

NYT Retreats on 2013 Syria-Sarin Claims

Exclusive: Even as The New York Times leads the charge against the Syrian government for this week's alleged chemical attack, it is quietly retreating on its earlier certainty about the 2013 Syria-sarin case, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The New York Times, which has never heard an allegation against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that it hasn't immediately believed, has compiled a list of his alleged atrocities with a surprising omission: the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus.

Why this omission is so surprising is that the sarin incident was the moment when the Western media and the Washington establishment piled on President Barack Obama for not enforcing his "red line" by launching military strikes against the Syrian government to retaliate for Assad "gassing his own people."

The retaliation, which would have pummeled the Syrian military, was hotly desired by neoconservatives and liberal interventionists who were obsessed with achieving another Mideast "regime change" even if that risked turning Syria over to Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State. The story of Obama's supposed "red line" retreat has become a treasured groupthink of all the "important people" in D.C.

So, for the Times to compile a summary of alleged Assad atrocities, which included a separate section on "chemical attacks," and to leave out the August 2013 case suggests that even The New York Times cannot sustain one of the most beloved myths of the Syrian war, that Assad was at fault for the sarin attack.

Previously, the Times backed away from one of its front-page reports – published about a month after the sarin attack – that used a "vector analysis" to place the site of the sarin missile launch at a Syrian military base about 9 kilometers from the two impact zones. That analysis was considered the slam-dunk proof of Assad's guilt, but it collapsed when it turned out that one of the missiles contained no sarin and the other rocket, which did have sarin, had a range of only about 2 kilometers, placing the likely firing location in rebel-controlled territory.

Hersh's Findings

Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh further demolished the Assad-sarin myth in an article that traced the chemicals back to Turkish intelligence, but the mainstream U.S. media was so hostile to any dissenting view on the Assad-did-it groupthink that Hersh had to publish his findings in the London Review of Books.

Later, Turkish police and opposition officials corroborated much of Hersh's findings – and I've been told that U.S. intelligence analysts now agree, at least generally, with Hersh's conclusions.

But the Times never directly repudiated its earlier accusations against Assad's military, thus allowing the groupthink to be sustained that Assad was responsible for the 2013 attack. That history became important again on Tuesday when another incident – also apparently involving sarin or a similar poison gas – claimed lives in an Al Qaeda-dominated area of northern Syria.

The U.S. mainstream media (along with President Trump and his top aides) immediately blamed Assad again, with Trump and his team threatening to launch a retaliatory military strike even without the approval of the United Nations Security Council. The 2013 case loomed large in the background with Trump implicitly referencing Obama's presumed failure to enforce his "red line."

Prominent U.S. news personalities, such as MSNBC's Andrea Mitchell, also have cited the old Assad-was-guilty-in-2013 conventional wisdom to buttress their new rush to judgment over the Tuesday incident. Indeed, the 2013 sarin case has become a perfect example of how the major U.S. media often jumps to conclusions and then refuses to back down regardless of the ensuing evidence.

But now we have the Times' list of alleged Assad atrocities, compiled by Russell Goldman, a senior staff editor on the International Desk, that doesn't allege that Assad or his forces were responsible for the 2013 sarin attack.

Goldman reports: "In the latest attack on civilians, more than 100 people, including children, were believed to have been killed by chemical weapons in a rebel-held town in Idlib Province on Tuesday. A doctor there said the victims' pupils were reduced to pinhole-size dots, a characteristic of nerve agents and other banned toxic substances.

"The United States put the blame for the attack on the Syrian government and its patrons, Russia and Iran, and suggested that the salvo was a war crime. While the attack was among the deadliest uses of chemical weapons in Syria in years, it was far from an isolated case.

"During the war, the Assad government has been accused of regularly using chlorine gas, which is less deadly than the agent used on Tuesday and is legal in its commercial form. According to the Violations Documentation Center, an antigovernment watchdog, more than 1,100 Syrians have been killed in chemical weapons and gas attacks."

The reference to the anti-Assad group's claim about the 1,100 Syrians allegedly killed by chemical weapons would presumably include the 2013 sarin incident,

although local medical personnel put the death toll much lower, at perhaps several hundred. But note how the Times used a passive tense in describing those deaths – “more than 1,100 Syrians have been killed” – without attribution of who did the killing.

And nothing specific at all about the 2013 sarin case and who was responsible.

