

NYT Mocks Skepticism on Syria-Sarin Claims

Exclusive: The New York Times and other major media have ruled out any further skepticism toward the U.S. government's claim that Syrian President Assad dropped a sarin bomb on a town in Idlib province, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In the old days of journalism, we were taught that there were almost always two sides to a story, if not more sides than that. Indeed, part of the professional challenge of journalism was to sort out conflicting facts on a complicated topic. Often we found that the initial impression of a story was wrong once we understood the more nuanced reality.

Today, however, particularly on foreign policy issues, the major U.S. news outlets, such as The New York Times and The Washington Post, apparently believe there is only one side to a story, the one espoused by the U.S. government or more generically the Establishment.

Any other interpretation of a set of facts gets dismissed as "fringe" or "fake news" even if there are obvious holes in the official story and a lack of verifiable proof to support the mainstream groupthink. Very quickly, alternative explanations are cast aside while ridicule is heaped on those who disagree.

So, for instance, The New York Times will no longer allow any doubt to creep in about its certainty that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad intentionally dropped a sarin bomb on the remote rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province in northern Syria on April 4.

A mocking article by the Times' Jim Rutenberg on Monday displayed the Times' rejection of any intellectual curiosity regarding the U.S. government's claims that were cited by President Trump as justification for his April 6 missile strike against a Syrian military airbase. The attack killed several soldiers and nine civilians including four children, according to Syrian press reports.

Rutenberg traveled to Moscow with the clear intention of mocking the Russian news media for its "fake news" in contrast to The New York Times, which holds itself out as the world's premier guardian of "the truth." Rather than deal with the difficulty of assessing what happened in Khan Sheikhoun, which is controlled by Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and where information therefore should be regarded as highly suspect, Rutenberg simply assessed that the conventional wisdom in the West must be correct.

To discredit any doubters, Rutenberg associated them with one of the wackier conspiracy theories of radio personality Alex Jones, another version of the Times' recent troubling reliance on McCarthyistic logical fallacies, not only applying guilt by association but refuting reasonable skepticism by tying it to someone who in an entirely different context expressed unreasonable skepticism.

Rutenberg wrote: "As soon as I turned on a television here I wondered if I had arrived through an alt-right wormhole. Back in the States, the prevailing notion in the news was that Mr. Assad had indeed been responsible for the chemical strike. There was some 'reportage' from sources like the conspiracy theorist and radio host Alex Jones – best known for suggesting that the Sandy Hook school massacre was staged – that the chemical attack was a 'false flag' operation by terrorist rebel groups to goad the United States into attacking Mr. Assad. But that was a view from the [U.S.] fringe. Here in Russia, it was the dominant theme throughout the overwhelmingly state-controlled mainstream media."

Ergo, in Rutenberg's sophistry, the "prevailing notion in the [U.S.] news" must be accepted as true, regardless of the checkered history of such confidence in the past, i.e., the "prevailing notion" that Saddam Hussein was hiding WMD in Iraq in 2003. Today, to shut down any serious evaluation of the latest WMD claims about Syria just say: "Alex Jones."

Thus, any evidence that the April 4 incident might have been staged or might have resulted from an accidental release of Al Qaeda-controlled chemicals must be dismissed as something on par with believing the wildest of silly conspiracy theories. (Indeed, one of the reasons that I detest conspiracy theories is that they often reject hard evidence in favor of fanciful speculation, which then can be used, in exactly the way that Rutenberg did, to undermine serious efforts to sort through conflicting accounts and questionable evidence in other cases.)

Alternative Explanations

In the case of the April 4 incident, there were several alternative explanations that deserved serious attention, including the possibility that Al Qaeda had staged the event, possibly sacrificing innocent civilians in an attempt to trick President Trump into reversing his administration's recent renunciation of the U.S. goal of "regime change" in Syria.

This notion is not as nutty as Rutenberg pretends. For instance, United Nations investigators received testimonies from Syrian eyewitnesses regarding another attempt by Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadists and their "rescue" teams to stage a chlorine attack in the town of Al-Tamanah on the night of April 29-30, 2014, and then spread word of the bogus attack through social media.

“Seven witnesses stated that frequent alerts [about an imminent chlorine weapons attack by the government] had been issued, but in fact no incidents with chemicals took place,” the U.N. report stated. “While people sought safety after the warnings, their homes were looted and rumours spread that the events were being staged. ... [T]hey [these witnesses] had come forward to contest the wide-spread false media reports.”

The rebels and their allies also made preposterous claims about how they knew canisters of chlorine were contained in “barrel bombs,” by citing the supposedly distinctive sound such chlorine-infused bombs made.

The U.N. report said, “The [rebel-connected] eyewitness, who stated to have been on the roof, said to have heard a helicopter and the ‘very loud’ sound of a falling barrel. Some interviewees had referred to a distinct whistling sound of barrels that contain chlorine as they fall. The witness statement could not be corroborated with any further information.”

Of course, the statement could not be corroborated because it was crazy to believe that people could discern the presence of a chlorine canister inside a “barrel bomb” by its “distinct whistling sound.”

Still, the U.N. team demanded that the Syrian government provide flight records to support its denial that any of its aircraft were in the air in that vicinity at the time of the attack. The failure of the Syrian government to provide those records of flights that it said did not happen was then cited by the U.N. investigators as somehow evidence of Syrian guilt, another challenge to rationality, since it would be impossible to produce flight records for flights that didn’t happen.

