The Real ‘Fake News’ Crisis

The secret of Donald Trump’s political success rests largely on his experience with the fake reality of “reality TV” via “The Celebrity Apprentice” – and how fake drama has spilled into political “news,” as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Everything you need to know about “fake news” happened on July 19, 2017. That was the day the media stopped in its tracks and turned like well-coiffed, bronzer-addicted lemmings to collectively hurl themselves into the abyss of infotainment. It was a truly telling moment because they actually had to hit the pause button on the morphine drip of TrumpTV to carry the live feed of O.J. Simpson’s piddling parole hearing in a Nevada conference room.

Amazingly — or, perhaps, predictably — this utterly inconsequential event was carried by CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, MSNBC, FOX News and ESPN. That's right, this scandalous ghost of obsessions past received the same treatment as a spectacular terrorist attack or a deadly hurricane or a political assassination.

But, no ... it was just O.J. pandering to a parole board. As expected, he was granted his release for a crime unrelated to the famous murders, troubled investigation and showy trial that made him America’s first news-cycle superstar. And it provided a strangely poetic full-circle moment for the media.

When the Juice squeezed out the omnipresent President, it was like he’d come back for a ceremonial handoff to the new star runner before he ambled down the field into the opposition’s broken coverage. This interruption in our regularly scheduled programming also confirmed something Trump has made central to his media-fueled rise as America’s first full-fledged celebritician. That’s right folks, President Trump is actually right about something ... CNN and much of the news media is, in fact, “fake news.”

The problem is that he’s right for the wrong reason. He wants you to believe fake news is part of a Deep State plot to keep him from Draining the Swamp™ and because the media doesn’t want him to Make America Great Again™. According to Trump, that’s why the “fake news” media – as embodied by CNN – is churning out fallacious stories. It's supposed to explain away the obsessive coverage of Russia-gate, dismiss his impressive array of self-inflicted wounds and account for the media’s petulant refusal to tout his “historic” number of as yet undetermined accomplishments. It’s a self-serving — if understandable — fiction Trump sells with his unique brand with reality showmanship.
The Real Fake News

But the true story of fake news is at once far more banal and yet ultimately just as pernicious as Trump’s fake news boogeyman. Sorry, Donald … the problem is not that the news is a bunch of made-up lies or salacious slanders cut from whole cloth. Nor is it a conduit for some nefarious political agenda. Their primary motive is the most All-American motive of all … it’s the profit motive.

Look no further than their bottom line since becoming Trump’s bête noire. The ratings, revenue and executive compensation … are all up. Frankly, CNN and MSNBC were mired in a crisis before the Trump came down the elevator of Trump Tower in June of 2015. And the New York Times and Washington Post were battling their own declining readership and relevance. But that was then. And this is now.

And now they’ve got their own bête noire in Trump … a walking, talking tabloid complete with salacious headlines, wild accusations, shady connections and a willingness to say anything so long as it keeps him on the tips of the media’s wagging tongues. Trump mastered the art of the headline-friendly spiel in the hurly-burly of New York’s tabloid-driven media marketplace. And he knew how to stay on the front page, even if it meant pretending to be his own press agent. By the time he’d done a reality show and peddled the racially-tinged tripe that Barack Obama was an African interloper, Trump had also mastered the art of dealing with the infotainment-driven national news media.

And in a plot twist befitting the side-show state of American politics, it turns out that fake newsiness is also one of the main reasons he became president in the first place. The media’s addiction to cheap and easy, scandal-driven coverage perfectly fit Trump’s one-man circus act. And they forked over the $5 billion in free media coverage to prove it.

Distrusted And Unverified

Now, that’s not to say the news media hasn’t repeatedly taken refuge behind a wall of willful ignorance or told lies of both omission and commission. This has been particularly true whenever Uncle Sam spoils for war with yet another enemy. It’s been that way since the start of the Cold War (and even earlier), but the lead-up to the “product launch” also-known-as “The Iraq War” remains an all-time low for the mainstream news media … with Knight-Ridder’s real-time
debunking of Saddam’s ominous aluminum tubes as the heroic exception that proved the rule.

By 2003, “Mission Accomplished” had devolved into a rolling catastrophe of roadside bombings, suicide attacks and what would become the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Not coincidentally, 2003 was the Rubicon moment when the percentage of Americans with a “great deal or fair amount of trust in the media” finally dropped below 50%, according to Gallup’s tracking poll. Since then the media has battled Congress for the ignominious title of America’s least liked and least trusted institution.

Given that turning point, it’s probably not coincidental that Trump’s campaign took off when he attacked Jeb Bush as the catch-all proxy for the Iraq debacle. The media’s complicity in the snipe hunt for WMDs widened a trust gap that may never be fully repaired … and Trump exploited that rift to great effect, both on a hapless Jeb and on the ever-present media that Trump turned into a de facto political opponent.

Diving Deeper

However, Gallup’s tracking poll also shows that the GOP’s loss of faith dates back beyond the Iraq War … to the middle of the Clinton years. It makes sense that the last time a majority of Republicans trusted the media was during the daily feeding frenzy right before the GOP’s failed attempt at impeachment. To wit, Republican trust hit a partisan high point of 52 percent in 1998. But it’s been a deep decline in trust for Republicans ever since. No doubt, the crashing and burning of the Bush Administration after Hurricane Katrina didn’t quite recapture their trust.

The daily media drumbeat again targets a Republican and overall confidence in the media is slowly rising. But “slowly” is the operative word … with newspapers up to 27 percent from a low of 20 percent in 2016 and television up to 24 percent from a low of 18 percent in 2014. That’s an aggregate number that includes Democrats and Independents (although it’s likely that the modest rise represents Democrats who appreciate the media’s daily bashing of Trump).

For Trump, the important number is the 89 percent of Republicans who trust him versus just 9 percent who trust CNN. They’ve been primed for his fake news attack on the media for a long time. As Jonathan Marshall recently detailed, there’s been a long-standing, concerted effort by right-wing activists to discredit news organizations under the bias-laden rubric of “The Liberal Media.” It began in the Nixon years and it was designed to produce miasmas of doubt around a host of issues and scandals.
Trump cranked-up that fog machine to create a self-serving narrative of “fake news.” It allows Trump to cast shadows of doubt on each and every damaging story by dismissing them all as the equivalent of aluminum tubes and mushroom clouds. But, like so many of Trump’s misdirections, that’s not really the problem. The issue is not that the “news” is a bunch of made-up lies or salacious slanders (although there is surely some of that). The true story of fake news is all about overhead.

**It’s News To Them**

Sadly, the truth is that much of the news that fills the 24-hour cycle simply isn’t newsworthy … and a lot of it really isn’t even news at all. It is mostly a serialized soap opera. It is personality-driven drivel. And it is rarely original reporting based on actual news gathered from around the United States or, even less so, from the far corners of the world.

Instead, the news gathering business has become little more than a news *blathering* business – with a teeming mass of in-studio experts, commentators, surrogates and columnists poised to chime-in on the latest installment of the ongoing drama *du jour*. It is like watching a perpetual Bachelorette after-party show where contestants – in this case, pundits – sit down to chew over the machinations of tonight’s shocking episode.

But don’t laugh. There is a really good reason why the Bachelor/Bachelorette franchise has notched a combined 28 seasons. The unavoidable truth is that it works. It’s an easy formula to replicate. And it’s profitable. That’s why television is brimming with reality shows … they’re cheap, easy to produce and people watch ‘em.

And that formula also explains why today’s cable news landscape is largely bereft of hard news. The blatherati-centric style of “news” is cheap, easy to produce and people watch it. Turn on any of the big three (CNN, FOX & MSNBC) and you’ll find actual reporting makes up a tiny fraction of what you might see on a given day.

You’ll find very few first-person reports by journalists in the field. And most stories are simply regurgitated newspaper reports the hosts toss over to blatherati trapped in Brady Bunch boxes. They tell us what they think and, if the producer is lucky, they’ll “make news” by calling out one of their colleagues in a viral moment of righteous anger. Much of what they talk about is what politicians say to permanent reporters stationed on Capitol Hill. Very little of it is actual news.

On some days, there is no original reporting at all. Genuine investigative
reporting is rarer than a solar eclipse and “breaking news” stories from outside the Beltway are only likely to penetrate that rare air inside the news bubble if the word “terror” fortuitously intersects with an American or European locale. If the bomb goes off in Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan? Not so much.

**Milking Disasters**

But if a natural disaster or mass shooting happens inside the U.S., they will go ... and go in force. Then they will milk it for all it’s worth. All the reporters they deploy and stringers and satellite trucks they hire are a sunk cost, after all. So, why not get all they can out of it?

Hour upon hour is devoted to coverage, whether or not they are advancing the story. The rest of the world fades away as experts and commentators pore over every detail and the same bits of video loop over and over again. Whole news cycles get gobbled up with this paint-by-number style of news programming. It really programs itself. Editorial decision-making is a breeze when there is only one story to cover ... be it Charlottesville, Hurricane Harvey or Donald Trump tweeting out the day’s agenda before they sip their first cup of coffee.

What you don’t see are one-to-three-minute-long video “packages” edited from originally shot video in places were stuff is actually happening. That’s the kind of high-overhead reporting that requires a news organization to deploy reporters, producers and camera crews out into “the field” ... a.k.a. “the world.”

It’s the kind of thing you can still find if you get BBC World on your cable or satellite system. On a good day, the BBC can give you eight packages on eight stories from eight different countries in 15 minutes. Sometimes it is less because they might actually go live to one of the many dozens of reporters they’ve deployed around the world. This allows them to report from the scene of an ongoing crisis or break news from nearly every part of the globe. And this is the sort of reporting CNN used to do in its heyday ... before the TimeWarnerAOL merger eroded what remained of Ted Turner’s dream of a globe-spanning network that could report from just about anywhere in real time.

**The Way It Was**

Back in the 1990s, when CNN was riding high after its on-the-spot coverage of the Gulf War, it had reporters deployed around the globe in bureaus big and small. Mike Chinoy reported regularly from China, Charlayne Hunter-Gault reported regularly from Johannesburg, and Lucia Newman reported around Latin America, often deployed from Havana. And every Sunday, CNN devoted two hours to a long-since-defunct show called “World Report” that compiled video packages from local news sources around the world ... ranging from Madagascar to Benin,
from Bolivia to Finland and Belarus.

But sadly, that model was already in trouble by the time every network and cable news channel cut to the live feed of O.J. driving his white Bronco down a Los Angeles freeway. The most important factor was the rise of “news divisions” as profit centers for the mega-corporations that owned them. To get there, the key was to find ways to grab eyeballs while also lowering overhead. Reporters and camera crews in bureaus around the world and, perhaps even more distressingly, around the United States were costly investments that drained profitability away from the bottom line. Sure, the packages they delivered were crucial to filling the day’s schedule, but cutting the cost of labor is always a tempting step for corporate number crunchers.

The solution to this problem came in two parts. One was the advent of “Crossfire” on CNN. The idea of filling a slot with two hosts and two walk-ons who only wanted a shot at making their names as political celebrities was programming gold. It was loud, contentious and often dramatic. And it was cheap, easy and profitable.

The second part was the rise of the serialized scandal. In some ways, the Gulf War portended the future. The daily build-up to war provided an irresistible plotline. Still, in spite of the Pentagon’s attempts to pool coverage, manage the narrative with snazzy videos of self-guiding bombs and the coming of expert Generals as commentators, the Gulf War was news. It was not a scandal, per se. The end of newsgathering began in earnest when O.J. Simpson was cast as the star of the ultimate courtroom drama.

The Juice Machine

The story arc played out over the course of 16 months and each day saw CNN parsing the details of the day’s events, particularly as the trial began in earnest in September of 1994. It was the endless chattering about O.J.’s trial that gave us the rise of the blathering class. Greta Van Sustern became a star and she has since hit the trifecta — having worked at CNN, FOX News and MSNBC. By the time the verdict came in on October 3, 1995, the die was cast.

The following year – timed nicely with the corporate-friendly Telecommunications Act of 1996 – saw the launch of FOX News and the beginning of the celebrity-branded “news” show with the coming of Bill O’Reilly. It was as if Roger Ailes had a premonition of things to come. The format was set and then replicated and “refined” with the Clinton-Lewinsky Impeachment saga. It was the gift that kept on giving. Even more so than O.J., the “Devil On A Blue Dress” storyline finished the transformation of the cable news model away from gathering news and towards constant blathering about the news and the celebritification of politics.
It was a smooth transition to Elian Gonzales. Then came Bush v. Gore with its epic recount and infamous “hanging chads.” After that came 9/11, the Iraq War build-up, the brutal years of war, the catastrophe of Katrina, and the Sandy Hook tragedy and so on. And that’s what TrumpTV is for cable news ... another serialized plotline of daily drama often ripped from the headlines that cable news incessantly ponders. Rarely do they break news. Mostly they “confirm” the work of others with their “own sources.” Then they talk about it.

Lemming Meringue

If television news ever decided to forgo the low overhead and once again send reporters and producers and videographers out into the world beyond the semi-permeable bubble of D.C.-N.Y. axis, these teams could do the one thing that only television can do ... and that’s go to a story where it is happening to “gather” the news and the sound and the pictures and send it right into people’s living rooms.

It’s the unique power of words and pictures working together to transport people to places they might never otherwise see and to hear from people they might never otherwise meet. It’s the kind of reporting that provides context to complicated issues and generates knowledge, understanding and maybe even a little empathy for someone outside of one’s own experience. And it’s the kind of power that Edward R. Murrow implored his colleagues to cherish back in 1958 when he warned them that their callow interests risked turning their miraculous opportunity into little more than “lights in a box.”

Pictures and reporting still matter. And one wonders how Americans would respond if they saw reports from Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Mali or anywhere the U.S. military is active and people are dying. Maybe it wouldn’t make a difference, but at least Americans could decide for themselves. As it stands now, there is almost no input, no information nor anything that shows America’s wide array of targets as human beings with lives and families and burnt-out homes.