The Chlorine Cases

The chlorine-gas cases have resulted in only a few fatalities, which also undercuts the claims that the Assad government was responsible for them. Why would Assad risk more outside military intervention against his government by using a chemical weapon that has almost no military value, at least as allegedly deployed in Syria?

U.N. investigators – under intense pressure from the West to find something that could be pinned on Assad – agreed to blame him for a couple of the chlorine allegations coming from rebel forces and their civilian allies. But the U.N. team did not inspect the sites directly, relying instead of the testimony of Assad’s enemies.

In one of the chlorine cases, however, Syrian eyewitnesses came forward to testify that the rebels had staged the alleged attack so it could be blamed on the government. In that incident, the U.N. team reached no conclusion as to what had really happened, but neither did the investigators – now alerted to the rebels’ tactic of staging chemical attacks – apply any additional skepticism to the other cases.

In one case, the rebels and their supporters also claimed to know that an alleged “barrel bomb” contained a canister of chlorine because of the sound that it made while descending. There was no explanation for how that sort of detection was even possible.

Yet, despite the flaws in the rebels’ chlorine claims – and the collapse of the 2013 sarin case – the Times and other mainstream U.S. news outlets report the chlorine allegations as flat-fact, without reference to sourcing from the U.N. investigators whose careers largely depended on them coming up with conclusions that pleased the majority of the five-member Security Council – the U.S., Great Britain and France.

If this fuller history were understood, much greater skepticism would be warranted by the new allegations about Assad ordering a new sarin attack. While it’s conceivable that Assad’s military is guilty – although why Assad would take this risk at this moment is hard to fathom – it’s also conceivable that Al Qaeda’s jihadists – finding themselves facing impending defeat – chose to stage

a sarin attack even if that meant killing some innocent civilians.

Al Qaeda's goal would be to draw in the U.S. or Israeli military against the Syrian government, creating space for a jihadist counteroffensive. And, as we should all recall, it's not as if Al Qaeda hasn't killed many innocent civilians before.

[For more on the mysterious 2013 sarin case, see a memo from U.S. intelligence veterans, "[A Call for Proof on Syrian-Sarin Attack.](#)"]

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](#)).

The Ugly Underbelly of Russia-gate

Exclusive: The dangerous demonization of Russia has spilled over into the creepy behavior of U.S. pundits spinning ugly conspiracy theories when tragedy strikes Russians, writes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

The reaction among a number of high-profile media figures to Monday's bombing of the St. Petersburg Metro, which killed 11 and seriously injured dozens, has been among the more shameful and troubling manifestations of the anti-Russian frenzy we have witnessed in recent months.

While the White House was quick to offer the Kremlin condolences for the Metro bombing, the reaction of the American media and pundits was largely focused on a new conspiracy theory – whether or not Vladimir Putin was behind this attack.

The smoke hadn't cleared from the Metro before the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's resident Russia hand Anna Borshchevskaya appeared on France 24 to imply that the bombing might have been Putin's doing in order to distract from the anti-corruption protests of last week.

Borshchevskaya, who according to the Washington Institute's website is its Ira Weiner Fellow "focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East," informed viewers that there's a history of Putin using such tactics in order to tighten his grip on power, and raised the unproven conspiracy theory that the spate of apartment bombings that shook Moscow in 1999 was Putin's handiwork.

All throughout the day, facile parallels to the 1999 bombings popped up on social media. Only hours after the bombings, chess grandmaster Gary Kasparov took to Twitter with messages such as:

“Tragedy in St. Petersburg. Once again ‘unknown terrorists’ perfectly timed to serve Putin’s political agenda. Forget protests, back to fear.” And later: “Such dark suspicions are based on 18 yrs of similarly well-timed attacks in Putin’s Russia, as I document in *Winter Is Coming. Clockwork.*”

Former Conservative Party MP Louise Mensch, now a liberal media darling because of her support for the Russia-gate allegations against Donald Trump, told her 223,000 Twitter followers that “Putin has zero compunction about killings Russians for his own ends.”

The Atlantic’s David Frum, who of late has found himself the object of fulsome praise from embittered Hillary Clinton partisans, tweeted: “Remember Beslan & the 1999 apartment bombings. It takes years to learn truth about terror attacks in Russia – often not even then.”

The reference to the Beslan school siege in 2004 was particularly appalling since that terrorist attack was ordered by a Chechen warlord whose militants took some 1,100 people hostage, including 777 children. After a three-day standoff, Russian security forces stormed the school to liberate the captives, but at least 330 hostages were killed, including 186 children.

