

The Mad Chase for Russia-gate Prey

Exclusive: As the Russia-gate imbroglia proves, a grave danger in journalism comes when the pack is running headlong in pursuit of the same prey and casts aside normal standards of care and fairness, as Daniel Lazare explains.

By Daniel Lazare

June is turning out to be the cruelest month for the Russia-gate industry. The pain began on June 8 when ex-FBI Director James Comey testified that a sensational New York Times article declaring that “members of Donald J. Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and other Trump associates had repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials” was “in the main ... not true.”

Then came Republican Karen Handel’s June 20 victory in a special election in Georgia’s sixth congressional district, sparking bitter recriminations among Democrats who had hoped to ride to victory on a Russia-gate-propelled wave of resistance to Trump.

More evidence that the strategy was not working came a day later when the Harris Poll and Harvard’s Center for American Political Studies produced a devastating survey showing that 62 percent of voters see no evidence that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia, while 54 percent believe the “Deep State” is trying to unseat the President by leaking classified information. The poll even showed a small bounce in Trump’s popularity, with 45 percent viewing him favorably as opposed to only 39 percent for his defeated Democratic rival Hillary Clinton.

The mainstream news media also came in for some lumps. On June 23, CNN retracted a story that had claimed that Congress was looking into reports that the Trump transition team met secretly with a Russian investment fund under sanction from the U.S. government. Three days later, CNN announced that three staffers responsible for the blooper – reporter and Pulitzer Prize-nominee Thomas Frank; Pulitzer-winner Eric Lichtblau, late of the New York Times; and Lex Harris, executive editor in charge of investigations – had resigned.

Adding to CNN’s embarrassment, Project Veritas, the brainchild of rightwing provocateur James O’Keefe, released an undercover video in which a CNN producer named John Bonifield explained that the network can’t stop talking about Russia because it boosts ratings and then went on to say about Russia-gate:

“Could be bullshit, I mean it’s mostly bullshit right now. Like, we don’t have any big giant proof. But ... the leaks keep leaking, and there are so many great leaks, and it’s amazing, and I just refuse to believe that if they had something

really good like that, that wouldn't leak because we've been getting all these other leaks. So I just feel like they don't really have it but they want to keep digging. And so I think the president is probably right to say, like, look, you're witch-hunting me, like, you have no smoking gun, you have no real proof."

Project Veritas also released an undercover video interview with CNN contributor Van Jones calling the long-running probe into possible collusion between Trump's 2016 campaign and Russia a "nothing-burger," a position similar to the skepticism that Jones has displayed in his on-air comments.

True, the Bonifield video was only a medical reporter sounding off about a story that he's not even covering and doing so to a dirty-trickster who has received financing from Trump and who, after another undercover film stunt, was ordered in 2013 to apologize and pay \$100,000 to an anti-poverty worker whose privacy he had invaded.

Good for Ratings

But, still, Bonifield's "president-is-probably-right" comment is hard to shake. Ditto Van Jones' "nothing-burger." Unless both quotes are completely doctored, it appears that the scuttlebutt among CNNers is that Russia-gate is a lot of hot air but no one cares because it's sending viewership through the roof.

And if that's what CNN thinks, then it may be what MSNBC's Rachel Maddow thinks as she also plays the Russia card for all it's worth. It may also be what The Washington Post has in the back of its mind even while hyperventilating about Russian President Vladimir Putin's "crime of the century, an unprecedented and largely successful destabilizing attack on American democracy."

The New York Times also got caught up in its enthusiasm to hype the Russia-gate case on June 25 when it ran a story slamming Trump for "refus[ing] to acknowledge a basic fact agreed upon by 17 American intelligence agencies that he now oversees: Russia orchestrated the attacks [on Democratic emails], and did it to help get him elected."

The "17-intelligence-agency" canard has been a favorite go-to assertion for both Democrats and the mainstream news media, although it was repudiated in May by President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and CIA Director John Brennan.

So, on June 29, the Times apparently found itself with no choice but to issue a correction stating: "The [Russia-hacking] assessment was made by four intelligence agencies – the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the

National Security Agency. The assessment was not approved by all 17 organizations in the American intelligence community.”