Really, this is the true fakery. It’s the mind-numbing bubble the news media created. It’s a semi-permeable barrier that has become what Murrow feared ... a shiny object designed to grab eyeballs, drive revenue and enrich the media moguls whose massive compensation packages rise with the ratings and the revenue.

That’s the bottom line. The lemmings in the media who cut to O.J.’s parole hearing believe they are giving the lemmings in the audience what they want. And the ratings say they are right. But in another ironic plot twist the oft-recited story of lemmings throwing themselves over a cliff is ... fake news!
That’s right, a 1983 investigation by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation determined a Disney documentary made in 1958 faked the lemming mass suicide story. The filmmakers used a variety of tricks to create the illusion of a stampede before intentionally throwing some lemmings off a cliff to film their deaths in the water below. It was a stupefying story everyone talked about despite the fact that no one actually saw it happen ... which sure sounds a lot like the lemming-like march of cable news into an abyss of its own making.

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The Last of the Mad Pirates?

Exclusive: President Trump’s erratic behavior and careless bellicosity could have dire consequences for the world, but he also demonstrates the need to rethink America’s global power, notes David Marks.

By David Marks

There is clear evidence of a world increasingly steeped in conflict and violence: The degradation of U.S.-Russian relations, territorial tensions in the South China Sea, the hostile rhetoric between North Korea and the United States, an escalation of the border conflict between China and India, growing tension between Israel and Iran, and the continuing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Ukraine; among other hostilities around the globe yielding death and destruction.

Yet there is some indication that what we may be witnessing is darkness before a new dawn.

In his historical essay of 1968, Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth, Buckminster Fuller, futurist and inventor of the geodesic dome, describes the conquest and colonization of the planet by Europeans as the age of the great pirates. He marks the end of that era with World War I, followed with a subsequent attempt by lesser pirates taking advantage of a time when the planet’s fate was precarious.

Fuller concluded that the later events of the Twentieth Century and beyond would be determined by the wisdom and strength of those who recognized that Spaceship Earth has limited resources that need to be appreciated and protected. As with
others who consider our predicament, he saw only two possibilities:

“We are not going to be able to operate our Spaceship Earth successfully nor for much longer unless we see it as a whole spaceship and our fate as common. It has to be everybody or nobody.”

The reign of the last of the pirates in their final self-destructive, single-minded grasp for profits would either destroy human life as we know it or be countered with a new sustainable relationship with the Earth.

The struggle between the conflict generating profiteers and those who recognize that reducing conflict is the only path to sustaining human life on the planet, is coming to a head. Despite hard evidence that environmental traumas are increasing and will dominate the near future, the modern pirates are in defiant denial, leading their final charge against anything that might get in the way of gargantuan treasure chests. They must lie, cheat, pillage or kill in order to maintain the facade that everything is okay with the planet.

One of the most critical tools of the great pirates and their modern heirs is the ability to prey on the ignorant and misinformed.

The pirates of old applied the sword to abscond with valuables; and more often committed genocide to steal land and resources from the indigenous.

Propaganda Power

Modern pirates inherited these tools and became specialists in others. They deceive, entice and encourage scapegoating to obtain treasures or protect their fortunes. Ignorance is fertile ground for their work. Anyone opposing these marauders and their skewed vision of the world become the objects of derision, ridicule and threats of violence.

Yes, this tale may sound familiar as we watch world events unfold. In that sense, the Trump presidency is a dramatic test of the planet’s fate; the last desperate, inane, final gasps of piracy confront us all.

Some recent U.S. Presidents, other world leaders, corporations and industrialists bear some resemblance to the pirates of old, and certainly there are current conflicts that are fueled outside the scope of U.S. influence. But Trump is straight out of Central Casting. And in contrast to his self-aggrandizement, he is not the heroic leader, but rather the mad, despised black pirate awash in his own darkness and loathing.

The glimmer of light comes because President Trump, pirate extraordinaire, is unwittingly doing everything to ensure that no one will ever tolerate a pirate
Because he is great at alienating others, Trump’s enemies begin to unite. Some of his previous supporters and loyalists have mutinied in reaction to his unwillingness to condemn racism and his willingness to pardon political allies. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson recently spoke an amazing phrase to encapsulate and isolate the so-called leader of the free world: “The President speaks for himself.”

The greatest danger, which was noted by some before he was elected and is just being recognized by those who have been on board his ship until now, is Trump’s proclivity to embrace violence, however and wherever it might suit him, such as his rush-to-judgment missile strike against a Syrian airbase in April. Many an eyebrow was raised at Trump’s “fire and fury like the world has never seen” threat against North Korea – suggesting a nuclear strike – but very few have broached the touchy subject of taking away his role as commander in chief, including his nuclear sword, via impeachment or the Twenty-fifth Amendment’s provision for declaring the President “unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office” (requiring a finding by the Vice President and a majority of the Cabinet).

A Pattern of Violence

Veiled hope percolates that Trump’s words are no more than bluster – and it must be acknowledged that Trump’s predecessors resorted to violence repeatedly around the world, including Nobel Peace laureate Barack Obama, who acknowledged bombing seven countries, and George W. Bush, who invaded Afghanistan and Iraq and lusted for more wars, and that Trump’s rival last year, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, may have surpassed even Trump in her hawkishness, having pushed for the invasion of Libya in 2011 and supporting the bloody proxy war in Syria.

But the current mad pirate, if nothing else, excels at unpredictability. The world watches in amazement as a buccaneer steers the most powerful ship on the planet with egoistic lunacy. How might this precarious tale have a happy end?

If we manage to survive these dangers, the Trump presidency could engender a new era of consensus. Perhaps with the maddest of the pirates gone, recognition of the causes of his ascendancy might be considered. First and foremost: the last U.S. presidential election presented only a choice between an unsustainable status quo and a role of the dice.

In that sense, it is not enough for Trump simply to be replaced by another pirate, even one with a calmer disposition and a better vocabulary. For the U.S., a period of serious self-criticism is warranted. Without that, it is hard
to envision how candidates seeking a more peaceful future can succeed.

President Trump’s crass destructiveness – and the more suave advocacy of violence by Bush, Obama and Clinton – should be a mirror for all Americans to reflect upon. The image of Trump is more garish and thus more obvious in its ugliness, but that may finally shake Americans of all ideological persuasions awake in the recognition of the viciousness that has absorbed American politics and society.

Trump’s unintended contribution is that he makes obvious how dangerous it is for the planet to have mad pirates at the helm. He has given re-birth to a concept that Fuller succinctly expressed: “If humanity does not opt for integrity we are through completely. It is absolutely touch and go. Each one of us could make the difference.”

Perhaps – once Americans are awake to this reality – simple things might be prioritized; like reducing violence between nations and religions, reversing the abuses that have bruised the planet and polluted its atmosphere. And maybe working to ensure that everyone on Spaceship Earth is fed, sheltered and educated.

Unlikely, naive and idealistic you say? Perhaps, but the moral health of the United States is a strong influence on the rest of the world. The direction that the U.S. takes after Trump will be a key factor in future global stability, both politically and environmentally.

The veil hasn’t quite lifted and the pirates still dominate, but there’s potential for recognizing we’re all on a mother ship worth protecting.

David Marks is a veteran documentary filmmaker and investigative reporter. His work includes films for the BBC and PBS, including Nazi Gold, on the role of Switzerland in WWII and biographies of Jimi Hendrix and Frank Sinatra.

A Victory Seen Over ‘State-Sponsored Racism’

The restoration of a Mexican-American studies program in Tucson, Arizona public schools is being hailed as an important step in telling the more complex history of the American West, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein
Advocates of Mexican-American studies are celebrating a federal court ruling restoring one of the most successful programs in Arizona public schools as a victory against “state-sponsored racism.”

Nolan Cabrera, associate professor at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, has been involved from the beginning in resisting the controversial removal of ethnic studies from the Tucson Unified School District. I spoke to Cabrera on Aug. 26, after a U.S. District Court judge’s decision in favor of the restoration of the program.

Cabrera is a recipient of the prestigious education early-career award the National Academy of Education/Spencer Postdoctoral fellowship and is a fellow for the American Association for Hispanics in Higher Education.

Dennis Bernstein: Nolan Cabrera, you created an ethnic studies program at the University of Arizona that provided the informational background for the students who fought the effort to shut down ethnic studies in Tucson. How did you get involved?

Dr. Nolan Cabrera: I became involved in the struggle around Mexican American studies running statistical analyses on the efficacy of the program. Interestingly, I was doing this for the desegregation case, which was a separate issue from House Bill 2281, that banned ethnic studies. But then that became the basis for the other statistical analyses, which demonstrated the program’s remarkable achievements in terms of student development over the years.

DB: Could you talk about the pressure that is building in Arizona right now? President Trump just made a kind of campaign stop in Phoenix, praising Sheriff Joe [Arpaio] and saying that he plans to pardon him. What does it mean for Trump to be there?

NC: When ethnic studies was banned in 2010, there was also a massive anti-immigrant bill and a move to eliminate affirmative action. We had border militias, there was the shooting of Rep. Gabby Giffords. It is almost as if the rest of America has become like what Arizona was at that time. So, while it is important that the president is here in Arizona, in terms of emboldening white supremacists and those advocating for regressive social policies, it is very much par for the course. We have been dealing with this for the better part of a decade in Arizona.

DB: When Trump praises Sheriff Joe, in spite of the fact that he has been convicted of breaking the law, what message is he sending and how does that reverberate with white supremacists?

NC: Firstly, there is this whole macho bravado that really resonates with a lot
of Trump supporters, of which Sheriff Joe is a classic example. He likes to call himself “the toughest sheriff in the country.” Actually, he was picking on poor undocumented migrants, subjecting them to inhumane conditions. That’s not toughness, that’s not strength. It is just bullying, cowardice and racism.

If he is pardoned, it will send a clear message that racial profiling, hunting down Mexicans, etc. is acceptable. As a colleague of mine in Colorado, Susana Munoz, says, “Dehumanizing policies give a license to dehumanize.”

In Arizona, it has had a twofold effect: It is emboldening racist action and, at the same time, it is sending up a flag welcoming new membership. The Southern Poverty Law Center is currently tracking 18 substantiated hate groups in the state of Arizona. One of my friends remarked that he didn’t realize the number was so low. And when rhetoric from the top draws false equivalencies between neo-Nazis and Black Lives Matter, it allows the white supremacists to feel vindicated and it justifies violence against civil rights organizations.

I am glad that a lot of the people who have been playing overt racist politics have been voted out of office in Arizona: Russell Pierce, John Huppenthal, Tom Horne and Joe Arpaio. In some respects, the voting populace as a whole is pushing back on this politics of racism and division. This is an incredibly important symbolic act.

DB: You were a key witness in the recent case in Tucson regarding the attempt by certain legislators to end the ethnic studies program there, which was proven to be incredibly successful. Could you remind people exactly what the case was about? And didn’t the judge rule that ethnic studies was a positive part of the educational system in Tucson?

NC: Back in 2006, superintendent of public education Tom Horne had an ax to grind with Mexican American studies. He worked three times to get a bill passed to allow him to eliminate the program.

In 2010, he was finally successful and that is when we got House Bill 2281, which allowed Horne to withhold ten percent of state funding for any district that had any class found to promote racial antagonism or treat students as representatives of their race. And it was up to Horne to determine what constituted a violation. So if students are reading a well-known book such as Rudi Acuña’s *Occupied America* or Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, according to the state superintendent of public instruction, that constitutes a violation.

What came out in the federal lawsuit was that Horne had found the district out of compliance before the law had even gone into effect, so it was a
predetermined outcome to eliminate the Mexican American studies program, and that Horne and Huppenthal acted out of racial animus.

Actually, John Huppenthal was caught anonymously blogging that he thought the Mexican American studies program was the KKK by another name. When he ran for state superintendent of public instruction, he ran a radio ad saying that, if elected, he would stop La Raza.

Students were only able to take Mexican American studies in their junior and senior years of high school. I started looking at the academic achievement of students prior to taking Mexican American studies and I found that they were abysmally low. These same students, after taking Mexican American studies, had some of the highest graduation rates in the entire district.

It was such an amazing accomplishment that the state, as it was trying to defend HB 2281, made the case that there was no way these statistics could be credible. The judge ruled that the law did harm to these students because it stripped them of this very promising educational opportunity. He also found that representatives of the state were using coded racist language for partisan purposes.

DB: There was strong support for these programs from the students, who knew how crucial they were to their own lives.

NC: Every time that Mexican American studies would come as an issue before the school board, the room would be packed with students. And then when the board was going to unilaterally destroy the program in April, 2011, a group of student activists chained themselves to the diocese before the school board was able to convene.

So much of the commentary at the time was, “Oh, these kids are throwing a temper tantrum, the adults need to reassert themselves.” But the students explained that they had studied civil disobedience and the actions of the ‘60s. This was an intentional political act and they knew that they could get arrested. A lot of them were applying to colleges but they were willing to take this risk if it meant saving their studies. The level of personal risk these students were taking, as well as the sophistication of political strategy, was phenomenal.

This is what participatory democracy is supposed to look like. All too often, we have ignored the roles of the students in these important social movements and forget that it is their education that is at stake. These students continually reminded folks of that. So, you had multiple student-led demonstrations, students speaking at board meetings, students working with the media.

In fact, when they finally succeeded in eliminating the Mexican American studies
program, the student group UNIDOS actually created a School of Ethnic Studies, a one-day event where people could come and learn from the curriculum that Arizona had outlawed.

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.

The Same Ol’ Afghan War Fallacies

Unless President Trump can pull off a peace deal with the Taliban, his Afghan War policy is following the same bloody and futile path that his predecessors took, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

President Trump’s statement on Afghanistan has numerous shortcomings. It portrays as a “new strategy” what is instead a familiar kicking of a can down the road. It combines Trump’s habit of heaping blame on his predecessors with a warmed-over version of what those predecessors did in Afghanistan.