Despite this evidence of a rebel fabrication – and the lack of a Syrian military purpose from using chlorine since it almost never kills anyone – the U.N. investigators succumbed to intense career pressure from the Western powers and accepted as true two other unverified rebel claims of chlorine attacks, leading the Western media to report as flat-fact that the Syrian government used chlorine bombs on civilians.

The Dubious Sarin Case

Besides the dubious chlorine cases – and the evidence of at least one attempted fabrication – there was the infamous sarin attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, when there was a similar rush to judgment blaming the Syrian government although later evidence, including the maximum range of the sarin-carrying missile, pointed to the more likely guilt of Al Qaeda-connected extremists sacrificing the lives of civilians to advance their jihadist cause.

In all these cases, the Times and other Western news outlets behaved as if there was only one acceptable side to the story, the one that the U.S. government was pushing, i.e., blaming the Syrian government. It didn't matter how implausible the claims were or how unreliable the sources.

In both the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin case and the current April 4, 2017 case, Western officials and media ignored the obvious motives for Al Qaeda to carry out a provocation, foist blame on the government and induce the U.S. to intervene on Al Qaeda's side.

In August 2013, the Syrian government had just welcomed U.N. investigators who came to Damascus to investigate government allegations of rebels using chemical weapons against government troops. That the Syrian government would then conduct a poison-gas attack within miles of the hotel where the U.N. investigators were staying and thus divert their attention made no logical sense.

Similarly, in April 2017, the Syrian government was not only prevailing on the battlefield but had just received word that the Trump administration had reversed the U.S. policy demanding "regime change" in Damascus. So, the obvious motive to release chemical weapons was with Al Qaeda and its allies, not with the Syrian government.

Manufacturing a Motive

The West has struggled to explain why President Assad would pick that time – and a town of little military value – to drop a sarin bomb. The Times and other mainstream media have suggested that the answer lies in the barbarism and irrationality of Arabs. In that vaguely racist thinking, Assad was flaunting his impunity by dropping sarin in a victory celebration of sorts, even though the predictable consequence was a U.S. missile attack and Trump reversing again the U.S. policy to demand Assad's ouster.

On April 11, five days after Trump's decision to attack the Syrian airbase, Trump's White House released a four-page "intelligence assessment" that offered another alleged motivation, Khan Sheikhoun's supposed value as a staging area for a rebel offensive threatening government infrastructure. But that offensive had already been beaten back and the town was far from the frontlines.

In other words, there was no coherent motive for Assad to have dropped sarin on this remote town. There was, however, a very logical reason for Al Qaeda's jihadists to stage a chemical attack and thus bring pressure on Assad's government. (There's also the possibility of an accidental release via a conventional government bombing of a rebel warehouse or from the rebels mishandling a chemical weapon – although some of the photographic evidence

points more toward a staged event.)

But we're not supposed to ask these questions – or doubt the “evidence” provided by Al Qaeda and its allies – because Alex Jones raised similar questions and Russian news outlets are reporting on this scenario, too.

There's the additional problem with Rutenberg's sophistry: Many of the April 4 sarin claims have been debunked by MIT national security and technology expert Theodore Postol, who has issued a series of reports shredding the claims from the White House's “intelligence assessment.”

For instance, Postol cited the key photographs showing a supposed sarin canister crumpled inside a crater in a roadway. Postol noted that the canister appeared to be crushed, not exploded, and that the men in the photos inspecting the hole were not wearing protective gear that would have been required if there actually were sarin in the crater.

All of these anomalies and the problems with “evidence” generated by Al Qaeda and its allies should put the entire meme of the Syrian government using chemical weapons in doubt. But Rutenberg is not alone in treating this official groupthink as flat-fact.

Four Pinocchios

Washington Post “fact-checker” Glenn Kessler awarded “four Pinocchios” – reserved for the most egregious lies – to former National Security Adviser Susan Rice for asserting last January that the Syrian government had surrendered all its chemical weapons as part of a 2013 agreement.

Kessler declared: “The reality is that there were confirmed chemical weapons attacks by Syria – and that U.S. and international officials had good evidence that Syria had not been completely forthcoming in its declaration [regarding its surrendered chemicals], and possibly retained sarin and VX nerve agent and that the Syrian government still attacked citizens with chemical weapons not covered by the 2013 agreement,” i.e., the chlorine cases.

But Kessler has no way of actually knowing what the truth is regarding Syria's alleged chemical weapons use. He is simply repeating the propagandistic groupthink that has overwhelmed the Syrian crisis. Presumably he would have given four Pinocchios to anyone who had doubted the 2003 claims about Iraq hiding WMD because all the Important People “knew” that to be true at the time.

What neither Rutenberg nor Kessler seems willing or capable of addressing is the larger problem created by the U.S. government and its NATO allies investing heavily in information warfare or what is sometimes called “strategic

communications,” claiming that they are defending themselves from Russian “active measures.” However, the impact of all these competing psychological operations is to trample reality.

The role of an honest press corps should be to apply skepticism to all official stories, not carry water for “our side” and reject anything coming from the “other side,” which is what The New York Times, The Washington Post and the rest of the Western mainstream media have done, especially regarding Middle East policies and now the New Cold War with Russia.

The American people and other news consumers have a right to expect that the Western media will recall the old adage that there are almost always two sides to a story. There’s also the truism that truth often resides not at the surface but is hidden beneath.

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](#)).