This point is important because, as Consortiumnews.com and other non-mainstream news outlets have argued for more than a month, it is much easier to manipulate a finding by hand-picking analysts from a small number of intelligence agencies than by seeking the judgments and dissents from all 17.

Despite the correction, the Times soon returned to its pattern of shading the truth regarding the U.S. intelligence assessment. On June 30, a Times article reported: “Mr. Trump has repeatedly cast doubt on the unanimous conclusion of United States intelligence agencies that Russia sought to interfere in the 2016 race.”

The Times’ phrase “unanimous conclusion” conveys the false impression that all 17 agencies were onboard without specifically saying so, although we now know that the Times’ editors are aware that only selected analysts from three agencies plus the DNI’s office were involved.

In other words, the Times cited a “unanimous conclusion of United States intelligence agencies” to mislead its readers without specifically repeating the “all-17-agencies” falsehood. This behavior suggests that the Times is so blinded by its anti-Trump animus that it wants to conceal from its readers how shaky the whole tale is.

Holes from the Start

But the problems with Russia-gate date back to the beginning. Where Watergate was about a real burglary, this one began with a cyber break-in that may or may not have occurred. In his June 8 testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Comey conceded that the FBI never checked the DNC’s servers to confirm that they had truly been hacked.

COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN RICHARD BURR: Did you ever have access to the actual hardware that was hacked? Or did you have to rely on a third party to provide you the data that they had collected?

COMEY: In the case of the DNC, and, I believe, the DCCC [i.e. the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee], but I’m sure the DNC, we did not have access to the devices themselves. We got relevant forensic information from a private party, a high-class entity, that had done the work. But we didn’t get direct access.

BURR: But no content?

COMEY: Correct.

BURR: Isn't content an important part of the forensics from a counterintelligence standpoint?

COMEY: It is, although what was briefed to me by my folks – the people who were my folks at the time – is that they had gotten the information from the private party that they needed to understand the intrusion by the spring of 2016.

The FBI apparently was confident that it could rely on such “a high-class entity” as CrowdStrike to tell it what it needed to know. Yet neither the Democratic National Committee nor CrowdStrike, the Irvine, California, cybersecurity firm the DNC hired, was remotely objective.

Hillary Clinton was on record calling Putin a “bully” whose goal was “to stymie, to confront, to undermine American power” while Dmitri Aferovitch, CrowdStrike’s chief technical officer, is a Russian émigré who is both anti-Putin personally and an associate of the Atlantic Council, a pro-Clinton/anti-Russian think tank that is funded by the Saudis, the United Arab Emirates and the Ukrainian World Congress. The Atlantic Council is one of the most anti-Russian voices in Washington.

So, an anti-Putin DNC hired an anti-Putin security specialist, who, to absolutely no one’s surprise, “immediately” determined that the break-in was the work of hackers “closely linked to the Russian government’s powerful and highly capable intelligence services.”

Comey’s trust in CrowdStrike was akin to cops trusting a private eye not only to investigate a murder, but to determine if it even occurred. Yet the mainstream media’s pack journalists saw no reason to question the FBI because doing so would not accord with an anti-Trump bias so pronounced that even journalism profs have begun to notice.

Doubts about CrowdStrike

Since CrowdStrike issued its findings, it has come under wide-ranging criticism. Cyber experts have called its analysis inconsistent because while praising the alleged hackers to the skies (“our team considers them some of the best adversaries out of all the numerous nation-state, criminal and hacktivist/terrorist groups we encounter on a daily basis”), CrowdStrike says it was able to uncover their identity because they made kindergarten-level mistakes, most notably uploading documents in a Russian-language format under the name “Felix Edmundovich,” a reference to Felix E. Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police.

“Raise your hand if you think that a GRU or FSB officer would add Iron Felix’s name to the metadata of a stolen document before he released it to the world while pretending to be a Romanian hacker,” wisecracked cyber-skeptic Jeffrey Carr.

Others noted how easy it is for even novice hackers to leave a false trail. In Seattle, cyber-sleuths Mark Maunder and Rob McMahon of Wordfence, makers of a popular computer-security program, discovered that “malware” found in the DNC was an early version of a publicly available program developed in the Ukraine – which was strange, they said, because one would expect Russian intelligence to develop its own tools or use ones that were more up to date.