As troubling as it was for Frum to cite that terrorist incident, it was not terribly surprising coming as it does from the longtime enabler and cheerleader of America’s disastrous interventions in the Middle East and author of George W. Bush’s infamous “axis of evil” speech.

Another member of neocon royalty, John Podhoretz, wrote that he found it, “Interesting that the bomb blasts in Petersburg come so hard upon the demonstrations – giving Putin cover for a huge crackdown.”

Ugly Humor

These Russo-phobic reactions are reminiscent of the cartoons published by the jejune French satirical rag *Charlie Hebdo*, which made sport of the deaths of 92 members of Russia’s Red Army Choir in a plane crash last December. Here’s how The Hill described some of the cartoons:

–One cartoon shows a choir member singing “AAAAAA” as the plane is going down. The caption says the Russian choir has expanded its repertoire.

–Another cartoon illustrates the whole choir singing to fish at the bottom of

the Black Sea with the downed plane in the background. The caption reads, “Red Army choir conquers a new audience.”

—A third cartoon shows the plane nose-diving with the words: “Bad news... Putin was not on board.”

Russians, as we have seen, have long been treated as fair game no matter what the situation (recall the mocking tone of American coverage of the concert that celebrated the liberation of the ancient ruins of Palmyra, Syria, from ISIS).

So, needless to say, the indecency shown by Frum, Mensch, Podhoretz and the rest is not particularly new. This sort of casual contempt for Russia and Russians became a feature of the 2016 campaign, which was rife with evidence-free reports supporting Hillary Clinton’s claim that Trump was Putin’s “puppet.”

Some of that storyline was developed in collaboration between Hillary Clinton’s supporters and the fiercely anti-Russian government in Ukraine. *Politico* reported that Alexandra Chalupa, a Ukrainian-American working as a consultant for the Democratic National Committee (DNC), met with top Ukrainian officials in Washington to push the narrative that Trump was under Russian influence.

Clinton’s defeat only added more fuel to the anti-Russia frenzy of angry Clinton supporters – and their fury is now debasing our political discourse. But the Clintonites and their neocon allies are now going even further, in Stalinist fashion, urging Americans to investigate the loyalty of other Americans.

Leading the charge is Neera Tanden’s Center for American Progress, which recently launched “The Moscow Project,” which takes the Democratic Party narrative blaming Hillary Clinton’s defeat on “Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential election” to a new level. Painting Trump as a traitor, “given Trump’s obedience to Vladimir Putin,” the project encourages Americans to scour the Internet for evidence to buttress the disloyalty allegations against Trump and his backers.

Bashing Bernie

And then there is the tireless Clinton shill Peter Daou, second perhaps only to Tanden among unreconstructed Clinton apparatchiks. Daou’s self-appointed mission of late has been to tie Sen. Bernie Sanders and his supporters to the Kremlin, tweeting claims like, “It is becoming increasingly clear that Bernie’s diehard supporters, those who became avowed Hillary haters, were influenced by #Russia” and “On the one hand, you had Russia hacking the DNC, on the other, Bernie Sanders and his diehards trashing the DNC. And Trump loved it.”

Daou is hardly alone in his effort to anathematize Sanders supporters. But

credit for spearheading that effort should probably go to the Internet tabloid The Daily Beast, which has twice published widely discredited and brutally mocked articles which have attempted to portray Bernie Sanders's supporters as pawns of the Kremlin.

Where all this will lead is anyone's guess, but judging by precedent, nowhere good.

As my esteemed *Nation* colleague, Patrick Lawrence has warned: "the reigning Russophobia worsens America's creeping isolation in world affairs – evident for years but rarely mentioned among us, and so another of our delusions. At bottom, Washington still operates according to Bush II's 'with us or against us' construct, and the world's vote starts to tilt toward the latter. In the end, the Russians will not be a lonelier people as a result of our efforts. We will be."

Meanwhile, the American political establishment finds itself firmly in the grip of yet another Red Scare.

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How to Ease North Korea's Fears

North Korea fears that it might end up like Iraq or Libya if it surrenders its nuclear program. China has offered an idea to calm those fears but President Trump says no, reports Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

During his campaign, Donald J. Trump proposed to deal with the problem of North Korea by pressuring China to convince its ally to give up nuclear weapons and the missiles designed to carry them. Yet after North Korea's recent test firing of several missiles, China proposed a solution to the problem, which the Trump administration summarily rejected.