It declares a determination to “win” while leaving one guessing as to exactly what a win would mean in Afghanistan. It fails to address underlying problems of governance in that country. It gives no basis for expecting or even hoping that the U.S. military expedition there will not go on forever.

Added to these features is a further notion that Trump shares with many others, including observers who in other respects are critical of his policy. This is the idea that there is a direct connection between extremists having a physical presence in a distant land and the United States facing a terrorist threat at home.

Trump used the term safe haven four times in his speech. He declared that the basic purpose of the military expedition in Afghanistan was, “We must stop the resurgence of safe havens that enable terrorists to threaten America.”

One hears this same idea over and over. The current U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, General John W. Nicholson, Jr., says, “The requirement to keep pressure on these terror groups to prevent another attack on our homeland .?.?. fundamentally, that is why we are here.” Such statements – and not only about Afghanistan – are minor rephrasing of the old notion of “fight them over there
or else we’ll have to fight them at home.”

That notion is not valid, and never has been. The very physical distance involved works against the relevance of foreign havens to terrorist threats against the homeland. One cannot drive a truck bomb, or even the ingredients for one, across the Atlantic Ocean. To the extent any physical space is required to prepare a terrorist attack, a house or apartment in or near the city being targeted is – as a long history of terrorist incidents has demonstrated – much more useful to terrorists than a piece of real estate on another continent.

Very little safe space of any sort is required for high-impact terrorism. After the recently discovered terrorist cell in Spain suffered the mishap of accidentally blowing up the house they were using in a Catalonian village to prepare explosives, they turned to the no-space-required technique of renting vehicles and using them to run down people in the street – the most popular terrorist modus operandi in the West in recent months. As for the terrorist-related functions of recruitment and operational coordination, most of that occurs not in any physical space but in cyberspace.

The ‘Safe Haven’ Myth

Even if the idea of a foreign safe haven being critical to international terrorist operations were valid, it could not be a sound basis for justifying a military expedition in any one country. Havens are fungible, and extremists driven from one place can set up shop somewhere else. The focus on Afghanistan is a historical legacy of one group’s operations in the past, which in turn were a legacy of an anti-Soviet insurgency in the even more distant past.

The current prime foes in Afghanistan, the Taliban, are not an international terrorist group and never have been one. The Taliban are instead narrowly focused on political power and the nature of the social order within Afghanistan.

It is true that a patch of foreign real estate may be required for more ambitious operations such as organizing and training a militia. But the world is full of militias that do not threaten the United States, and they certainly should not be equated with terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland.

The establishment of a mini-state on Iraqi and Syria territory by the so-called Islamic State or ISIS raises the further issue of how such a seizure of territory might inspire radicalized individuals elsewhere. But the inspiration depends more on ideology and grievances than on a territorial presence, as has been demonstrated by ISIS-inspired terrorism in the West that has continued and even increased while the mini-state has been getting crushed.
The persistence, especially in the minds of Americans, of the erroneous notion about safe havens and terrorism has much to do with 9/11, its searing effect on the American consciousness, and Al-Qaeda’s past residency in Afghanistan. But the notion is a misreading of that piece of history, even without getting into overlooked details about phases of the Afghan civil war and the nature of the relationship between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Most of the preparations for the 9/11 operation did not take place in Afghanistan; most took place in the West, including in apartments in Hamburg, hotels in Spain, and flight schools in the United States.

The safe haven notion also has become a convenient mantra to cite as a rationale for continuing U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan for other reasons. Those reasons may include fear that if a pullout from Afghanistan were followed by a major anti-U.S. terrorist attack, domestic political opponents would make a rhetorical connection between the two whether the connection were valid or not. And the more the mantra is recited, the more believable such alleged connections sound to the public.

**Fearing a Backlash**

More general habits of thought, especially American habits, are also in play. One is a tendency toward spatial thinking that associates good guys and bad guys with different places on a map. There is a tendency to imagine a Mordor whether one exists or not. A further American tendency is to equate solving a security problem with an overseas use of military force. Related to that is the American view of terrorism as primarily a foreign threat, notwithstanding the nature of most terrorist attacks within the United States since 9/11.

An unfortunate effect of the persistent notion about terrorist safe havens is not only costly and unnecessary military expeditions; the notion also worsens the terrorist threat itself. The overseas deployment of U.S. military forces provides a major motivation for anti-U.S. terrorism. The collateral casualties and damage that inevitably result from operations by those forces accentuate the grievances that underlie such terrorism.

A relevant reminder about this comes from an incomplete and misleading passage in Trump’s speech about Afghanistan. He referred to Iraq and asserted that “the vacuum we created by leaving too soon gave safe haven for ISIS to spread, to grow, recruit, and launch attacks.” What he did not mention was that ISIS did not exist before the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. The group arose, under a different name, as a direct result of the invasion and of the warfare within Iraq that the invasion ignited.

And lest we forget, a major part of the campaign to sell the invasion to the
American public involved the fear of terrorism, the specter of dictators giving weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, and the idea that if we don’t fight the bad guys over there they will attack us at home.

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Worries about a Galveston Bio-Lab

Exclusive: The flooding caused by Hurricane Harvey has left thousands homeless in the greater Houston area but there also is rising concern about a biological lab in Galveston that houses deadly diseases, notes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Concern is rising for the safety of a biological lab containing deadly diseases on Galveston island, which has been hit by the massive storm devastating southeast Texas.

The Galveston National Laboratory on the campus of the University of Texas Medical Branch contains samples of hundreds of viruses, insects and microbes, which could spread extreme danger if they were to escape. There are several Bio-safety Level 4 labs at Galveston. BSL-4 is the highest level precaution taken for work with agents that can be transmitted through the air and cause fatal diseases in humans for which there are no known cures.

According to its website, the high security national bio-containment lab’s mission is to develop “therapies, vaccines, and diagnostic tests for naturally occurring emerging diseases such as SARS, West Nile encephalitis and avian influenza – as well as for microbes that might be employed by terrorists.”

There has been almost no news from Galveston as journalists have reported being blocked from reaching the island because of severe flooding. There has been no reporting at all on the condition of the lab. A call to the laboratory on Tuesday immediately went to voicemail.

The lab’s website says “plans are in place to shut down and secure all laboratory operations if a hurricane landfall is predicted near Galveston.” It says that “this shut-down and decontamination can be done quickly, with all work
in the facility ceasing, the lab locked down, and all infectious agents and biological and chemical material placed into safe and secure storage.”

A 2008 article in *The New York Times* about the laboratory said, “Each time a hurricane approaches the island, scientists will have to stop their experiments and exterminate many of the viruses and bacteria they are studying.”

**Uncertain Warning**

It is not clear how much warning the Galveston lab had. Last Wednesday the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tweeted that “remnants of Trop. Storm Harvey have regenerated into a Tropical Depression.” On Thursday NOAA tweeted about “rapidly strengthening … Tropical Storm #Harvey as it moves toward #Texas.” Later on Thursday it upgraded the storm to a hurricane. On Friday it was declared a Category 2 hurricane on the same day it surged to Category 4 and made landfall.

The lab says that its $174 million facilities have been constructed to withstand a Category 5 storm. The eight-story buildings containing the labs have pilings into the earth 121 feet deep. All the lab facilities are at least 30 feet above ground, high enough to withstand even the most severe flooding, the website said. The building is supposed to survive 140 mph winds.

The National Weather Service has called this storm “unprecedented” and “beyond anything experienced” before. The storm has so far dropped 48 inches of rain on Houston, a record for a single storm in the continental U.S. About half a million people will need help from the federal government to recover.

With electric power out to at least 100,000 customers in southeast Texas, there is fear that electricity going out at the lab would release the pressure needed to contain the deadly bugs in their secure storage containers.

“State-of-the-art systems built into the design of the GNL help protect workers and prevent any release of infectious agents,” the lab says on its website. “Double and triple redundancies in equipment and systems help ensure that if an unexpected failure does occur, a backup is in place to maintain safety.”

**Generators Need Fuel**

The lab has back-up electric generators. In the event of a power failure, the Galveston National Laboratory “will have primary power plus independent backup power provided by multiple generators that are tested regularly,” the lab’s site said.

But the generators run on fuel that would have to be replenished. It is not
known if the lab is accessible to emergency crews to refuel the generators, which are stored on the roof, according to the 2008 Times piece.

“As I see it the existential problem is this: What happens if and when the fuel for the back-up generators runs out?” asked University of Illinois professor Francis Boyle, an expert in biological weapons. “The negative air pressure that keeps (the) bugs in there ends. And (the) bugs can then escape.”

Boyle drafted the Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989, the U.S. domestic implementing legislation for the Biological Weapons Convention. He said in an email that he believes the Pentagon should send a Nuclear, Biological and Chemical control team to Galveston to secure the lab.

The lab says it maintains “impeccable, explicit, and transparent safety standards at all levels of biological containment, consistent with federal laws and guidelines.” But Boyle points out a legal difference in language between being “consistent” with the law and being “compliant” with it.

“This is a typical lawyer’s dodge,” said Boyle, an international lawyer. “For example, Bush Jr. repeatedly stated that he would treat detainees ‘consistent with’ the Geneva Conventions, and not ‘in compliance with’ the Geneva Conventions, thus setting the basis for their abuse.”

In a 2103 incident, the Galveston lab lost track of a lethal hemorrhagic fever virus sample. It is not believed to have escaped the facility, however. The release of hundreds of samples because of a power failure could present a different scenario.

Labs Hit by Hurricanes

There have been examples of severe storms causing widespread damage at bio labs. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Tulane University School of Medicine “lost years of research,” according to the journal Nature Medicine. “Tulane University ... sat stranded in floodwaters for weeks,” the journal reported. “When the backup generators failed, so did the freezers and refrigerators. In the sweltering heat of a New Orleans summer, it didn’t take long for the contents to spoil.”

The world’s largest collection of lymphoma samples from rhesus macaques infected with simian immunodeficiency virus was lost.

When Hurricane Ike struck Galveston in 2008, some labs on the University of Texas Medical Branch campus “lost backup power, which meant that freezers thawed,” the journal reported. It took three to four years for the university to recover. Galveston National Laboratory survived Ike, a Category 2 storm, without any damage.
When the Laboratory was built many people questioned the wisdom of putting BSL-4 labs in the path of hurricanes. “The University of Texas should consider locating its biohazards lab away from Galveston Island and out of harm’s way,” Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club, told the Times a month before the lab opened in November 2008. “As destructive as it was, Hurricane Ike was only a Category 2 storm. A more powerful storm would pose an even greater threat of a biohazards release,” Kramer said.

“It’s crazy, in my mind,” Jim Blackburn, an environmental lawyer in Houston, told the Times. “I just find an amazing willingness among the people on the Texas coast to accept risks that a lot of people in the country would not accept.”

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The Alt-Right’s Alternative Reality

President Trump’s “Alt-Right” is a grab bag of mostly incoherent or contradictory ideas derived from white resentments. Now, it will be played off against the Republican establishment with unpredictable results, as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

One thing to keep in mind during the Age of Trump is that reality shows are far more scripted than they appear. That simple fact should be used like a decoder card to decipher the combative stories and click-baited headlines emanating from Steve Bannon’s portentous reboot of Breitbart.

This is particularly true of the #WAR meme gleefully spread by Breitbart’s shock-troops at the very moment Bannon triumphantly returned to the fold. Like an exiled sheriff returning to a one-horse town, Bannon boasted that his hands were back “on his weapons” after a short trip from the West Wing to Breitbart’s nearby headquarters. And how proud Breitbart’s staff must be to find themselves holstered on Bannon’s hip, ready to be deployed as his at-will instruments of destruction.
True to form, Bannon reportedly led an editorial meeting to plan an attack on a presidency he pronounced “over” during a tour de force exit interview with the Weekly Standard. That interview punctuated a week of mixed messages from a swollen Svengali who’d been transformed by the media into jacked-up version of Karl Rove. TIME even dubbed Bannon “the Great Manipulator” in a Trump-baiting cover story. It was quite a meteoric rise for a man who’d previously hitched his star to Sarah Palin.

Although Rove sanctimoniously denounced his kindred spirit, the alluring idea of Bannon as Trump’s version of Bush’s Brain 2.0 was toothsome fodder for a press corps forever on the prowl for juicy details of palace intrigue from inside Trump’s White House. Some, like deposed hit-man Anthony “The Mooch” Scaramucci, believed Bannon slaked their thirst with his self-serving leaks. Perhaps that’s why Trump wisely avoided poisoning Bannon’s media-friendly well.

It would explain why Bannon’s parting shots at the administration were met with praise by his “former” boss. Trump thanked him on Twitter, touted his renewed role at Breitbart, and welcomed Bannon’s coming attack on the GOP establishment. Most notably, Trump ignored Bannon’s brutal autopsy of his failed administration, thus transgressing his iron law about “always hitting back” with twice the force he receives. That important detail kept the Beltway’s blatherati guessing about the damage Bannon could do to Trump’s otherwise impregnable base. But it may indicate there’s something far more triangular than diametrical at work between the supposed frenemies.

Bermuda Triangulation

It’s really easy to get lost down one of Trump’s rabbit holes. There are lots of ‘em ... and they become even harder to avoid when Trump’s torrential tweetstorms open ‘em up into rhetorical sinkholes. And that’s exactly what he’s done since Bannon’s departure. He’s deluged Capitol Hill with tweeted attacks on Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky; Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, R-Wisconsin; foreign affairs scion Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tennessee; and never-Trumper Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Arizona. It could be part of a cunning plan. Then again, Trump’s star-turn as a celebritician has been built on a pro-wrestling-style of political choreography that gins up villains so he can showcase his unique ability to slam them.

This need to continually spoil for a fight was on full-display when he drew a line in the sand during a long, strange pep rally in Phoenix, Arizona. In what’s shaping-up as an epic Mexican stand-off over the debt ceiling, Trump threatened to shut down the government if Congress fails to properly fund a wall that was originally supposed to be purchased with pesos.
So, with Trump poised to officially break one of his key promises (Mexico will pay) in order to keep one of his other key promises (build a wall his party’s leadership doesn’t want to fund), what is the logic of risking a shutdown that, if history is any guide, will almost certainly damage the GOP?