But even if the malware was Russian, experts pointed out that its use in this instance no more implicates Russian intelligence than the use of an Uzi in a bank robbery implicates Mossad.

Other loose threads appeared. In January, Carr poured cold water on a subsequent CrowdStrike report charging that pro-Russian separatists had used similar malware to zero in on pro-government artillery units in the eastern Ukraine.

The Ukrainian ministry of defense and the London think tank from which CrowdStrike obtained much of its data agreed that the company didn’t know what it was talking about. But if CrowdStrike was wrong about the Ukraine case, how could everyone be sure it was right about the DNC?

In March, Wikileaks went public with its “Vault 7” findings showing, among other things, that the CIA has developed sophisticated software in order to scatter false clues – which inevitably led to dark mutterings that maybe the agency had hacked the DNC itself in order to blame it on the Russians.

Finally, although Wikileaks policy is never to comment on its sources, Julian Assange, the group’s founder, decided to make an exception.

“The Clinton camp has been able to project a neo-McCarthyist hysteria that Russia is responsible for everything,” he told journalist John Pilger in November. “Hillary Clinton has stated multiple times, falsely, that 17 U.S. intelligence agencies had assessed that Russia was the source of our publications. That’s false – we can say that the Russian government is not the source.”

Craig Murray, an ex-British diplomat who is a Wikileaks adviser, disclosed that he personally flew to Washington to meet with a person who was either the original source or an associate of the source. Murray said the motive for the

leak was “disgust at the corruption of the Clinton Foundation and the tilting of the primary election playing field against Bernie Sanders.”

Conceivably, such contacts could have been cutouts to conceal from WikiLeaks the actual sources. Still, Wikileaks’ record of veracity should be enough to give anyone pause. Yet the press either ignored the WikiLeaks comments or, in the case of The Washington Post, struggled to prove that WikiLeaks was lying.

Unstable Foundation

The stories that have been built upon this unstable foundation have proved shaky, too. In March, the Times published a front-page exposé asserting that Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort “had regular communications with his longtime associate – a former Russian military translator in Kiev who has been investigated in Ukraine on suspicion of being a Russian intelligence agent.”

But if the man was merely a suspected spy as opposed to a convicted one, then what’s the problem?

The article also noted that Jason Greenblatt, a former Trump lawyer who is now a special White House representative for international negotiations, met last summer with Rabbi Berel Lazar, “the chief rabbi of Russia and an ally of Russia’s president, Vladimir V. Putin.” But an Orthodox Jew paying a call on Russia’s chief rabbi is hardly extraordinary. Neither is the fact that the rabbi is a Putin ally since Putin enjoys broad support in the Russian Jewish community.

In April, the Times published another innuendo-laden front-page story about businessman Carter Page whose July 2016 trip to Moscow proved to be “a catalyst for the F.B.I. investigation into connections between Russia and President Trump’s campaign.”

Page’s sins chiefly consist of lecturing at a Moscow academic institute about U.S.-Russian relations in terms that The New York Times believed “echoed the position of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia” and, on another occasion, meeting with a suspected Russian intelligence agent in New York.

“There is no evidence that Mr. Page knew the man was an intelligence officer,” the article added. So is it now a crime to talk with a Russian or some other foreign national who, unbeknownst to you, may turn out to be an intelligence agent?

Then there is poor Mike Flynn, driven out as national security adviser after just 24 days in office for allegedly misrepresenting conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak – exchanges during the Trump transition that supposedly exposed him to the possibility of Russian blackmail although U.S.

intelligence was monitoring the talks and therefore knew their exact contents. And, since the Russians no doubt assumed as much, it's hard to see what they could have blackmailed him with. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Turning Gen. Flynn into Road Kill.](#)"]

Yet the mainstream media eagerly gobbled up this blackmail possibility while presenting with a straight face the claim by Obama holdovers at the Justice Department that the Flynn-Kislyak conversations might have violated the 1799 Logan Act, an ancient relic that has never been used to prosecute anyone in its entire two-century history.

So, if the scandal is looking increasingly threadbare now, could the reason be that there was little or nothing to it when it was first announced during the final weeks of the 2016 campaign?

Although it's impossible to say what evidence might eventually emerge, Russia-gate is looking more and more like a Democratic version of Benghazi, a pseudo-scandal that no one could ever figure out but which wound up making Hillary Clinton look like a persecuted hero and the Republicans seem like obsessed idiots.