China proposed that North Korea suspend its nuclear program in exchange for the United States and South Korea suspending their joint military exercises on the Korean peninsula, which triggered the North Korean missile tests. Although the

Trump administration quickly nixed China's idea, in consideration of its prior campaign rhetoric, the Chinese proposition should be reconsidered.

Also during the road to the White House, Trump suggested that the United States should be less active in wars overseas and thus let its allies assume more of the defense burden. China's proposal would actually help the administration work toward that goal while making a start at getting North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program – or at least freezing it so that the North stops obtaining more weapons.

Of course, at stake is not only the North's nuclear weapons program but the American Empire of one-sided alliances around the world; the United States, to be the big man on campus, provides security for wealthy allies but gets little back economically from full opening of their markets to American products and services.

In fact, over the decades, those allies have become rich in part by using the money they save in reduced defense spending to compete with American companies around the world. The South Korean "economic miracle" was based on physical protection by the U.S. military and trade protection against American goods and services.

Currently, this economic miracle has given South Korea the twelfth largest economy in the world, which is more than 35 times the GDP of its starving, communist North Korean enemy. Little doubt exists that South Korea could not only do more for its own defense, as Trump suggested, but defend itself without American help.

Therefore, South Korea could begin spending more on defense to build up its military forces, while joint U.S.-South Korea military exercise are suspended. These joint exercises would be unneeded when, after a few years, South Korea was weaned away from needing U.S. protection.

Easing Paranoia

Without a U.S.-South Korea alliance on its border, North Korea might be less paranoid and therefore more susceptible to Chinese pressure over its nuclear weapons program. In addition, the Chinese would be more inclined to apply such pressure. China is not fond of having an unstable nuclear weapons state on its border.

Yet at the current time, the Chinese have been reluctant to apply too much pressure on North Korea for fear the regime will collapse, create a surge of refugees into China, and ultimately lead to a unified Korea on its border protected by the powerful U.S. military (similar to the inclusion of a unified

Germany into the expanded NATO alliance in Europe after the Cold War ended).

Historically, China has been sensitive to other great powers' military activity near its borders. For example, it fought a border war with the Soviet Union in 1969, flooded troops into North Korea during the Korean War in the early 1950s when U.S. forces there got too close to the Chinese border, and helped North Vietnam against the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Furthermore, legitimate Chinese aspirations to be a regional power would be given a safety valve if the United States removed the Cold War-era alliances ringing and containing China, including the one with South Korea.

In the 1800s, Britain allowed its then-adversary United States to rise as a great power, because a vast ocean between them mitigated the threat. Today, an even bigger ocean separates China and the United States.

If the United States wants China to police and constrain its allies – that is, North Korea – it must be willing to give up something in return. That is, if saving money by gradually ending the protection of a rich, ungrateful South Korean ally is really giving anything up.

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The Riches on the Right

A surprise from the financial disclosure forms of the Trump White House was how many of the players got rich from working in the right-wing world of anti-government activism, says Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Some of the latest hoey uttered by White House press secretary Sean Spicer – the man from whom a seemingly bottomless wellspring of hoey flows – was his pronouncement the other day that having so many fabulously wealthy men and women working in the White House is a good and wondrous thing.

“The President has brought a lot of people into this administration, and this White House in particular, who have been very blessed and very successful by this country, and have given up a lot to come into government by setting aside a lot of assets,” Spicer said.

“People are often told they have to sell an asset or get rid of something to come serve in the government. And there’s a lot of people that have done a lot to come into this administration to give back, that have been inspired by the President’s victory and the President’s agenda to move the country forward.”

You bet, Sean. In a world of haughty ideals and self-professed high purpose, some would call this notion *noblesse oblige* – that with wealth and power comes social responsibility; to whom much is given, much is expected, etc. And so it should be.

But in Donald Trump’s world, snagging a White House job doubtless will be a solid gold vehicle for using wealth and power to generate more wealth and power for yourself and others, taking optimal advantage of an opportunity handed you by the rich guy who, thanks to the deficiencies of the Electoral College, has landed in the most lucrative pot of jam ever.

And while the new hires may have to hew closer to the conflict-of-interest rules than the boss – did you see the latest about how Trump can keep siphoning profits from his businesses even though he’s supposed to be hands off? – there will be plenty of opportunities to take advantage.