Perhaps damaging the GOP establishment is the whole point. Bannon certainly has them in his sights. He told The Economist that Sen. McConnell tops his growing list of targets. And, according to a report by Bloomberg, Trump developed this stand-off strategy in cahoots with Bannon the week before he resigned. White House sources said Bannon “urged the president to go through with a government shutdown if necessary to force Congress into providing money for the wall.”

Apparently, this is seen as “crucial to Trump’s credibility and even political survival.” And, in what’s becoming a Trumpster talking point, Roger Stone called for Trump to take “a scalp” from “arrogant” members of Congress to end their defiance. Said Stone to The Hill, “All he needs to do is punish one incumbent and I think you’d see a sea-change.” And Bannon told Devil’s Bargain author Joshua Green that he left the White House to “go to war for Trump against his opponents — on Capitol Hill, in the media and in corporate America.”

At the same time, Trump is doing everything he can to signal that he’s keeping the faith … particularly after Breitbart derided his “flip-flop” on Afghanistan. Since that decision, he’s said the media isn’t just the enemy, but they actually don’t want America to be great again. He’s pardoned criminally contemptuous Sheriff Joe Arpaio and inspired exactly the response Bannon relishes from his opponents. Trump punished transgendered Americans in the military. He’s resumed controversial transfers of military hardware to local police. And it looks like he’s poised to crack-down on DACA “Dreamers.”

So, since Bannon left the White House in control of the “moderates” … Trump has made a point of hitting many of the hot buttons that activated the ire of Bannon’s critics on both sides of the aisle. Mostly, this onslaught looks like it is designed to confront the GOP, their role in passing Trump’s agenda be damned. It’s a triangular agenda to distance him from Congressional failures. And it means that Bannon is still calling Trump’s tune.

Who’s The Boss?

The simple fact is that Trump was never really Bannon’s boss in the first place. Just refer back to The Mooch’s colorful comments to find the only person Bannon is truly willing to bend over backwards (or forward, as the case may be) to serve. If Bannon is beholden to anyone it is the deep-pocketed Mercers — a pair of super-rich ideologues who’ve tipped their tin-foiled caps at the Frank Gaffney wing of a growing Islamophobia plunderbund. Just think of them as the
Koch Brothers of the Alt-Right.

In fact, Robert Mercer pumped $10 million into Bannon’s version of Breitbart. He and his daughter Rebekah doled out $26 million during the 2016 campaign to a variety of causes like the “Defeat Crooked Hillary PAC” and a fun little PAC run by Iran-obsessed Neocon John Bolton. The elder Mercer also reportedly dropped another $10 million on Cambridge Analytica, the ever-more scrutinized data targeting company that spread micro-targeted pro-Trump/anti-Hillary “news” during the 2016 Election.

Not coincidently, both Bannon and deposed National Security Advisor Gen. Michael Flynn drew salaries from the Cambridge operation. The Mercers were instrumental in bringing Flynn’s paranoid, “Iran is Lurking Behind Every Corner” worldview into the White House. And they even quietly funded Milo Yiannopoulos after he momentarily became too controversial for the controversy-addicted editors of Breitbart.

But it was Trump’s Bannon-managed rise that put the Mercers on the map. And their money helped Bannon coalesce a growing cohort of Alt-Right civilizational strugglers in a political force. This is the same fringy scrum that kept Hungarian hustler Seb Gorka from disappearing forever into the dark abyss of a tediously long White Nationalist subreddit. And it’s the same Alt-Right universe where you’ll find a “deep state of alert” over National Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster’s purge of Michael Flynn’s anti-Islam groupies. Many of them actually believe recently dispatched NSC aide Rich Higgins was axed by McMaster because Higgins was getting dangerously close to uncovering a plot between the Deep State’s “cultural Marxists” and their far-flung network Islamist allies.

According to a much-discussed memo titled “POTUS & Political Warfare,” Higgins infamously warned that a cadre of Deep State actors called “Globalists” is actively trying to destroy Trump. Even worse, these nefarious “Maoist” tacticians are said to be risking the nation’s future because powerful “Islamists will co-opt the movement in its entirety” and calamity will fall over the land like a pitch-black burqa.

As Higgins wrote, “Globalists and Islamists recognize that for their visions to succeed, America, both as an ideal and as a national and political identity, must be destroyed.”

And the linchpin of that Globalist-Islamist plan to destroy America? Look no further than the ongoing Deep State coup against the one man who dares to stand between the United States and the Globalist abyss — Donald J. Trump. Russia-gate and the Globalist-controlled media are two prongs of this attack. But devotees of this grand narrative see Globalist insiders like Jared Kushner, Gary Cohn,
McMaster and Obama’s puppets in the Intelligence community as the primary anti-American phalanx battling Trump as he struggles to make America great again.

Along the way, Trumpist websites like Breitbart, American Greatness, Infowars, Conservative HQ and American Thinker routinely wield the “Globalist” moniker like a cudgel against Trump’s enemies. They find these Globalist enemies hiding under all of Washington’s mossy rocks and lurking around every international corner. George Soros is often targeted because they believe he uses Craigslist ads to pay protesters and he secretly funds the Antifa, Black Lives Matter and just about every group that opposes Trump and America’s heritage. Soros the indefatigable boogeyman is even blamed for orchestrating the Charlottesville mess in an effort to discredit the Alt-Right.

And at one strange point, McMaster was simultaneously called a puppet of the Rothschilds via Soros and an anti-Israel agent. But since Bannon bailed, it’s Jared Kushner and Gary Cohn who’ve become their primary targets.

Castigating Kushner

The tension between Bannon and Kushner is well documented. In fact, Breitbart’s Editor-in-Chief even reassured someone he thought was Bannon that he was willing to do the “dirty work” of smearing Jared and Ivanka. No stranger to a sneaky smear, Bannon reportedly relished calling Kushner a “cuck” behind his back. The term “cuck” is the Alt-Right’s favorite epithet for those deemed effeminate and weak and traitorous. But the epithet du jour has to be “Globalist.”

As if on cue, Breitbart heralded the return of Gorka under the headline: “EXCLUSIVE–‘Like the Last Scene of Star Wars’: Sebastian Gorka Compares Battle Against Globalist Cabal to Rebel Alliance Fighting Evil.” It’s actually kind of ironic since “Seb Gorka” sounds exactly like the name Jar-Jar Binks would take if he turned to the Dark Side to become a Sith Lord. Breitbart has also ripped Kushner as “starstruck” with “Goldman Sachs Globalists” and they’ve repeatedly attacked Gary Cohn as a “Globalist” who’s hijacked Trump’s White House. They’ve taken to framing Cohn in-between two globes, which they did once again when Cohn recently criticized his boss’s response to Charlottesville and called-out Neo-Nazis.

Frankly, their use of “globes” is troubling. It is strangely reminiscent of anti-Semitic paranoia about Jewish plots to control the world. But Breitbart is also decidedly anti-Muslim, often garishly pro-Israel and its Jewish staffers swear by their mission, as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency detailed in a survey of Breitbart’s mixed messages. This deep state of confusion between anti-Semitic and pro-Israel messaging was even exploited by embattled Israel Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu and his son Yair … who eagerly weaponized the Charlottesville
melee for domestic political purposes in spite of the anti-Semitic chants of the White Nationalist marchers. It’s that willingness to let the ends justify the means that makes the Alt-Right’s “anti-Globalist” meme so complicated and, potentially, an ideological trap.

Grand Designers

What is The Alt-Right, anyway?

Wikipedia pegs the Alt-Right as “a loosely defined group of people with far-right ideologies who reject mainstream conservatism in favor of white nationalism.” The Associated Press’ primer goes with “a political grouping or tendency mixing racism, white nationalism, anti-Semitism and populism.” And there is a fascinating debate raging on the Right over the Alt-Right’s conservative bona fides and the supposed “Libertarian to Alt-Right pipeline” feeding White Nationalism.

However, one thing stood out from the “Unite The Right” melee that catapulted the Alt-Right and its White Nationalist subset into the center of American politics. Vice News captured the seminal moment when a cohort of White, similarly-dressed and evocatively-coiffed young men marched with burning tiki torches while repeatedly chanting “The Jews Will Not Replace Us.”

This, of course, belied Trump’s recalcitrant claim about the presence of “good people” who were only interested in protesting the removal of a Confederate statue. However, Gary Cohn certainly took note of the chant. Trump’s embattled economic adviser has since remarked that he “will not allow neo-Nazis ranting ‘Jews will not replace us’ to cause this Jew to leave his job.” But what does “The Jews will not replace us” really mean? “Replace” them how?

The ideological forge of White Nationalism is found in the not-too-distant past... particularly in a mélange of Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen, Christian Identity/Aryan Resisters and Skinhead Punks that coalesced at the beginning of the 1990s. This nexus point was captured on film in a 1991 documentary titled “Blood In The Face.” The title comes from the Christian Identity belief that Adam was said to have blushed in the Bible and this proves that he was actually an Aryan. Their elaborate idea asserts that Adam could not possibly be Jewish because Jews are supposedly incapable of blushing ... unlike God’s “true” Chosen People.

At the same time, this idea of “true” Chosenness also means by definition that Jews are imposters who conspired to “replace” Aryans in the Judeo-Christian narrative. They usurped the title through deception. And now these “imposters” are directing a global conspiracy to destroy White America and European culture...
in the final affront God’s people.

This conspiratorial narrative often includes the belief that Jews and the Jewish-controlled media orchestrated the civil rights movement and illegal immigration, thus foisting both Blacks and Latinos onto the backs of working-class White Americans. This false flag-like concoction helped the “Zionist Occupation Government” take control of the United States as part of their grand design to dissolve America into a Jewish-dominated One World Government. That dissolution would ultimately mark the extinction of White, Euro-American culture as they know it … or think that they know it. In other words, Jews would “replace” Whites as the preeminent race in America and the world.

Although these ideas have been around for a long time, they’ve recently reemerged from the shadowy tentacles of the internet and, more notably, out of the still warm graves of the racially charged, Southern Strategy-style campaigns the GOP has run in the wake of Jim Crow’s demise. It was this pattern of racial dog whistling that Trump turned into a bullhorn during the last campaign. And the evidence of its effectiveness is mounting.

A post-Charlottesville poll by Public Policy Polling gives us a good handle on what percentage of Trump’s base sympathizes with this Alt-Right/White Nationalist narrative. According to the poll, 45 percent of Trump voters say Whites face “the most discrimination in America.” They’re followed by Native Americans (17 percent), African Americans (16 percent), and Latinos (5 percent). Additionally, when “asked what religious group they think faces the most discrimination in America, 54% of Trump voters says it’s Christians followed by 22% for Muslims and 12% for Jews.”

This is a far more substantial number than the 9 percent of Americans who said it is “acceptable to hold neo-Nazi or white supremacist views” or the 10 percent who said they supported the “so-called alt-right movement,” according to an ABC News/Washington Post poll. Still that works out to roughly 22 million Americans who find some form of White Nationalism acceptable.

And that’s why it’s worth asking if there isn’t something more pernicious behind Breitbart’s cartoon globes demarcating “Globalist Gary” and the drumbeat of negative headlines about nefarious Globalists and their Deep State minions. Is “Globalist” actually just another code-word? Were the young men who marched in Charlottesville actually angry about being “replaced” as the pre-eminent “species” by a conspiracy of “Globalists” who are, in fact, really “the Jews”?

It’s a powerful narrative that merges victimhood and grievance with an Alt-Right media-reinforced confirmation bias that sees anything and everything as further evidence of a deep, ongoing deception. Trump himself mastered this tactic when
he rematerialized as a born-again Right-Winger by pushing Birtherism. That racially coded connivance fed right into his run for the White House which, according to a fascinating read by Gabriel Sherman of New York Magazine, was born out of a series of memos scrawled out by a small group of Roger Stone-led advisers who jotted-down hot-button keywords they culled from listening to Right-Wing talk radio.

Those keywords became the Trump’s de facto campaign platform. Why else would Trump talk about “Common Core” or reverse himself on one position after another? He was merely echoing back the catchphrases popular on Right-Wing radio and, perhaps, on Alt-Right favs like InfoWars. No doubt, one of those keywords was “Globalist.” It’s still the Alt-Right’s favorite way to identify the “cosmopolitan” cabal White House aide Stephen Miller famously called out in a presser on immigration. These are the self-same “Globalists” many of Trump’s supporters expected him to replace with good old-fashioned American greatness.

**Trump The Marytr**

Yet, in what could be an epic bit of intellectual jiu-jitsu, Trump’s transgression on Afghanistan and his failure to “Make America Great Again” are poised to become reinforcing examples of Globalist control over a once-sovereign nation.

It’s a narrative of betrayal and economic irredentism the Alt-Right and White Nationalists inherited from the racist convergence of the early 1990s. Trump harnessed it during a campaign that blamed America’s decline on external forces like China and NATO … and on unwanted “criminal” interlopers like Mexicans and Muslims. Trump has even appointed a bloated, talk radio gabber who decries “race traitors” to the FDA. Really, is it any surprise that Richard Spencer and David Duke embrace Trump?

Nor is it surprising that Bannon’s been able to jump off his “platform for the Alt-Right” with the help of the Mercers’ money and Trump’s self-satisfied trolling. Now he has to re-channel the sense of transgression that got him and Trump into the White House toward a new effort to both explain away their failure and to justify continuing their fight.

That’s because Bannon knows “traditional” Republicans don’t want his trade war with China or Trump’s border wall or huge spending on infrastructure. Republicans thought they could use Trump as a pliable rubber-stamp for the usual GOP suspects of deregulation, increased defense spending and entitlement-gutting tax cuts for the top brackets. But after the Trumpcare debacle, there’s little appetite for horse-trading with a President who hoards the credit and avoids the blame. And Trump and Bannon must both realize there’s little chance of squeezing
their populist-nationalist agenda through Washington’s clogged-up sausage machine. No doubt Bannon’s known it for a while.