As much as that epic inquiry turned out to be mostly a witch-hunt, Americans are beginning to sense the same about Washington's latest game of "gotcha."

The United States is still a democracy in some vague sense of the word, and "We the People" are losing patience with subterranean maneuvers on the part of the Democrats, the neoconservatives, and the intelligence agencies seeking to reverse a presidential election.

Like Benghazi or possibly even the Birthergate scam about President Obama's Kenyan birthplace, the whole convoluted Russia-gate tale grows stranger by the day.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

Is Trump Making Up Syria-Sarin Claims?

The White House claimed victory after it warned Syria not to mount a chemical weapons attack and nothing happened, but some experts are questioning the quality of these U.S. claims about Syria and sarin, says Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

This week, the White House issued a warning to Syria that it would pay a “heavy price” if it carried out a chemical weapons attack that was allegedly in the works – and President Trump took credit when no attack occurred. But no evidence was presented to support the White House claims amid growing doubts about Trump’s earlier missile attack on Syria in retaliation for another alleged chemical attack on April 4.

The latest doubts about the April 4 incident came from legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh – published in the Sunday edition of Die Welt – who questioned whether the Syrian government carried it out. Hersh earlier had disputed U.S. government claims that the Syrian government was responsible for a sarin attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Another skeptic of these U.S. government accusations is Theodore Postol, professor emeritus of science, technology, and national security policy at MIT. In earlier comments on the topic of allegations of Syria’s use of chemical weapons, Postol stated, “The White House took unjustified actions – and is now creating another set of reasons for more such actions. Chances of an unpredictable escalation are significant. Trump is pushing the Russians to extreme positions and he’s undermining the effort to destroy the Islamic State.”

I spoke to Postol on Pacifica Radio’s Flashpoints show about the U.S. claims that Syria had used chemical weapons as well as the dangers of a new global conflagration if the U.S. launches another attack on Syrian government forces now closely aligned with nuclear-armed Russia.

Dennis Bernstein: So, now, why don’t you come at this, because we’ve seen a bit of evidence that these first two attacks by the Syrian government with chemicals really weren’t from the Syrian government, if in fact they occurred at all. Clearly, the information isn’t clear. You want to jump in here?

Theodore Postol: Well, I think there’s a real dangerous situation in the United States actually, where people seem to really hate the Syrian government and that’s not hard to do. The brutality of the behavior of the Syrian government there, there’s nothing to talk about, except to agree that it’s a very brutal regime. But, the problem is that they’re also fighting very brutal rebels, and nobody comes out looking especially good.

So, the real question is whether or not the Syrian government had been, in fact, responsible for the nerve agent attacks. And, I think the answer is “No.” I mean there’s no evidence to prove that. In fact, the evidence overwhelmingly points to the likelihood that these were attacks by rebel elements [...] with a very

serious and clear military goal. The goal was to make it look like there's a nerve agent attack perpetrated by the Syrian government, thereby causing the United States to come in and attack Syrian military assets, which would then make it easier for the rebels to defeat the Syrian government. So, it's kind of a bizarre situation.

Nobody looks good here. I want to be very clear, I'm not trying to in any way suggest that the Syrian government is a group of good guys. But it's important, I think, for us to keep our eye on the ball. And the eye on the ball requires that we aim at defeating ISIS, which is the gravest threat, for all of us. And then if there are opportunities to do something about the Syrian government, I'm certainly not opposed to it. But as of right now, this preoccupation with taking down Assad is really very counterproductive toward the overriding important goal, which is to defeat ISIS.

DB: Now, Seymour Hersh – who's now publishing in Germany, one of the best reporters the United States ever produced, investigative reporters, is reporting in other countries because it's very difficult to get his information in this country – has again written a very compelling piece that seriously calls into question the last [chemical] attack, so-called from the Syrian government. You have taken great pains to demonstrate that perhaps there are grave doubts about who did this bombing, if there was a chemical bombing, and where it came from. Could you just give us your best shot at why you doubt the last one came from the Syrian government?