In other words, high-ranking White House employee, those assets that you may or may not have set aside for the duration are likely to be worth a lot more when you and this president are done, even though you will have left behind quite a trail of broken dreams and shattered lives among the less favored of us.

The financial disclosure forms from about 180 staffers that begrudgingly were released by the White House late last week – a Friday night news dump designed to be as cumbersome for the press as possible – revealed, as *The Washington Post* reported, that Trump, “who campaigned as a champion of the working class, has surrounded himself with a circle of wealthy advisers.

“The disclosures showed that Trump’s top aides have generated millions of dollars from Wall Street, Hollywood, real estate and the media, holding a slew of investments that intensify the administration’s challenge in navigating potential intersections between officials’ personal finances and their policymaking roles.”

Amassed Fortunes

Just 27 of these folks have a combined worth of \$2.3 billion, and that is a sum, according to a different *Washington Post* article, greater than what all the households in each of 80 percent of America’s counties make in a year – 86 percent when it comes to the counties that voted for Trump. Per the *Post*, in a classic bit of understatement, “This reinforces the disconnect between the Trump

team and the voters Trump likes to highlight.”

That would include such team players as chief economic adviser and Goldman Sachs alum Gary Cohn, worth between \$253 million and \$611 million; Reed Cordish, the Maryland real estate guy now in charge of technology initiatives, worth at least \$197 million; and of course, Ivanka Trump and her husband, Jared Kushner, the person known around these parts as The Son-in-Law Also Rises.

Ivanka and Jared, a man whose burgeoning portfolio of responsibilities now covers everything from the opioid epidemic and peace in the Middle East to possibly, I pray, throwing himself between his father-in-law and the nuclear football, are worth as much as \$740 million.

Eric Lipton and Jesse Drucker at *The New York Times* write: “Mr. Kushner did resign from more than 200 positions in the partnerships and limited liability companies that make up the family-run multibillion-dollar real estate business. But the financial disclosure report shows that Mr. Kushner will remain a beneficiary of most of those same entities.”

And that’s a big problem, “perilous legal and ethical ground,” according to experts interviewed by the *Times*. As real estate investors, the Kushner family attracts money from China, Russia, the Middle East and other places where American foreign policy has an interest.

What’s more, the banks with which the Kushners deal are regulated by governments here and abroad and stand to gain from Trump pledges to roll back the Dodd-Frank reforms, among others. Some, such as Israel’s Bank Hapoalim, are under federal investigation. The tax code reform that Trump claims to be a high priority will impact the Kushners and their financial interests, too.

One other thing. Looking at the disclosure forms, what’s also striking is how many of the fortunate now staking their claims at the executive mansion made much of their money not via inheritance or banks or industry but in the world of political consulting, a field that has exploded with the infusion of millions now made possible by *Citizens United* and other court decisions. Those rulings have helped open a fire hose of dark money, much of it from the Right – especially the Koch brothers and the Mercers, father and daughter – and it floods the electoral landscape with a deluge of cant and propaganda.

Presidential adviser and mouthpiece Kellyanne Conway, a pollster and consultant, has assets valued at between \$11 million and more than \$44 million. Last year she made \$842,614 from a reported 75 sources of income, including Tea Party Patriots and the Judicial Crisis Network, which has been bankrolling a big media campaign in support of Supreme Court pick Neil Gorsuch.

And while Steve Bannon made his initial fortune in international investment banking (including Goldman Sachs), an irony given his current anti-globalist nationalism and economic populism, in recent years he has made a lot of his cash from ventures in right-wing publishing (*Breitbart*), filmmaking, analysis and consulting. His assets are now listed as between \$13 million and \$56 million.

At *AlterNet*, Steven Rosenfeld writes: “While most press reports have focused on the potential for financial conflicts of interest posed by the multibillions in holdings by numerous White House officials, the personal financial statements show how key political advisers became rich via their extreme anti-government activism.”

The profit opportunities are rife, deeply tempting and not just for Trump’s nearest and dearest. This wealthiest administration in American history is going to make for its selected few a bundle of a size unimaginable to the rest of us – yet we’re the ones who will be paying the bill.

And when this gang leaves their government jobs, they’ll be making even more, spinning through the revolving door back into the private sector, their worth enhanced by the time they’ve spent working for this mudslide of a president. Welcome to the plutocracy.

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