More to the point, Bannon – like the Senators he and Trump are now targeting – must realize the legal danger Trump faces now that Special Counsel Robert Mueller has eschewed the convoluted mess of the DNC data breach in favor of Trump’s troubled financial dealings with Russian money laundering ... particularly at the ground zero site of Trump Soho, in the offices of Bayrock Group and with Trump’s Moscow-linked connection to long-time henchman Felix Sater.

Trump’s hardened base will stick with Trump come Hell or high crimes and misdemeanors. Trump knows it. Bannon knows it. The key now is to build a narrative framework that makes Trump a martyr to the cause, thus allowing him and the agenda he embodies to survive the coming storm. Mainstreaming the Globalist conspiracy is a crucial part of that framework. Everyone has heard of the process of globalization. Fewer know about the elite cabal of Globalists who seek America’s destruction by affecting a Deep State coup that forestalls America’s return to greatness.

Frankly, the Deep State and corporate-fueled deindustrialization have long been the sole bailiwick of the Progressive Left. But Trump exposed a fissure on the Right that opened up these issues inside the GOP. Bannon needs to preserve and expand that rift ... if only to reverse Breitbart’s flagging fortunes. It’s even possible Bannon used his much-discussed interview with The American Prospect’s Robert Kuttner to send a faint signal to disaffected Democrats and to Sandernistas – 10 percent of whom crossed-over to vote for Trump. But he sent his strongest message to the Alt-Right and the recalcitrant GOP Establishment. He said loudly and clearly that he and Trump are not beholden to the party as they head into the 2018 election. Trump’s Presidency may be over. But Trumpism, a.k.a. Bannonism, is alive and well. And they plan on using it against the GOP.

Trump reiterated that point by demanding his aides present him with tariffs so he can deliver the one thing that tops Bannon’s wish list – a trade war with China. That’s another attack on Republican orthodoxy and, therefore, another opportunity for Bannon and Trump to triangulate against the Globalists and their minions in the GOP establishment. It also goads the as-yet unrequited neoliberal backlash festering in the Democratic Party. And it means that Bannon’s much-ballyhooed exit was not the end of something. It was, as Seb Gorka vengefully proclaimed, just the beginning.

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Bias in Arizona’s Reaction to Immigrants

In Arizona, a federal judge ruled that racial animus drove a shutdown of a Mexican-American ethnic studies program, as President Trump pardoned ex-Sheriff Arpaio over his harsh treatment of immigrants, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

President Trump’s pardon of former Arizona Sheriff Joseph Arpaio over a contempt-of-court conviction when he refused to comply with an order to end racial-profiling in detaining suspected undocumented immigrants again shows Trump’s readiness to flout the law in protection of friends while his administration declared that even Hurricane Harvey wouldn’t stop the immigration crackdown.

“The Border Patrol is a law enforcement agency and we will not abandon our law enforcement duties,” said a statement from the Rio Grande Valley Sector office last Thursday, vowing to “remain vigilant against any effort by criminals to exploit disruptions caused by the storm.”

Though overshadowed by the Arpaio pardon and the storm, Arizona students and their parents won a victory in Federal Court in Arizona with the restoration of a popular Mexican-American ethnic studies program. On Friday, I spoke with Cesar Cruz, an author and educator who was in Tucson to witness the court case.

Dennis Bernstein: I know that many of you are monitoring the hurricane off the coast of Texas. But keep in mind that there are people there who are worried about whether they should face the storm or seek shelter and take the risk of being deported.

Welcome, Dr. Cesar Cruz. I saw a news conference about the hurricane. People are already clearing the shoreline and moving inland. But in the middle of the news conference the question was asked whether undocumented individuals might be thinking twice before coming to one of these shelters, where they could end up being arrested and deported to an eternity of hell.

Cesar Cruz: My mother was deported on three different occasions. We grew up undocumented in this country. In situations like this, we didn’t know who to turn to because the people running the shelters might very easily turn us over to immigration. And things are especially difficult in Texas for our undocumented brothers and sisters.

DB: Dr. Cruz, you were just in Arizona witnessing this trial concerning the right to have ethnic studies in Tucson schools. Why did you want to be there,
and why did you decide to bring your kids along with you?

CC: Despite the Brown vs. Board of Education decision back in 1954, the Tucson community in 1998 had to sue the state to finally desegregate their schools and have Mexican-American studies included in the curriculum. I took my children to the trial because it is so important for a tree to know its roots, to know where it comes from. We wanted to come in solidarity to say that Mexican-American studies matter, just as every people’s history matters.

DB: Why do you think these people were resisting this incredibly successful program that has made a lot of students out of non-students?

CC: We just scored a major national victory with the judge in this case ruling that racial animus was at the core of this opposition to ethnic studies programs. What we are witnessing is the fear of a brown nation. It is what happens when a community is empowered and knows its rights. There is such a backlash against this and against the idea that the people are going to take back the land that was taken from them. They either want to incarcerate us, deport us, or miseducate us. All we are asking is what everyone deserves: an equal education and to know our rights.

DB: What exactly was Donald Trump doing in Phoenix on that same day? He announced that he would essentially pardon Sheriff Arpaio.

CC: The mainstream news covered Trump’s speech but not the court decision. It was a clear appeal to his base, which is quickly shrinking. He was saying to white supremacy, they are not going to convict one of ours. Think about it, we have come to the point where we are convicting sheriffs! These are empowering times. You have to remember, this is the state that refused to honor Dr. Martin Luther King with a national holiday. When Tucson is able to successfully fight for its rights, that gives me a tremendous amount of hope. If Tucson can do it, we can do it across the country.

DB: Actually, we just now got the news that Arpaio was pardoned. Again, what is the message here?

CC: This is someone who demonized the Latino community and was finally found guilty of misusing his office to terrorize them. What does it say when the president of the United States can so easily overturn such an important and hard-won legal victory? We have to take a stand and say that no one is above the law.

Sheriff Arpaio must do his time. If Donald Trump is going to come to Arizona and say that he wants to unite the country, he has to live up to that. He knows very well that it is divisive to pardon someone like Sheriff Arpaio.
DB: I think the most amazing thing about the struggle for ethnic studies is how successful the program has been by all measures. That has been behind the drive to shut it down.

CC: Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the godfather of African-American history, said that the worst sort of lynching you can have in this country is to not teach a young person his or her history, to teach them that their condition is hopeless.

What they are afraid of in Arizona is a young generation of critical thinkers. Teachers in Arizona have been working in a climate of hate and yet they created something beautiful and profound. It is now our duty to set up ethnic studies programs all over the country. It is happening in Chicago, in Los Angeles, in San Francisco.

In Chicago, they now have ethnic studies and Latino studies from kindergarten up. In Seattle and Boston ethnic studies have just been approved. And it was this small program in Tucson that put ethnic studies on the map.

DB: Give us a brief history on how Mexican Americans actually played a key role in the initial desegregation of US schools?

CC: In the 1930’s, during the Great Depression, when our people were being deported, it was the Mexican Americans who fought to desegregate schools in San Diego. In the 1940’s, Orange County Raza fought to desegregate schools. We are standing on the shoulders of those ancestors.

In one of the most racist states in America, we took on one of the most racist school superintendents and we won! Why are we not celebrating nationally? This is a great victorious day but the mainstream news is not covering it.

Because our history has not even been on the bus, let alone on the back of the bus. Generations of people have fought for this day, like Sal Castro, like the movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s, like Rudi Acuña, and so many others.

DB: In Tucson, it wasn’t just about blocking ethnic studies, these authorities believed they had the right to ban books to prevent young people from learning about history. This was an anti-intellectual attempt to stymie and undermine an entire people.

CC: We have seen this before. In the 1950’s we had the Red Scare and Operation Wetback. There were certain films you couldn’t see, like Salt of the Earth. Now they are banning Pedagogy of the Oppressed by the great Paulo Freire, which talks about creating consciousness. The only reason to ban that book is because you don’t want to promote critical thinking.
DB: Back to shelter from the storm: The community in Texas is taking actions as we speak to offer shelter to those who may be afraid to go to government shelters for fear of being deported. Is that right?

CC: In the same way that Tony Diaz began Libros Trafficante, an underground book trafficking movement to break the ethnic studies ban, we are asking members of our community in Tejas to open up their homes to the undocumented during this hurricane, because many of our people don’t want to risk coming to shelters where they might be picked up by immigration.

DB: Nobody is talking about this: What happens when you are undocumented and the storm is coming? Do you head for shelter or do you run into the storm? You just may have a better chance of surviving the storm than you do ICE. Trump’s key policy has always been his anti-immigrant attack. There is great suffering going on, and when this kind of national emergency comes up, we can see how dangerous it has become to be undocumented in Trump’s America.

CC: Let’s remember, though, that the waves of hate and xenophobia have been around a long time. My mother was deported on three different occasions. When I would ask her how she was able to make it past that twenty-foot-high border, she would tell me that she had an invisible 21-foot ladder. As we topple walls, we are building the ladders to help our people.

There will be other hurricanes and other hostile presidencies. We will overcome these obstacles but we must stay organized and committed and see the long view of history. We have to think seven generations ahead and seven generations before.

Other empires have fallen and this one is coming down. If we are scoring victories in Arizona, of all places, what more proof do we need that the people are winning?

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.

More Misleading Russia-gate Propaganda

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media is touting a big break in Russia-gate, emails showing an effort by Donald Trump’s associates to construct a building in Moscow. But the evidence actually undercuts the “scandal,” reports Robert Parry.
There is an inherent danger of news organizations getting infected by “confirmation bias” when they want something to be true so badly that even if the evidence goes in the opposite direction they twist the revelation to fit their narrative. Such is how The Washington Post, The New York Times and their followers in the mainstream media are reacting to newly released emails that actually show Donald Trump’s team having little or no influence in Moscow.

On Tuesday, for instance, the Times published a front-page article designed to advance the Russia-gate narrative, stating: “A business associate of President Trump promised in 2015 to engineer a real estate deal with the aid of the president of Russia, Vladimir V. Putin, that he said would help Mr. Trump win the presidency.”

Wow, that sounds pretty devastating! The Times is finally tying together the loose and scattered threads of the Russia-influencing-the-U.S.-election story. Here you have a supposed business deal in which Putin was to help Trump both make money and get elected. That is surely how a casual reader or a Russia-gate true believer would read it — and was meant to read it. But the lede is misleading.

The reality, as you would find out if you read further into the story, is that the boast from Felix Sater that somehow the construction of a Trump Tower in Moscow would demonstrate Trump’s international business prowess and thus help his election was meaningless. What the incident really shows is that the Trump organization had little or no pull in Russia as Putin’s government apparently didn’t lift a finger to salvage this stillborn building project.

But highlighting that reality would not serve the Times’ endless promotion of Russia-gate. So, this counter-evidence gets buried deep in the story, after a reprise of the “scandal” and the Times hyping the significance of Sater’s emails from 2015 and early 2016. For good measure, the Times includes a brief and dishonest summary of the Ukraine crisis.

The Times reported: “Mr. Sater, a Russian immigrant, said he had lined up financing for the Trump Tower deal with VTB Bank, a Russian bank that was under American sanctions for involvement in Moscow’s efforts to undermine democracy in Ukraine. In another email, Mr. Sater envisioned a ribbon-cutting ceremony in Moscow. ‘I will get Putin on this program and we will get Donald elected,’ Mr. Sater wrote.”

But the idea that Russia acted “to undermine democracy in Ukraine” is another example of the Times’ descent into outright propaganda. The reality is that the
U.S. government supported – and indeed encouraged – a coup on Feb. 22, 2014, that overthrew the democratically elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych even after he offered to move up scheduled elections so he could be voted out of office through a democratic process.

After Yanukovych’s violent ouster and after the coup regime dispatched military forces to crush resistance among anti-coup, mostly ethnic Russian Ukrainians in the east, Russia provided help to prevent their destruction from an assault spearheaded by neo-Nazis and other extreme Ukrainian nationalists. But that reality would not fit the Times’ preferred Ukraine narrative, so it gets summarized as Moscow trying “to undermine democracy in Ukraine.”

Empty Boasts

However, leaving aside the Times’ propagandistic approach to Ukraine, there is this more immediate point about Russia-gate: none of Sater’s boastful claims proved true and this incident really underscored the lack of useful connections between Trump’s people and the Kremlin. One of Trump’s lawyers, Michael Cohen, even used a general press email address in a plea for assistance from Putin’s personal spokesman.

Deeper in the story, the Times admits these inconvenient facts: “There is no evidence in the emails that Mr. Sater delivered on his promises, and one email suggests that Mr. Sater overstated his Russian ties. In January 2016, Mr. Cohen wrote to Mr. Putin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, asking for help restarting the Trump Tower project, which had stalled. But Mr. Sater did not appear to have Mr. Peskov’s direct email, and instead wrote to a general inbox for press inquiries.”

The Times added: “The project never got government permits or financing, and died weeks later. ... The emails obtained by The Times make no mention of Russian efforts to damage Hillary Clinton’s campaign or the hacking of Democrats’ emails.”

In other words, the Russia-gate narrative – that somehow Putin foresaw Trump’s election (although almost no one else did) and sought to curry favor with the future U.S. president by lining Trump’s pockets with lucrative real estate deals while doing whatever he could to help Trump win – is knocked down by these new disclosures, not supported by them.

Instead of clearing the way for Trump to construct the building and thus – in Sater’s view – boost Trump’s election chances, Putin and his government wouldn’t even approve permits or assist in the financing.

And, this failed building project was not the first Trump proposal in Russia to
fall apart. A couple of years earlier, a Moscow hotel plan died apparently because Trump would not – or could not – put up adequate financing for his share, overvaluing the magic of the Trump brand. But one would think that if the Kremlin were grooming Trump to be its Manchurian candidate and take over the U.S. government, money would have been no obstacle.