TP: Well, there's a great deal of forensic evidence in the form of videos that have been posted on the web. And some of the video data was actually cited by the White House in their April 11 – I don't know if you'd call it – intelligence report. What happened is, the president ordered this attack on the Shayrat Air Base in Syria. That was on April 7. The attack that allegedly was a nerve agent attack by the Syrian government occurred on April 4. And on April 11 the National Security Council put out this White House intelligence report.

And I have a fair amount of experience reading these kinds of things. And it was very clear to me that they were citing evidence that no competent intelligence agent would cite. And that evidence was images of a crater taken, through videos, which I got a hold of from the web. And this crater had a pipe in it, and the pipe was kind of bent. And this was supposedly the source of this sarin attack.

Well, first of all, the pipe could not have contained much sarin. And if you're going to have a significant number of people injured downwind, you need a significant amount of sarin. So that was a problem right there. And then the second thing was that the crater looked like it was kind of possibly made from a

rocket, but from a very small explosion. And, if anything, it looked like... if you believed anything, you would believe that this was an improvised device that was set on the ground, and detonated on the ground, not delivered by air.

But the real fundamental problem was nobody – nobody who has any knowledge at all of forensic evidence analysis – would have assumed that this material had not been tampered with, had not been put in place.

And so, for the U.S. government to be citing evidence that no competent intelligence analyst would first, if they believed the evidence, find compelling. And second, if they believed the evidence it would indicate that they were really not an experienced analyst, would cite this evidence. So, it was really very suspicious.

And my conclusion was, and remains, that this report was put together by a bunch of amateurs on the National Security Council probably designed to cover the fact that the president impulsively attacked Syria without adequate intelligence. That was my guess then. And that's what Sy Hersh reports. And, quite frankly, none of what he reports is not totally consistent with everything else that I have found, using totally different methods. So I would say the Hersh report looks like it's... if there are errors in it, they are only of the most minor nature. I think that the report is accurate.

DB: And so, now, here we go again. We've got Trump saying, even his own amateurs who put together, as you call them, the last report, are saying that nobody has heard about this information, this evidence. Have you? Do you have any information, is something new that we all don't know about? What do you think is at play here?

TP: It's difficult to know. But my guess – and it is a guess– it seems to me that the president has made a pretty significant error by attacking a country, and actually jeopardizing our relationship with Russia, because we need to defeat ISIS. We need cooperation from the Russians on this. He's not a man who seems to be able to acknowledge he's made errors. And it may just be something that has gotten in his head. I just don't know. But it's very dangerous, it's extremely dangerous. Because the Russians have already had an important ally of theirs [Syria] attacked for no reason. And there's only so much they're going to put up with. And I'm afraid that they will lose patience and do something that will then cause an action/reaction cycle.

DB: You know a lot about the technology that's at play now in terms of all sides at war in this little country. What are your fears, in terms of the technology, the way stuff is flying around, what's going on, what are you thinking?

TP: Well, I think the most dangerous aspect of the president's new posture, and this is very dangerous, this is what has got me tremendously worried, even more than I was, was his position that, essentially, that any evidence of a chemical attack, it's not even clear he's limiting it to a nerve agent, that any evidence of a chemical attack, he will ascribe to the Syrians and Russians.

In other words, he will not take steps to determine whether or not the attacks are false flag attacks. And so, whether intended or not, he's encouraging the rebels to engage in false flag attacks, in the hope that this will escalate American response, an unjustified American response, against Syria and Russia.

And that's what they [the rebels] really need at this time because they are losing the war very badly. So they're in an endgame in Idlib, where Khan Sheikhoun is, where this nerve agent, this alleged nerve agent attack, occurred. And these people are very desperate.

And let me underscore, it may be that Assad is a butcher, but he's not alone. In this war, it doesn't matter. These are people who argue about whether you cut off someone's head from left to right, or right to left. That's where the disagreements are. These are not people who are just innocent victims of some kind of monstrous brutality on the part of the Assad government. They are equally brutal. And we need to focus on winning this war against ISIS, and then doing what we can to stop these horrifying atrocities on both sides.

But right now I don't think the Syrian government is in any way responsible for this nerve agent attack. I think it's a totally orchestrated process. And I think the evidence is overwhelming, it's overwhelming.

DB: Wow. And finally what is your worst fear? How could this unravel?

