its actions overseas. This is especially a problem in the Muslim world; in this instance with Trump, the deleterious complementarity is between his lying and his Islamophobia.

The threat to U.S. credibility involved here is far more real than the supposed threat that often is posited: that if the United States does not immerse itself in this or that conflict that is peripheral to its interests, then other governments will not believe that the United States will stand up for its interests elsewhere. That is not how governments calculate credibility.

U.S. credibility depends not on intervening in what is peripheral but instead on U.S. leaders being believed when they say something is vital.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Old Cold War Revives as Castro Dies

As the U.S. plows toward a New Cold War, remnants of the old one resurfaced with the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro as the mainstream U.S. media flashed back to old Cold War rhetoric, says William Blum.

By William Blum

The most frequent comment I've read in the mainstream media concerning Fidel Castro's death is that he was a "dictator"; almost every heading bore that word. Since the 1959 revolution, the American mainstream media has routinely referred to Cuba as a dictatorship. But just what does Cuba do or lack that makes it a dictatorship?

No "free press"? Apart from the question of how free Western media is, if that's to be the standard, what would happen if Cuba announced that from now on anyone in the country could own any kind of media? How long would it be before CIA money – secret and unlimited CIA money financing all kinds of fronts in Cuba – would own or control almost all the media worth owning or controlling?

Is it "free elections" that Cuba lacks? They regularly have elections at municipal, regional and national levels. They do not have direct election of the president, but neither do Germany or the United Kingdom and many other countries. The Cuban president is chosen by the parliament, The National Assembly of People's Power. Money plays virtually no role in these elections; neither does party politics, including the Communist Party, since all candidates run as individuals.

Again, what is the standard by which Cuban elections are to be judged? Is it that they don't have private corporations to pour in a billion dollars? Most Americans, if they gave it any thought, might find it difficult to even imagine what a free and democratic election, without great concentrations of corporate money, would look like, or how it would operate. Would Ralph Nader finally be able to get on all 50 state ballots, take part in national television debates, and be able to match the two monopoly parties in media advertising? If that were the case, I think he'd probably win; which is why it's not the case.

Or perhaps what Cuba lacks is our marvelous "electoral college" system, where the presidential candidate with the most votes is not necessarily the winner. Did we need the latest example of this travesty of democracy to convince us to finally get rid of it? If we really think this system is a good example of democracy why don't we use it for local and state elections as well?

Is Cuba a dictatorship because it arrests dissidents? Many thousands of anti-war and other protesters have been arrested in the United States in recent years, as in every period in American history. During the Occupy Movement of five years ago more than 7,000 people were arrested, many beaten by police and mistreated while in custody. And remember: The United States is to the Cuban government like Al Qaeda is to Washington, only much more powerful and much closer; virtually without exception, Cuban dissidents have been financed by and aided in

other ways by the United States.

Would Washington ignore a group of Americans receiving funds from Al Qaeda and engaging in repeated meetings with known members of that organization? In recent years the United States has arrested a great many people in the U.S. and abroad solely on the basis of alleged ties to Al Qaeda, with a lot less evidence to go by than Cuba has had with its dissidents' ties to the United States. Virtually all of Cuba's "political prisoners" are such dissidents.

While others may call Cuba's security policies dictatorship, I call it self-defense.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]

Official Washington's 'Info-Wars'

Organs of Official Washington, such as the State Department and The Washington Post, are becoming unhinged over their weakening grip on the narratives that the people are supposed to believe, as William Blum explains.

By William Blum

On November 16, at a State Department press briefing, department spokesperson John Kirby was having one of his frequent adversarial dialogues with Gayane Chichakyan, a reporter for RT (Russia Today); this time concerning U.S. charges of Russia bombing hospitals in Syria and blocking the U.N. from delivering aid to the trapped population.

When Chichakyan asked for some detail about these charges, Kirby replied: "Why don't you ask your defense ministry?"

GC: Do you – can you give any specific information on when Russia or the Syrian Government blocked the UN from delivering aid? Just any specific information.

KIRBY: There hasn't been any aid delivered in the last month.

GC: And you believe it was blocked exclusively by Russia and the Syrian Government?

KIRBY: There's no question in our mind that the obstruction is coming from the regime and from Russia. No question at all.

...

MATTHEW LEE (Associated Press): Let me -- hold on, just let me say: Please be careful about saying "your defense minister" and things like that. I mean, she's a journalist just like the rest of us are, so it's -- she's asking pointed questions, but they're not --

KIRBY: From a state-owned -- from a state-owned --

LEE: But they're not --

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet, Matt.

LEE: But they're not --

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet that's not independent.

LEE: The questions that she's asking are not out of line.

KIRBY: I didn't say the questions were out of line.

.....

KIRBY: I'm sorry, but I'm not going to put Russia Today on the same level with the rest of you who are representing independent media outlets.