Along the same lines, there’s the relative pittance that RT paid Gen. Michael Flynn to speak at the TV network’s tenth anniversary in Moscow in December 2015. The amount totaled $45,386 with Flynn netting $33,750 after his speakers’ bureau took its cut. Democrats and the U.S. mainstream media treated this fact as important evidence of Russia buying influence in the Trump campaign and White House, since Flynn was both a campaign adviser and briefly national security adviser.

But the actual evidence suggests something quite different. Besides Flynn’s relatively modest speaking fee, it turned out that RT negotiated Flynn’s rate downward, a fact that The Washington Post buried deep inside an article on Flynn’s Russia-connected payments. The Post wrote, “RT balked at paying Flynn’s original asking price. ‘Sorry it took us longer to get back to you but the problem is that the speaking fee is a bit too high and exceeds our budget at the moment,’ Alina Mikhaleva, RT’s head of marketing, wrote a Flynn associate about a month before the event.”

Yet, if Putin were splurging to induce Americans near Trump to betray their country, it makes no sense that Putin’s supposed flunkies at RT would be quibbling with Flynn over a relatively modest speaking fee; they’d be falling over themselves to pay him more.

So, what the evidence really indicates is that Putin, like almost everybody else in the world, didn’t anticipate Trump’s ascendance to the White House, at least not in the time frame of these events – and thus was doing nothing to buy influence with his entourage or boost his election chances by helping him construct a glittering Trump Tower in Moscow.

But that recognition of reality would undermine the much beloved story of Putin-Trump collusion, so the key facts and the clear logic are downplayed or ignored – all the better to deceive Americans who are dependent on the Times, the Post and the mainstream media.

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).
Inflating the Russian Threat

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media, led by The New York Times, has behaved as classic propagandists, hyping a Russian military “threat” and promoting a new Cold War hysteria, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Readers of the New York Times have more to sweat about than hot summer weather in the Big Apple. The paper’s chief military correspondent, Michael Gordon – co-author of the infamous 2002 story about Saddam Hussein’s “quest for A-bomb parts” – has all but warned that war in Europe could break out at any minute with the mighty Russian army.

“Russia is preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory at the end of the summer,” he reported last month with Eric Schmitt. Sounding like speechwriters for Sen. John McCain, they called the long-planned military exercises with Belarus – known as “Zapad” (Russian for “west”) – “one of the biggest steps yet in the military buildup undertaken by President Vladimir V. Putin and an exercise in intimidation that recalls the most ominous days of the Cold War.”

Gordon and Schmitt added that this latest and greatest example of “Mr. Putin’s saber-rattling,” represents “the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that so much offensive power has been concentrated in a single command.”

Many other Western news organizations have echoed this story, albeit with less alarmist rhetoric. NBC News warned that “another military challenge may be on the horizon” as “thousands of Russian troops and tanks are preparing to take part in what may be the country’s largest military exercise since the Cold War.”

Reciting the same talking points almost verbatim, the London Guardian reported days ago that “Russia is preparing to mount what could be one of its biggest military exercises since the Cold War.” Like the Times, it cited estimates by “Western officials and analysts” that “up to 100,000 military personnel and logistical support could participate” in the war games next month.

Meanwhile, the Defense Minister of Estonia predicted that “Russia may use large-scale military exercises to move thousands of troops permanently into Belarus later this year in a warning to NATO.” Two Polish military officials speculated darkly that “Having created such a military build-up under the pretext of such exercise, Russia could launch a limited or provocative military hybrid operation to see what happens and further test the waters on
NATO’s eastern flank, or in Ukraine, where the Russo-Ukrainian conflict remains in full swing.”

The Missing Context

The average reader would never know that U.S. and NATO forces themselves engaged this summer in “their largest military exercises since the end of the Cold War,” to quote NPR. Nor would they know that NATO collectively spends 12 times more than Russia on its military, or that its European members alone field nearly 75 percent more military personnel than Russia.

And only the most attentive reader, reaching the bottom of the long New York Times story, would have learned that “Russian officials have told NATO that the maneuvers will be far smaller than Western officials are anticipating and will involve fewer than 13,000 troops.”

The anti-Putin director of the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies in Minsk points out that only 3,000 Russian military personnel will take part in the exercises in Belarus from September 14 to September 20. “Based on these figures, the military drills are practically the same as the previous Zapad-2013,” he said.

He also noted that Belarus has invited no fewer than 80 international observers to calm fears:

“In addition to the accredited military attaches of Western embassies, special delegations from the UN, the International Red Cross . . . and NATO will be invited. This, by the way, is the first time when NATO observers are invited to such exercises. Separately, Belarus arranged for the presence of delegations from Sweden, Norway and Estonia.”

NATO has complained – possibly with justification – that Russia and Belarus have not fully complied with their obligations under the Vienna Document of 2011 to provide detailed briefings, progress reports, and opportunities to interview soldiers about the exercise.

NATO and Russia undertook after the Cold War to provide greater transparency about their military exercises to minimize the threat of conflict. In recent years, particularly following the Ukraine crisis, growing political tensions have put a strain on such cooperative measures.

A number of reasonable analysts warn that Russia may sidestep its reporting obligations by dividing its exercises into smaller units, below the threshold of 13,000 personnel that gives members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe the right to observe.
‘Probably Exaggerated’

For example, Russia claimed that its Western exercises four years ago kept just within that threshold. But two experts writing for the conservative Jamestown Foundation in Washington, D.C. argued that “if one takes a broader view of what elements constituted a part of the Zapad 2013 exercise, then the total participants number approximately 22,000 men, of which 13,000 exercised on Belarusian territory and more than 9,500 on Russian territory.”

The Guardian quotes an expert on Russia’s military as saying of Zapad-17, “you can’t trust what the Russians say. One hundred thousand is probably exaggerated but 18,000 is absolutely realistic.”

Even if true, such numbers hardly support viewing the upcoming exercises as an “ominous” threat to the West. A British expert, remarking on the “mythology” that often accompanies such events, noted that “Much of the Western coverage said that the 2009 exercise ended with a simulated nuclear attack on Warsaw, Poland, even though there is no evidence at all from unclassified sources to suggest this was the case.”

Michael Kofman, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute, has debunked many of the unfounded estimates of Zapad-17’s size and potential threat to Europe.

“The Russian Ministry of Defense itself likely hopes Western media will report exaggerated figures,” he says. “Such headlines help validate the scale and success of the exercise to national leadership in Moscow. In this respect, the entire affair is an exercise in co-dependency and is self-affirming.”

Russia unquestionably wants to impress NATO with its military capabilities, Kofman acknowledges, but that’s for deterrence.

“Throughout the exercise, Russian armed forces will try to signal that they have the ability to impose substantial costs on a technologically advanced adversary, i.e. the United States,” he writes. “Russian thinking is founded on the belief that its military can raise costs for the West such that they will grossly outweigh the potential gains for sustaining hostilities, particularly if the fight is over Belarus.”

Threat Inflation Nothing New

The steady drumbeat of warnings about Russian military capabilities and intentions recalls the perennial use of “threat inflation” since the earliest days of the Cold War to sell bigger military budgets and a permanent warfare state.
One of the acknowledged masters of threat inflation was NATO Supreme Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove. Hacked emails exposed his undercover campaign to “leverage, cajole, convince or coerce the U.S. to react” to Russia during the Obama years.

Two years ago, the West German news magazine Der Spiegel, ran a lengthy article on Breedlove’s reckless disregard for facts. Following the Minsk ceasefire agreement, at a time of relative quiet in Ukraine between government and pro-Russian forces, Breedlove held an inflammatory press conference to announce that Vladimir Putin had sent Russian armed forces with “well over a thousand combat vehicles, . . . some of their most sophisticated air defense, battalions of artillery” to Eastern Ukraine. The military situation he warned was “getting worse every day.”

German political leaders and intelligence officials were “stunned,” according to the magazine. Their information didn’t match his claims at all.

The same thing had happened soon after the start of the Ukraine crisis in early 2014, triggered by an anti-Russia coup that ousted President Viktor Yanukovych. Breedlove warned of an imminent invasion by 40,000 Russian troops massed on the border — when intelligence officials from other NATO member states had ruled out such an invasion and put the total number of Russian troops at about half that number.

“For months,” the magazine observed, “Breedlove has been commenting on Russian activities in eastern Ukraine, speaking of troop advances on the border, the amassing of munitions and alleged columns of Russian tanks. Over and over again, Breedlove’s numbers have been significantly higher than those in the possession of America’s NATO allies in Europe. As such, he is playing directly into the hands of the hardliners in the US Congress and in NATO.”

Russian troop advances . . . the massing of forces . . . it all sounds familiar. Sure enough, although now retired, Breedlove was one of the first to sound the alarm this year about the Zapad exercise, telling a Senate hearing that it could involve as many as 200,000 troops.

Two years ago, members of the German government condemned Breedlove’s warnings as “dangerous propaganda.” They told Der Spiegel, “The West can’t counter Russian propaganda with its own propaganda, ‘rather it must use arguments that are worthy of a constitutional state.’”

The same stricture should surely apply today, as unsupported rhetoric foments unnecessary and dangerous military tensions between the world’s two nuclear superpowers.
How History Explains the Korean Crisis

Special Report: Many Americans simply view North Korea and its leaders as “crazy,” but the history behind today’s crisis reveals of a more complex reality that could change those simplistic impressions, as historian William R. Polk explains.

By William R. Polk

The U.S. and North Korea are on the brink of hostilities that if begun would almost certainly lead to a nuclear exchange. This is the expressed judgment of most competent observers. They differ over the causes of this confrontation and over the size, range and impact of the weapons that would be fired, but no one can doubt that even a “limited” nuclear exchange would have horrifying effects throughout much of the world including North America.

So how did we get to this point, what are we now doing and what could be done to avoid what would almost certainly be the disastrous consequences of even a “limited” nuclear war?

The media is replete with accounts of the latest pronouncements and events, but both in my personal experience in the closest we ever came to a nuclear disaster, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and from studying many other “flash points,” I have learned that failure to appreciate the background and sequence of events makes one incapable of understanding the present and so is apt to lead to self-defeating actions. With this warning in mind, I will recount in Part 1 how we and the Koreans got to where we are. Then in Part 2, I will address how we might go to war, what that would mean and what we can do to stay alive.

Throughout most of its history, Korea regarded China as its teacher. It borrowed from China Confucianism, its concepts of law, its canons of art and its method of writing. For these, it usually paid tribute to the Chinese emperor.

With Japan, relations were different. Armed with the then weapon of mass destruction, the musket, Japan invaded Korea in 1592 and occupied it with more than a quarter of a million soldiers. The Koreans, armed only with bows and arrows, were beaten into submission. But, because of events in Japan, and particularly the decision to give up the gun, the Japanese withdrew in less than a decade and left Korea on its own.
Nominally unified under one kingdom, Korean society was already divided between the *Puk-in* or “people of the North” and the *Nam-in* or “people of the South.” How significant this division was in practical politics is unclear, but apparently it played a role in thwarting attempts at reform and in keeping the country isolated from outside influences. It also weakened the country and facilitated the second intrusion of the Japanese. In search of iron ore for their nascent industry, they “opened” the country in 1876. Hot on the Japanese trail came the Americans who established diplomatic relations with the Korean court in 1882.

American missionaries, most of whom doubled as merchants, followed the flag. Christianity often came in the guise of commerce. Missionary-merchants lived apart from Koreans in segregated American-style towns, much as the British had done in India earlier in the century. They seldom met with the natives except to trade. Unlike their counterparts in the Middle East, the Americans were not noted for “good works.” They spent more time selling goods than teaching English, repairing bodies or proselytizing; so while Koreans admired their wares all but a few clung to Confucian ways.

**China’s Protection**

It was to China rather than to America that Koreans turned for protection against the Japanese “rising sun.” As they grew more powerful and began their outward thrust, the Japanese moved to end the Korean relationship to China. In 1894, the Japanese invaded Korea, captured its king and installed a “friendly” government. Then, as a sort of byproduct of their 1904-1905 war with Russia, the Japanese seized control, and, in accord with the policies of all Western governments, they took up “the White Man’s burden.” American politicians and statesmen, led by Theodore Roosevelt, found it both inevitable and beneficial that Japan turned Korea into a colony. For the next 35 years, the Japanese ruled Korea much as the British ruled India and the French ruled Algeria.

If the Japanese were brutal, as they certainly were, and exploitive, as they also were, so were the other colonial powers. And, like other colonial peoples, as they gradually became politically sensitive, the Koreans began to react. Over time, they saw the Japanese intruders not as the carriers of the “white man’s burden” but as themselves the burden. Some Koreans reacted by fleeing.

Best known among them was Syngman Rhee. Converted to Christianity by American missionaries, he went to the West. After a torturous career as an exile, he was allowed by the American military authorities at the end of the Second World War to become (South) Korea’s first president.

But most of those who fled the Japanese found havens in Russian-influenced Manchuria. The best known of these “Eastern” exiles, Kim Il-sung, became an
anti-Japanese guerrilla and joined the Communist Party. At the same time Syngman Rhee arrived in the American-controlled South, Kim Il-sung became the leader of the Soviet-supported North. There he founded the ruling “dynasty” of which his grandson Kim Jong-un is the current leader.

During the 35 years of Japanese occupation, no one in the West paid much attention to Syngman Rhee or his hopes for the future of Korea, but the Soviet government was more attentive to Kim Il-Sung. While distant Britain, France and America played no active role, the near-by Soviet Union, with a long frontier with Japanese-held territory, had to concern itself with Korea.

It was not so much from strategy or the perception of danger that Western policy (and Soviet acquiescence to it) evolved. Driven in part by sentiment, America forced a change in the tone of relations with the colonial world during the Second World War and, driven by the need to appease America, Britain and France acquiesced. It was the tide of war, rather than any preconceived plan, that swept Korea into the widely scattered and ill-defined group of “emerging” nations.