TP: Well, it could unravel badly, if there's a significant chemical attack by the rebels and nobody is able to get the president to think about the consequences of blaming the Syrians and Russians, without evidence. That's the problem. If there's no evidence that the Syrians and Russians were in any way involved in this [...] and there's no incentive for them, I should point out.

If you're winning the war, why would you attack people that are far behind the lines with nerve agent? It's just ridiculous. You know, if you're going to use the nerve agent... if you're desperate, and you're going to use the nerve agent, you're gonna use it up in the combat areas. And you already know that the United States will bring the full force of its military power on you, if they determine that you, in fact, engaged in this attack, and you're winning the war. So why would you risk this tremendous setback that would occur if the United States came after you? So, it makes no sense from the point of view of motives, and

also, there's no forensic evidence to support that there was a nerve agent attack.

Everything you look at, which is used to claim that there's evidence, turns out to be false. The New York Times published a video online, and I wrote a paper about it, that's now widely circulating, that showed that every piece, without exclusion, every piece of forensic evidence they showed, derived from videos, proved the opposite of what they were claiming. Every piece, there was not an exception.

And if this is the way the mainstream news media is going to handle this matter, then where are the American people going to get a more thought-out and informed ... view of this information? And this is a hand in hand recklessness, not only... I mean if people want to point at Mr. Trump, fine, but they ought to look at their own newspapers, because they are not doing their job.

There's a very interesting article in the New York Times on page A11 today [June 29 of print version; June 28 online]. And for the first time the New York Times is talking about an "alleged" nerve agent attack. That's a complete change in their rhetoric. And I'm hoping that this is an indication that somebody at the Times finally got the message. But this article now, is now talking about an alleged chemical agent attack, which is absolutely different, an absolute 180 degree turnaround from what they were saying, even a day before. So, we'll see. I'm hoping that this is actually an indication that the New York Times has finally figured out there's something wrong. I've been in contact. They have the information I've provided to them. But they don't seem to want to respond.

DB: Hmmm, the "paper of record." Alright, well, we're going to watch this obviously very closely. We're all sitting on the edge of our chairs, and we're all biting our fingernails off because this really is, I guess you would agree, one of the most dangerous times in modern history, in our lives.

TP: This is almost like a Cuban Missile Crisis, without the public's attention. You know, we're getting into that kind of territory now. Except nobody seems to be aware, in the general public, how serious this matter is.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Trump Courts War Risks with Iran

Pushed by Israel and Saudi Arabia, President Trump is edging toward war with Iran, possibly beginning with “mission creep” in Syria, a reversal of Trump’s campaign rhetoric objecting to military adventures, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A combination of circumstances has increased the risk that armed conflict will break out between the United States and Iran. Such a war is no certainty, but the chance that one will occur is greater today than it has been in years. Some of the relevant circumstances, such as the first two mentioned below, have been around in some form for a substantial amount of time, while others are more recent.

Anti-Iranism in American discourse. The vocabulary has become so repetitive and widely used that it rolls off tongues automatically: Iran is a “theocratic autocracy” and the “largest state sponsor of terrorism” that engages in “nefarious,” “malign” and “destabilizing” behavior as part of its “drive for regional hegemony,” etc. The verbiage has become a substitute for thought and for any careful examination of exactly what Iran is and is not doing and how it does and does not affect U.S. interests. Such a commonly accepted mantra means that anyone making a focused attempt to stir up trouble with Iran starts with a built-in advantage in mustering public and political support.

The lobby pushing hostility against Iran. There indeed have been, and still are, focused attempts to stir up trouble. Politically potent interests have their own narrow

reasons to keep U.S.-Iranian relations bad and to keep Iran isolated. Foremost among those interests is the right-wing government of Israel, for which Iran as chief *bête noire* serves to cripple a competitor for regional influence, to explain all regional trouble in terms that do not relate to Israel, to distract attention from matters (especially the occupation of Palestinian territory) the Israeli government would rather not discuss, and to keep the United States wedded to Israel as supposedly its only reliable regional partner.

Given the obvious impact of the Israeli government's preferences on American politics, this factor weighs greatly on the current administration's policies toward Iran. Donald Trump has tilted heavily to those Israeli preferences, as reflected in his appointments and in his rhetoric since midway through the presidential campaign. Trump still aspires to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, which would require sharp breaks with the Netanyahu government's current course. But that might make aggressiveness and confrontation with Iran seem all the more necessary, as a form of compensation to Netanyahu while pressing him for concessions toward the Palestinians.