One has to wonder if State Department spokesperson Kirby knows that in 2011 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking about RT, declared: "The Russians have opened an English-language network. I've seen it in a few countries, and it is quite instructive."

I also wonder how Mr. Kirby deals with reporters from the BBC, a STATE-OWNED television and radio entity in the U.K., broadcasting in the U.S. and all around the world.

Or the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation, described by Wikipedia as follows: "The corporation provides television, radio, online and mobile services throughout metropolitan and regional Australia, as well as overseas ... and is well regarded for quality and reliability as well as for offering educational and cultural programming that the commercial sector would be unlikely to supply on its own."

There's also Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Radio Liberty (Central/Eastern Europe), and Radio Marti (Cuba); all (U.S.) state-owned, none "independent", but

all deemed worthy enough by the United States to feed to the world.

And let's not forget what Americans have at home: PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio), which would have a near-impossible time surviving without large federal government grants. How independent does this leave them? Has either broadcaster ever unequivocally opposed a modern American war? There's good reason NPR has long been known as National Pentagon Radio. But it's part of American media's ideology to pretend that it doesn't have any ideology.

As to the non-state American media ... There are about 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States. Can you name a single paper, or a single TV network, that was unequivocally opposed to the American wars carried out against Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Panama, Grenada, and Vietnam while they were happening, or shortly thereafter? Or even opposed to any two of these seven wars? How about one?

In 1968, six years into the Vietnam War, the *Boston Globe* (Feb. 18, 1968) surveyed the editorial positions of 39 leading U.S. papers concerning the war and found that "none advocated a pull-out." Has the phrase "invasion of Vietnam" ever appeared in the U.S. mainstream media?

In 2003, leading cable station MSNBC took the much-admired Phil Donahue off the air because of his opposition to the calls for war in Iraq. Mr. Kirby would undoubtedly call MSNBC "independent."

If the American mainstream media were officially state-controlled, would they look or sound significantly different when it comes to U.S. foreign policy?

New Cold War Propaganda

On Nov. 25, the *Washington Post* ran an article entitled: "Research ties 'fake news' to Russia." It's all about how sources in Russia are flooding American media and the Internet with phony stories designed as "part of a broadly effective strategy of sowing distrust in U.S. democracy and its leaders."

"The sophistication of the Russian tactics," the article says, "may complicate efforts by Facebook and Google to crack down on 'fake news'."

The *Post* states that the Russian tactics included "penetrating the computers of election officials in several states and releasing troves of hacked emails that embarrassed Clinton in the final months of her campaign." (Heretofore this had been credited to Wikileaks.)

The story is simply bursting with anti-Russian references:

- –An online magazine header – “Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy.”
- –“the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns.”
- –“more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season.”
- –“stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.”
- –“The Russian campaign during this election season ... worked by harnessing the online world’s fascination with ‘buzzy’ content that is surprising and emotionally potent, and tracks with popular conspiracy theories about how secret forces dictate world events.”
- –“Russian-backed phony news to outcompete traditional news organizations for audience”
- –“They use our technologies and values against us to sow doubt. It’s starting to undermine our democratic system.”
- –“Russian propaganda operations also worked to promote the ‘Brexit’ departure of Britain from the European Union.”
- –“Some of these stories originated with RT and Sputnik, state-funded Russian information services that mimic the style and tone of independent news organizations yet sometimes include false and misleading stories in their reports.”
- –“a variety of other false stories – fake reports of a coup launched at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and stories about how the United States was going to conduct a military attack and blame it on Russia”

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, is quoted saying he was “struck by the overt support that Sputnik expressed for Trump during the campaign, even using the #CrookedHillary hashtag pushed by the candidate.” McFaul said Russian propaganda typically is aimed at weakening opponents and critics.

“They don’t try to win the argument. It’s to make everything seem relative. It’s kind of an appeal to cynicism.” [Cynicism? Heavens! What will those Moscow fascists/communists think of next?]

The *Post* did, however, include the following: “RT disputed the findings of the researchers in an e-mail on Friday, saying it played no role in producing or amplifying any fake news stories related to the U.S. election.” RT was quoted: “It is the height of irony that an article about ‘fake news’ is built on false, unsubstantiated claims. RT adamantly rejects any and all claims and insinuations that the network has originated even a single ‘fake story’ related to the US election.”

It must be noted that the *Washington Post* article fails to provide a single example showing how the actual facts of a specific news event were rewritten or distorted by a Russian agency to produce a news event with a contrary political message.

What then lies behind such blatant anti-Russian propaganda? In the new Cold War such a question requires no answer. The new Cold War by definition exists to discredit Russia simply because it stands in the way of American world domination. In the new Cold War, the political spectrum in the mainstream media runs the gamut from A to B.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]