As heir to the dreams of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed that colonial peoples deserved to be free. Korea was to benefit from the great liberation of the Second World War. So it was that on December 1, 1943, the United States, Britain and (then Nationalist) China agreed at the Cairo Conference to apply the revolutionary words of the 1941 Atlantic Charter: “Mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea,” Roosevelt and a reluctant Churchill proclaimed, they “are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.”

At the April-June 1945 San Francisco conference, where the United Nations was founded, Korea got little attention, but a vague arrangement was envisaged in which Korea would be put under a four-power (American, British, Chinese and Soviet) trusteeship. This policy was later affirmed at the Potsdam Conference on July 26, 1945, and was agreed to by the Soviet Union on August 8 when it declared war on Japan. Two days later Russian troops fanned out over the northern area. It was not until almost a month later, on September 8, that the first contingents of the U.S. Army arrived.

Aftermath of War

Up to that point, most Koreans could do little to effect their own liberation: those inside Korea were either in prison, lived in terror that they soon would be arrested or collaborated with the Japanese. The few who had reached havens in the West, like Syngman Rhee, found that while they were allowed to speak, no one with the power to help them listened to their voices. They were to be liberated
but not helped to liberate themselves. It was only the small groups of Korean exiles in Soviet-controlled areas who actually fought their Japanese tormentors. Thus it was that the Communist-led Korean guerrilla movement began to play a role similar to insurgencies in Indochina, the Philippines and Indonesia.

As they prepared to invade Korea, neither the Americans nor the Russians evinced any notion of the difference between the Puk-in or “people of the North” and the Nam-in or “people of the South.” They were initially concerned, as least in their agreements with one another as they had been in Germany, by the need to prevent the collision of their advancing armed forces. The Japanese, however, treated the two zones that had been created by this ad hoc military decision separately.

As a Soviet army advanced, the Japanese realized that they could not resist, but they destroyed as much of the infrastructure of the north as they could while fleeing to the south. On reaching the south, both the soldiers and the civil servants cooperated at least initially with the incoming American forces. Their divergent actions suited both the Russians and the Americans — the Russians were intent on driving out the Japanese while the Americans were already beginning the process of forgiving them. What happened in this confused period set much of the shape of Korea down to the present day.

The Russians appear to have had a long-range policy toward Korea and the Communist-led insurgent force to implement it, but it was only slowly, and reluctantly, that the Americans developed a coherent plan for “their” Korea and found natives who could implement it. What happened was partly ideological and partly circumstantial. It is useful and perhaps important to emphasize the main points:

The first point is that the initial steps of what became the Cold War had already been taken and were quickly reinforced. Although the Yalta Conference included the agreement that Japan would be forced to surrender to all the allies, not just to the United States and China, President Truman set out a different American policy without consulting Stalin.

Buoyed by the success of the test of the atomic bomb on July 16, 1945, he decided that America would set the terms of the Pacific war unilaterally; Stalin reacted by speeding up his army’s attack on Japanese-held Korea and Manchuria. He was intent on creating “facts on the ground.” Thus it was that the events of July and August 1945 anchored the policies – and the interpretations of the war – of each great power. They shaped today’s Korea.

Arguments ever since have focused on the justifications for the policies of each Power. For many years, Americans have argued that it was the atomic bomb attack
on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, not the threat or actuality of the Soviet invasion, that forced the Japanese to surrender.

Spoils of War

In the official American view, it was America that won the war in the Pacific. Island by island from Guadalcanal, American soldiers had marched, sailed and flown toward the final island, Japan. From nearby islands and from aircraft carriers, American planes bombed and burned its cities and factories. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the final blows in a long, painful and costly process.

Truman held that the Russians appeared only after the Japanese were defeated. Thus, he felt justified – and empowered – to act alone on Japan. So when General Douglas MacArthur arranged the ceremony of surrender on September 2, he sidelined the Russians. The procedure took place on an American battleship under an American flag. A decade was to pass before the USSR formally ended its war with Japan.

The second crucial point is what was happening on the peninsula of Korea. There a powerful Russian army was present in the North and an American army was in control of the South. The decisions of Cairo, San Francisco and Potsdam were as far from Korea as the high-flown sentiments of the statesmen were from the realities, dangers and opportunities on the scene. What America and the Soviet Union did on the ground was crucial for an understanding of Korea today.

As the Dutch set about doing in Indonesia, the French were doing in Indochina and the Americans were doing in the Philippines, the American military authorities in their part of Korea pushed aside the nationalist leaders (whom the Japanese had just released from prison) and insisted on retaining all power in their own (military) government. They knew almost nothing about (but were inherently suspicious of) the anti-Japanese Koreans who set themselves up as the “People’s Republic.” On behalf of the U.S., General John Hodge rejected the self-proclaimed national government and declared that the military government was the only authority in the American-controlled zone.

Hodge also announced that the “existing Japanese administration would continue in office temporarily to facilitate the occupation” just as the Dutch in Indonesia continued to use Japanese troops to control the Indonesian public. But the Americans quickly realized how unpopular this arrangement was and by January 1946 they had dismantled the Japanese regime.

In the ensuing chaos dozens of groups with real but often vague differences formed themselves into parties and began to demand a role in Korean affairs. This development alarmed the American military governor. Hodge’s objective,
understandably, was order and security. The local politicians appeared unable to offer either, and in those years, the American military government imprisoned tens of thousands of political activists.

Cold War in Vitro

Although not so evident in the public announcements, the Americans were already motivated by fear of the Russians and their actual or possible local sympathizers and Communists. Here again, Korea reminds one of Indochina, the Philippines and Indonesia. Wartime allies became peacetime enemies. At least in _vitro_, the Cold War had already begun.

At just the right moment, virtually as a _deux ex machina_, Syngman Rhee appeared on the scene. Reliably and vocally anti-Communist, American-oriented, and, although far out of touch with Korean affairs, ethnically Korean, he was just what the American authorities wanted. He gathered the rightist groups into a virtual government that was to grow into an actual government under the U.S. aegis.

Meanwhile, the Soviet authorities faced no similar political or administrative problems. They had available the prototype of a Korean government. This government-to-become already had a history: thousands of Koreans had fled to Manchuria to escape Japanese rule and, when Japan carried the war to them by forming the puppet state they called Manchukuo in 1932, some of the refugees banded together to launch a guerrilla war. The Communist Party inspired and assumed leadership of this insurgency. Then as all insurgents – from Tito to Ho Chi-minh to Sukarno – did, they proclaimed themselves a government-in-exile.

The Korean group was ready, when the Soviet invasion made it possible, to become the nucleus of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The USSR recognized it as the sole government of (all) Korea in September 1948. And, despite its crude and often brutal method of rule, it acquired a patina of legitimacy by its years of armed struggle against the Japanese.

Both the USSR and the U.S. viewed Korea as their outposts. They first tried to work out a deal to divide authority among themselves. But they admitted failure on December 2, 1945. The Russians appeared to expect the failure and hardly reacted, but the Americans sought the help of the United Nations in formalizing their position in Korea. At their behest, the U.N. formed the “Temporary Commission on Korea.” It was supposed to operate in all of Korea, but the Russians regarded it as an American operation and excluded it from the North. After a laborious campaign, it managed to supervise elections but only in the south, in May 1948.
The elections resulted in the formation on August 15 of a government led by Syngman Rhee. In response, a month later on September 9, the former guerrilla leader, Communist and Soviet ally Kim Il-sung, proclaimed the state of North Korea. Thus, the ad hoc arrangement to prevent the collision of two armies morphed into two states.

The USSR had a long history with Kim Il-sung and the leadership of the North. It had discreetly supported the guerrilla movement in Manchukuo (aka Manchuria) and presumably had vetted the Communist leadership through the purges of the 1930s and closely observed them during the war. The survivors were, by Soviet criteria, reliable men. So it was possible for the Russians to take a low profile in North Korean affairs. Unlike the Americans, they felt able to withdraw their army in 1946. Meanwhile, of course, their attention was focused on the much more massive tide of the revolution in China. Korea must have seemed something of a sideshow.

The position of the United States was different in almost every aspect. First, there was no long-standing, pro-American or ideologically democratic cadre in the South.

The Rise of Rhee

The leading figure, as I have mentioned, was Syngman Rhee. While Kim Il-sung was a dedicated Communist, Rhee was certainly not a believer in democracy. But ideology aside, Rhee was deeply influenced by contacts with Americans. Missionaries saved his eyesight (after smallpox), gave him a basic Western-style education, employed him and converted him to Christianity. Probably also influenced by them, as a young man he had involved himself in protests against Korean backwardness, corruption and failure to resist Japanese colonialism. His activities landed him in prison when he was 22 years of age. After four years of what appears to have been a severe regime, he was released and in 1904 made his way into exile in America.

Remarkably for a young man of no particular distinction – although he was proud of a distant relationship to the Korean royal family – he was at least received if not listened to by President Theodore Roosevelt. Ceremonial or perfunctory meetings with other American leaders followed over the years. The American leaders with whom he met did not consider Korea of much importance and even if they had so considered it, Rhee had nothing to offer them. So I infer that his 40-year wanderings from one university to the next (BA in George Washington University, MA in Harvard and PhD in Princeton) and work in the YMCA and other organizations were a litany of frustrations.

It was America’s entry into the war in 1941 that gave Rhee the opportunity he
had long sought: he convinced President Franklin Roosevelt to espouse at least
nominally the cause of Korean independence. Roosevelt’s kind words probably
would have little effect — as Rhee apparently realized. To give them substance,
he worked closely with the OSS (the ancestor of the CIA) and developed contacts
with the American military chiefs. Two months after the Japanese surrender in
1945, he was flown back to Korea at the order of General Douglas MacArthur.

Establishing himself in Seoul, he led groups of right-wing Koreans to oppose
every attempt at cooperation with the Soviet Union and particularly focused on
opposition to the creation of a state of North Korea. For those more familiar
with European history, he might be considered to have aspired to the role played
in Germany by Konrad Adenauer. To play a similar role, Rhee made himself
“America’s man.” But he was not able to do what Adenauer could do in Germany nor
could he provide for America: an ideologically controlled society and the
makings of a unified state like Kim Il-sung was able to give the Soviet Union.
But, backed by the American military government and overtly using democratic
forms, Rhee was elected on a suspicious return of 92.3 percent of the vote to be
president of the newly proclaimed Republic of Korea.

Rhee’s weakness relative to Kim had two effects: the first was that while Soviet
forces could be withdrawn from the North in 1946, America felt unable to
withdraw its forces from the South. They have remained ever since. And the
second effect was that while Rhee tried to impose upon his society an
authoritarian regime, similar to the one imposed on the North, he was unable to
do so effectively and at acceptable cost.

The administration he partly inherited was largely dependent upon men who had
served the Japanese as soldiers and police. He was tarred with their brush. It
put aside the positive call of nationalism for the negative warning of anti-
Communism. Instead of leadership, it relied on repression. Indeed, it engaged in
a brutal repression, which resembled that of North Korea but which, unlike the
North Korean tyranny, was widely publicized. Resentment in South Korea against
Rhee and his regime soon grew to the level of a virtual insurgency. Rhee may
have been the darling of America but he was unloved in Korea. That was the
situation when the Korean War began.

Resumption of War

The Korean War technically began on June 25, 1950, but of course the process
began before the first shots were fired. Both Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-sung were
determined to reunite Korea, each on his own terms. Rhee had publicly spoken on
the “need” to invade the North to reunify the peninsula; the Communist
government didn’t need to make public pronouncements, but events on the ground
must have convinced Kim Il-sung that the war had already begun. Along the
dividing line, according to one American scholar of Korea, Professor John Merrill, large numbers of Koreans had already been wounded or killed before the “war” began.

The event that appears to have precipitated the full-scale war was the declaration by Syngman Rhee’s government of the independence of the South. If allowed to stand, that action as Kim Il-sung clearly understood, would have prevented unification. He regarded it as an act of war. He was ready for war. He had used his years in power to build one of the largest armies in the world whereas the army of the South had been bled by the Southern rulers.

Kim Il-sung must have known in detail the corruption, disorganization and weakness of Rhee’s administration. As the English journalist and commentator on Korea Max Hastings reported, Rhee’s entourage was engaged in a massive theft of public resources and revenues. Money intended by the foreign donors to build a modern state was siphoned off to foreign bank accounts; “ghost soldiers,” the military equivalent of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, who existed only on army records, were paid salaries which the senior officers pocketed while the relatively few actual soldiers went unpaid and even unclothed, unarmed and unfed. Bluntly put, Rhee offered Kim an opportunity he could not refuse.

We now know, but then did not, that Stalin was not in favor of the attack by the North and agreed to it only if China, by then a fellow Communist-led state, took responsibility. What “responsibility” really meant was not clear, but it proved sufficient to tip Kim Il-sung into action. He ordered his army to invade the South. Quickly crossing the demarcation line, his soldiers pushed south. Far better disciplined and motivated, they took Seoul within three days, on June 28.

Syngman Rhee proclaimed a fight to the death but, in fact, he and his inner circle had already fled. They were quickly followed by thousands of soldiers of the Southern army. Many of those who did not flee, defected to the North.

Organized by the United States, the United Nations Security Council – taking advantage of the absence of the Soviet delegation – voted on June 27, just before the fall of Seoul, to create a force to protect the South. Some 21 countries led by the United States furnished about three million soldiers to defend the South. They were countries like Thailand, South Vietnam and Turkey with their own problems of insurgency, but most of the fighting was done by American forces. They were driven south and nearly off the Korean peninsula by Kim Il-sung’s army. The American troops were ill-equipped and nearly always outnumbered. The fighting was bitter and casualties were high. By late August, they held only a tenth of what had been the Republic of Korea, just the southern province around the city of Pusan.
The Chinese Prepare

Wisely analyzing the actual imbalance of the American-backed southern forces and the apparently victorious forces commanded by Kim Il-sung, the Chinese statesman Zhou Enlai ordered his military staff to guess what the Americans could be expected to do: negotiate, withdraw or try to break out of their foothold at Pusan. The staff reported that the Americans would certainly mobilize their superior potential power to counterattack.