Anti-Obamaism and the nuclear agreement. The preceding factor was one of two major reasons for opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the multilateral agreement that severely restricts Iran's nuclear program and closes any possible path to a nuclear weapon. The other major, and very partisan, reason was that the accord was probably Barack Obama's biggest single achievement in foreign policy.

Trump, who scathingly denounced the accord during the campaign and whose administration only grudgingly acknowledges that Iran is complying with its obligations under the agreement, still shows a strong inclination to do the opposite of whatever Obama did. Now that the Republican effort to undo Obama's signature domestic achievement, the Affordable Care Act, has run aground on the realities of health care, the urge may be stronger than ever to undo Obama's signature foreign policy achievement. If it can be undone not through direct U.S. renunciation but as a casualty of some other confrontation with Iran, then so much the better from Trump's point of view.

Weak voices of restraint in the administration. There are press reports of debate within the Trump administration on aspects of policy toward Iran, and real debate is much better than policy made through wee-hours tweets. But it is doubtful whether the sober reasons why armed conflict with Iran would be folly are getting adequate attention. This is not only a matter of the dominance of non-sober voices, such as that of self-declared Leninist destroyer-of-worlds Stephen Bannon, who demonstrated his clout with Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement. The problem also is that visceral anti-Iranism infects even some of those looked to as adults in the room, most notably Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

Respectability given to regime change. Another of the adults, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, recently told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that regime change is part of U.S. policy on Iran. This comment resurrects a malevolent concept that amply deserves a place on the trash heap of

U.S. foreign policy history, especially given the disastrous results under the previous two administrations of regime change in Iraq and Libya. The concept is no more suitable to Iran, where there is not some political movement in our own image that is just waiting to be freed from the yoke of theocratic autocrats through a new revolution.

Those with other reasons for promoting hostility toward Iran also have been promoting the regime change idea. The Sheldon Adelson-funded Foundation for Defense of Democracies, for example, shortly after the inauguration was pushing a paper at the National Security Council centered on regime change. The specific notion usually being pushed is that forms of subversion short of armed conflict would do the job, but the fantasy outcome of a new and attractive regime in Tehran can easily become an objective of military operations initiated, or ostensibly initiated, for other reasons. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of regime change adds to tension and distrust between Tehran and Washington that make destabilizing incidents increasingly likely.

Mission creep in Syria. The crushing of the so-called Islamic State's caliphate is close enough to completion that the difficult and deferred question of what becomes of the Syrian territory that had been part of the caliphate now must be faced directly. Much commentary on this question in the United States is advocating what amounts to a significant expansion of U.S. objectives in Syria by confronting the Damascus regime and its Russian and Iranian backers.

U.S. actions on the ground and in the air already have moved in this direction. Incidents have included shooting down

Iranian drones and a manned Syrian aircraft, as well as U.S. attacks on what were described as “Iranian-supported” militias. It is remarkable how much the mission in Syria already has crept and evolved.

As Josh Wood puts it, “Over the course of his short tenure, Mr. Trump and his administration went from talking about potentially partnering with Damascus and Moscow against [Islamic State], to appearing absolutely disinterested in the civil war, to bombing Syrian government targets.”

The evolution of objectives in the next five months could be just as rapid as in the last five. Given Iran’s significant role in Syria, and the expanding U.S. role there, Syria is one of the places most likely to spark direct warfare between the United States and Iran.

Displacement from Russia. Incidents with the Syrian regime’s other major backer, Russia, certainly are worth worrying about along with incidents involving Iran. But some of the very reasons for special worry about direct armed conflict with Russia – a nuclear-armed ex-superpower – are also reasons to expect special restraint, along lines similar to what the United States and the USSR displayed throughout the Cold War.

Moreover, under the Trump administration Russia does not play the sort of automatic, take-for-granted-as-an-adversary role that Iran plays. We have yet to fathom the full reasons for Trump’s more qualified and even benign posture toward Russia, but there clearly are such reasons. If the administration needs to strike at one of the beasts involved in the Syrian war, that beast will be Iran, even though

Russian support probably has been at least as important as Iranian support in shoring up the Assad regime.

Delegation to the military. Trump's practice of delegating to the Pentagon major decisions, even of a more strategic than tactical nature, involving deployment or use of military forces could in some circumstances be an encouragement of restraint, given the disinclination of experienced military officers to be thrust into new conflicts in which the United States is not already involved. But the United States *is* already involved in places such as Syria and the Persian Gulf where confrontation with the Iranians is possible, and with such involvement the military bias is in the direction of doing more rather than doing less.

The bias is toward being more aggressive to accomplish presumed objectives and especially to protect American forces. At least one U.S. attack so far in Syria has been justified in terms of protection of U.S. forces. Military decisions taken for military reasons may spark an expanded conflict.

Heightened bellicosity in Arabia. The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran is especially high right now, and most of the initiative for making it so has come from the Saudi side. The ascent to power of the Saudi king's inexperienced son, Mohammed bin Salman, has something to do with this. The young crown prince has talked about how "we will work so the battle is there, in Iran."

He has used the relatively minor link between a Yemeni group and Iran as the excuse for prosecuting a war that has turned

Yemen into a humanitarian disaster. His most recent destabilizing move has been the fracturing of the Gulf Cooperation Council for the sake of bashing Qatar, one of whose listed offenses is to have more-or-less normal, peaceful relations with Iran. The potential for the United States being dragged into an escalation of this mess is significant, especially given Trump's inclination so far to go all in with the Saudis.

Brinkmanship in the Persian Gulf. Even without the added recklessness of young princes, the Gulf is the other most likely place, besides Syria, for an incident involving U.S. and Iranian forces to escalate out of control. The U.S. forward presence in what the Iranians regard as their maritime backyard is more than matched by the sometimes reckless and unsafe maneuvers by small craft of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The recent fatal collision of a U.S. Navy destroyer with a merchant ship in Japanese waters shows what can happen in crowded sea lanes even when there is no international conflict or animosity involved. Imagine something similar happening in the Persian Gulf amid the current hostility in U.S.-Iranian relations, with no apparent interest by the Trump administration in restoring a diplomatic channel for defusing incidents.

The nature of the person in the White House. In his Congressional testimony, former FBI Director James Comey mentioned "the nature of the person" as a reason for meticulously documenting his conversations with President Trump, meaning that Trump is a serial liar. The first five months of Trump's administration is sufficient to see that

the lying extends not just to individual falsehoods but to large segments of his policies.

On domestic and economic policy, the populism he voiced and that won him decisive votes last year has been revealed to be fraudulent, with health care being only one of the indications of this. There is no reason to suppose that what Trump has said about foreign and security policy, including vote-winning rhetoric about aversion to more foreign wars, is any less fraudulent.

With the rhetoric being next to meaningless, other aspects of the nature of the person will be influential, including Trump's impetuosity, his dwelling on the immediate at the expense of longer-term consequences, and his insatiable appetite for personal approbation at the expense of broader national interests. None of these qualities augurs well for avoiding conflagration with Iran.

Diversion from difficulty. These personal qualities of Trump make him a prime candidate to turn to the time-honored tactic of using foreign conflict to divert attention from domestic troubles and to win flag-rally popular support. His current support, according to the latest poll on the subject, continues to fall.

Armed conflict with Iran would be an enormously negative event for U.S. interests on several grounds, beginning with whatever expenditure of American blood and treasure was involved. Other consequences would include giving a gift to the most hardline elements in Iranian politics, possibly leading to renunciation of the nuclear agreement and the opening of a path to an Iranian nuclear weapon, as well as

collateral damage to U.S. good will and relations with many others, beyond some hardliners in other places who would welcome the spilling of American blood as long as it was done in the service of attacking Iran. One can hope that that there will be enough thinking about such consequences to prevent such an armed conflict from coming to pass.

But war is a possibility, with a likelihood that is somewhere above trivial levels. It is an uncertainty. Also uncertain is the extent to which any conflict that did break out would be fully intended, as distinct from an unintended consequence of aggressive and confrontational policies and postures.

Citizens and members of Congress need to be fully aware of the possibilities and the associated dangers. They should be alert to any new signs that the United States may be headed toward such a war, and they should ask the toughest of questions every step of the way as to whether this path is in U.S. interests.

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.)