To guard against intrusion into China, Zhou convinced his colleagues to move military forces up to the Chinese-Korean frontier and convinced the Soviet government to give the North Koreans air support. What was remarkable was that Zhou’s staff exactly predicted what the Americans would do and where they would do it. Led by General Douglas MacArthur, the Americans made a skillful and bold counterattack. Landing at Inchon on September 15, they cut the bulk of the Northern army off from their bases. The operation was a brilliant military success.

But, like many brilliant military actions, it developed a life of its own. MacArthur, backed by American Secretary of State Dean Acheson and General George Marshall — and ordered by President Truman — decided to move north to implement Syngman Rhee’s program to unify Korea. Beginning on September 25, American forces recaptured Seoul, virtually destroyed the surrounded North Korean army and on October 1 crossed the 38th parallel. With little to stop them, they then pushed ahead toward the Yalu river on the Chinese frontier. That move frightened both the Soviet and Chinese governments which feared that the wave of victory would carry the American into their territories. Stalin held back, refusing to commit Soviet forces, but he reminded the Chinese of their “responsibility” for Korea.

In response, the Chinese hit on a novel ploy. They sent a huge armed force, some 300,000 men to stop the Americans but, to avoid at least formally and directly a clash with America, they categorized it as an irregular group of volunteers — the “Chinese People’s Volunteer Army.” Beginning on October 25, the lightly armed Chinese virtually annihilated what remained of the South Korean army and drove the Americans out of North Korea.

Astonished by the collapse of what had seemed a definitive victory, President Truman declared a national emergency, and General MacArthur urged the use of 50 nuclear bombs to stop the Chinese. What would have happened then is a matter of speculation, but what did happen was that MacArthur was replaced by General Matthew Ridgeway who restored the balance of conventional forces. Drearily, the war rolled on.
During this period and for the next two years, the American air force carried out massive bombing sorties. Some of the bombing was meant to destroy the Chinese and North Korean ability to keep fighting, but Korea is a small territory and what began as “surgical strikes” grew into carpet-bombing. (Such bombing would be considered a war crime as of the 1977 Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions).

The attacks were enormous. About 635,000 tons of high explosives and chemical weapons were dropped – that was far more than was used against the Japanese in the Second World War. As historian Bruce Cumings has pointed out, the U.S. Air Force found that “three years of ‘rain and ruin’” had inflicted greater damage on Korean cities “than German and Japanese cities firebombed during World War II.” The North Korean capital Pyongyang was razed and General Curtis LeMay thought American bombings caused the deaths of about 20 percent – one in five – North Koreans.

**Carpet-Bombing the North**

LeMay’s figure, horrifying as it is, needs to be borne in mind today. Start with the probability that it is understated. Canadian economist Michel Chossudovsky has written that LeMay’s estimate of 20 percent should be revised to nearly 33 percent or roughly one Korean in three killed. He goes on to point to a remarkable comparison: in the Second World War, the British had lost less than 1 percent of their population, France lost 1.35 percent, China lost 1.89 percent and the U.S. only a third of 1 percent. Put another way, Korea proportionally suffered roughly 30 times as many people killed in 37 months of American carpet-bombing as these other countries lost in all the years of the Second World War.

In all, 8 million to 9 million Koreans were killed. Whole families were wiped out and practically no families alive in Korea today are without close relatives who perished. Virtually every building in the North was destroyed. What General LeMay said in another context – “bombing them back to the Stone Age” – was literally effected in Korea. The only survivors were those who holed up in caves and tunnels.

Memories of those horrible days, weeks and months of fear, pain and death seared the memories of the survivors, and according to most observers they constitute the underlying mindset of hatred and fear so evident among North Koreans today. They will condition whatever negotiations America attempts with the North.

Finally, after protracted battles on the ground and daily or hourly assaults from the sky, the North Koreans agreed to negotiate a ceasefire. Actually achieving it took two years.
The most significant points in the agreement were that (first) there would be two Koreas divided by a demilitarized zone essentially on what had been the line drawn along the 38th parallel to keep the invading Soviet and American armies from colliding and (second) article 13(d) of the agreement specified that no new weapons other than replacements would be introduced on the peninsula. That meant that all parties agreed not to introduce nuclear and other “advanced” weapons.

What needs to be remembered in order to understand future events is that, in effect, the ceasefire created not two but three Koreas: North, South, and the American military bases.

The North set about recovering from devastation. It had to dig out from under the rubble and it chose to continue to be a garrison state. It was certainly a dictatorship, like the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam and Indonesia, but close observers thought that the regime was supported by the people. Most observers found that the memory of the war, and particularly of the constant bombing, created a sense of embattlement that unified the country against the Americans and the regime of the South. Kim Il-sung was able to stifle such dissent as arose. He did so brutally. No one can judge for certain, but there is reason to believe that a sense of embattled patriotism remains alive today.

South’s Military Dictatorships

The South was much less harmed by the war than the North and, with large injections of aid and investment from Japan and America, it started on the road to a remarkable prosperity. Perhaps in part because of these two factors – relatively little damage from the war and growing prosperity – its politics was volatile.

To contain it and stay in power, Syngman Rhee’s government imposed martial law, altered the constitution, rigged elections, opened fire on demonstrators and even executed leaders of the opposing party. We rightly deplore the oppression of the North, but humanitarian rights investigations showed little difference between the Communist/Confucian North and the Capitalist/Christian South. Syngman Rhee’s tactics were not less brutal than those of Kim Il-sung.

Employing them, Rhee managed another electoral victory in 1952 and a third in 1960. He won the 1960 election with a favorable vote officially registered to be 90 percent. Not surprisingly, he was accused of fraud. The student organizations regarded his manipulation as the “last straw” and, having no other recourse, took to the streets. Just ahead of a mob converging on his palace – much like the last day of the government of South Vietnam a few years later – he was hustled out of Seoul by the CIA to an exile in Honolulu.
The third Korea, the American “Korea,” would have been only notional except for the facts that it occupied a part of the South (the southern perimeter of the demilitarized zone and various bases elsewhere), had ultimate control of the military forces of the South (it was authorized to take command of them in the event of war) and, as the British had done in Egypt, Iraq and India, it “guided” the native government it had fostered. Its military forces guaranteed the independence of the South and at least initially, the United States paid about half the costs of the government and sustained its economy.

At the same time, the United States sought to weaken the North by imposing embargos. It kept the North on edge by carrying what the North regarded as threatening maneuvers on its frontier and, from time to time, as President Bill Clinton did in 1994 (and President Donald Trump is now doing), threatened a devastating preemptive strike. The Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff also developed OPLN 5015, one of a succession of secret plans whose intent, in the words of commentator Michael Peck, was “to destroy North Korea.”

And, in light of America’s worry about nuclear weapons in Korea, we have to confront the fact that it was America that introduced them. In June 1957, the U.S. informed the North Koreans that it would no longer abide by Paragraph 13(d) of the armistice agreement that forbade the introduction of new weapons. A few months later, in January 1958, it set up nuclear-tipped missiles capable of reaching Moscow and Peking. The U.S. kept them there until 1991. It wanted to reintroduce them in 2013 but the then South Korean Prime Minister Chung Hong-won refused.

As I will later mention, South Korea joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1975, and North Korea joined in 1985. But South Korea covertly violated it from 1982 to 2000 and North Korea first violated the provisions in 1993 and then withdrew from it in 2003. North Korea conducted its first underground nuclear test in 2006.

There is little moral high ground for any one of the “three Koreas.”

New elections were held in the South and what was known as the Second Republic was created in 1960 under what had been the opposition party. It let loose the pent-up anger over the tyranny and corruption of Syngman Rhee’s government and moved to purge the army and security forces. Some 4,000 men lost their jobs and many were indicted for crimes. Fearing for their jobs and their lives, they found a savior in General Park Chung-hee who led the military to a coup d’état on May 16, 1961.
General Park was best known for having fought the guerrillas led by Kim Il-sung as an officer in the Japanese “pacification force” in Manchukuo. During that period of his life, he even replaced his Korean name with a Japanese name. As president, he courted Japan. Restoring diplomatic relations, he also promoted the massive Japanese investment that jump-started Korean economic development. With America he was even more forthcoming. In return for aid, and possibly because of his close involvement with the American military – he studied at the Command and General Staff school at Fort Sill – he sent a quarter of a million South Korean troops to fight under American command in Vietnam.

Not less oppressive than Rhee’s government, Park’s government was a dictatorship. To protect his rule, he replaced civilian officials by military officers. Additionally, he formed a secret government within the formal government; known as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, it operated like the Gestapo. It routinely arrested, imprisoned and tortured Koreans suspected of opposition. And, in October 1972, Park rewrote the constitution to give himself virtual perpetual power. He remained in office for 16 years. In response to oppression and despite the atmosphere of fear, large-scale protests broke out against his rule. It was not, however, a public uprising that ended his rule: his chief of intelligence assassinated him in 1979.

An attempt to return to civilian rule was blocked within a week by a new military coup d’état. The protests that followed were quickly put down and thousands more were arrested. A confused scramble for power then ensued out of which in 1987 a Sixth Republic was announced and one of the members of the previous military junta became president.

The new president Roh Tae-woo undertook a policy of conciliation with the North and under the warming of relations both North and South joined the U.N. in September 1991. They also agreed to denuclearization of the peninsula. But, as often happens, the easing of suppressive rule caused the “reformer” to fall. Roh and another former president were arrested, tried and sentenced to prison for a variety of crimes — but not for their role in anti-democratic politics. Koreans remained little motivated by more than the overt forms of democracy.

Relations between the North and the South over the next few years bounced from finger on the trigger to hand outstretched. The final attempt to bring order to the South came when Park Geun-hye was elected in 2013. She was the daughter of General Park Chung-hee who, as we have seen, had seized power in a coup d’état 1963 and was president of South Korea for 16 years. Park Geun-hye, was the first women to become head of a state in east Asia. A true daughter of her father, she ruled with an iron hand, but like other members of the ruling group, she far overplayed her hand and was convicted of malfeasance and forced out of office in
The Kim Dynasty

Meanwhile in the North, as Communist Party head, Prime Minister from 1948 to 1972 and president from 1972 to his death in 1994, Kim Il-sung ruled North Korea for nearly half a century. His policy for his nation was a sort of throw-back to the ancient Korean ideal of isolation. Known as juche, it emphasized self-reliance. The North was essentially an agrarian society and, unlike the South, which from the 1980s welcomed foreign investment and aid, it remained closed. Initially, this policy worked well: up to the end of the 1970s, North Korea was relatively richer than the South, but then the South raced ahead with what amounted to an industrial revolution.

Surprisingly, Kim Il-sung shared with Syngman Rhee a Protestant Christian youth; indeed, Kim said that his grandfather was a Presbyterian minister. But the more important influence on his life was the brutal Japanese occupation. Such information as we have is shaped by official pronouncements and amount to a paean. But, probably, like many of the Asian nationalists, as a very young man he took part in demonstrations against the occupying power. According to the official account, by the time he was 17, he had spent time in a Japanese prison.

At 19, in 1931, he joined the Chinese Communist Party and a few years later became a member of its Manchurian fighting group. Hunted down by the Japanese and such of their Korean collaborators as Park Chung-hee, Kim crossed into Russian territory and was inducted into the Soviet army in which he served until the end of the Second World War. Then, as the Americans did with Syngman Rhee, the Russians installed him as head of the provisional government.

From the first days of his coming to power, Kim Il-sung focused on the acquisition of military power. Understandably from his own experience, he emphasized training it in informal tactics, but as the Soviet Union began to provide heavy equipment, he pushed his officers into conventional military training under Russian drillmasters. By the time he had decided to invade South Korea, the army was massive, armed on a European standard and well organized. Almost every adult Korean man was or had been serving in it.

The army had virtually become the state. This allocation of resources, as the Korean War made clear, resulted in a powerful striking force but a weakened economy. It also caused Kim’s Chinese supporters to decide to push him aside. How he survived his temporary demotion is not known, but in the aftermath of the ceasefire, he was again seen to be firmly in control of the Communist Party and the North Korean state.
The North Korean state, as we have seen, had virtually ceased to exist under the bombing attack. Kim could hope for little help to rebuild it from abroad and sought even less. His policy of self-reliance and militarization were imposed on the country. On the Soviet model of the 1930s, he launched a draconian five-year plan in which virtually all economic resources were nationalized. In the much-publicized Sino-Soviet split, he first sided with the Chinese but, disturbed by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he swung back to closer relations with the Soviet Union.

In effect, the two neighboring powers had to be his poles. His policy of independence was influential but could not be decisive. To underpin his rule and presumably in part to build the sense of independence of his people, he developed an elaborate personality cult. That propaganda cult survived him. When he died in 1994 at 82 years of age, his body was preserved in a glass case where it became the object of something like a pilgrimage.

Unusual for a Communist regime, Kim Il-sung was followed by his son Kim Jong-Il. Kim Jong-Il continued most of his father’s policies, which toward the end of his life, had moved haltingly toward a partial accommodation with South Korea and the United States. He was faced with a devastating drought in 2001 and sequential famine that was said to have starved some 3 million people. Perhaps seeking to disguise the impact of this famine, he abrogated the armistice and sent troops into the demilitarized zone. However, intermittent moves including creating a partly extra-territorialized industrial enclave for foreign trade, were made to better relations with the South.

Then, in January 2002, President George Bush made his “Axis of Evil Speech” in which he demonized North Korea. Thereafter, North Korea withdrew from the 1992 agreement with the South to ban nuclear weapons and announced that it had enough weapons-grade plutonium to make about 5 or 6 nuclear weapons. Although he was probably incapacitated by a stroke in August 2008, his condition was hidden as long as possible while preparations were made for succession. He died in December 2011 and was followed by his son Kim Jong-un.

With this thumbnail sketch of events up to the coming to power of Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, I will turn in Part 2 of this essay to the dangerous situation in which our governments – and all of us individually – find ourselves today.

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