

The Legacy of Reagan's Civilian 'Psyops'

Special Report: When the Reagan administration launched peacetime "psyops" in the mid-1980s, it pulled in civilian agencies to help spread these still-ongoing techniques of deception and manipulation, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Declassified records from the Reagan presidential library show how the U.S. government enlisted civilian agencies in psychological operations designed to exploit information as a way to manipulate the behavior of targeted foreign audiences and, at least indirectly, American citizens.

A just-declassified sign-in sheet for a meeting of an inter-agency "psyops" committee on Oct. 24, 1986, shows representatives from the Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) joining officials from the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department.

Some of the names of officials from the CIA and Pentagon remain classified more than three decades later. But the significance of the document is that it reveals how agencies that were traditionally assigned to global development (USAID) or international information (USIA) were incorporated into the U.S. government's strategies for peacetime psyops, a military technique for breaking the will of a wartime enemy by spreading lies, confusion and terror.

Essentially, psyops play on the cultural weaknesses of a target population so they could be more easily controlled or defeated, but the Reagan administration was taking the concept outside the traditional bounds of warfare and applying psyops to any time when the U.S. government could claim some threat to America.

This disclosure – bolstered by other documents released earlier this year by archivists at the Reagan library in Simi Valley, California – is relevant to today's frenzy over alleged "fake news" and accusations of "Russian disinformation" by reminding everyone that the U.S. government was active in those same areas.

The U.S. government's use of disinformation and propaganda is, of course, nothing new. For instance, during the 1950s and 1960s, the USIA regularly published articles in friendly newspapers and magazines that appeared under fake names such as Guy Sims Fitch.

However, in the 1970s, the bloody Vietnam War and the Pentagon Papers' revelations about U.S. government deceptions to justify that war created a

crisis for American propagandists, their loss of credibility with the American people. Some of the traditional sources of U.S. disinformation, such as the CIA, also fell into profound disrepute.

This so-called “Vietnam Syndrome” – a skeptical citizenry dubious toward U.S. government claims about foreign conflicts – undermined President Reagan’s efforts to sell his plans for intervention in the civil wars then underway in Central America, Africa and elsewhere.

Reagan depicted Central America as a “Soviet beachhead,” but many Americans saw haughty Central American oligarchs and their brutal security forces slaughtering priests, nuns, labor activists, students, peasants and indigenous populations.

Reagan and his advisers realized that they had to turn those perceptions around if they hoped to get sustained funding for the militaries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras as well as for the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, the CIA-organized paramilitary force marauding around leftist-ruled Nicaragua.

Perception Management

So, it became a high priority to reshape public perceptions inside those targeted countries but even more importantly among the American people. That challenge led the Reagan administration to revitalize and reorganize methods for distributing propaganda and funding friendly foreign operatives, such as creation of the National Endowment for Democracy under neoconservative president Carl Gershman in 1983.

Another entity in this process was the Psychological Operations Committee formed in 1986 under Reagan’s National Security Council. In the years since, the U.S. administrations, both Republican and Democratic, have applied many of these same psyops principles, cherry-picking or manufacturing evidence to undermine adversaries and to solidify U.S. public support for Washington’s policies.

This reality – about the U.S. government creating its own faux reality to manipulate the American people and international audiences – should compel journalists in the West to treat all claims from Washington with a large grain of salt.

However, instead, we have seen a pattern of leading news outlets simply amplifying whatever U.S. agencies assert about foreign adversaries while denouncing skeptics as purveyors of “fake news” or enemy “propaganda.” In effect, the success of the U.S. psyops strategy can be measured by how Western mainstream media has stepped forward as the enforcement mechanism to ensure conformity to the U.S. government’s various information themes and narratives.

For instance, any questioning of the U.S. government's narratives on, say, the current Syrian conflict, or the Ukraine coup of 2014, or Russian "hacking" of the 2016 U.S. election, or Iran's status as "the leading sponsor of terrorism" is treated by the major Western news outlets as evidence that you are a "useful fool" at best, if not a willful enemy "propagandist" with loyalty to a foreign power, i.e., a traitor.

Leading mainstream media outlets and establishment-approved Web sites are now teaming up with Google, Facebook and other technology companies to develop algorithms to bury or remove content from the Internet that doesn't march in lockstep with what is deemed to be true, which often simply follows what U.S. government agencies say is true.

Yet, the documentary evidence is now clear that the U.S. government undertook a well-defined strategy of waging psyops around the world with regular blowback of this propaganda and disinformation onto the American people via Western news agencies covering events in the affected countries.

During more recent administrations, euphemisms have been used to cloak the more pejorative phrase, "psychological operations" – such as "public diplomacy," "strategic communications," "perception management," and "smart power." But the serious push to expand this propaganda capability of the U.S. government can be traced back to the Reagan presidency.

The Puppet Master

Over the years, I've obtained scores of documents related to the psyops and related programs via "mandatory declassification reviews" of files belonging to Walter Raymond Jr., a senior CIA covert operations specialist who was transferred to Reagan's National Security Council staff in 1982 to rebuild capacities for psyops, propaganda and disinformation.

Raymond, who has been compared to a character from a John LeCarré novel slipping easily into the woodwork, spent his years inside Reagan's White House as a shadowy puppet master who tried his best to avoid public attention or – it seems – even having his picture taken.

From the tens of thousands of photographs from meetings at Reagan's White House, I found only a couple showing Raymond – and he is seated in groups, partially concealed by other officials.

But Raymond appears to have grasped his true importance. In his NSC files, I found a doodle of an organizational chart that had Raymond at the top holding what looks like the crossed handles used by puppeteers to control the puppets below them. The drawing fits the reality of Raymond as the behind-the-curtains

operative who was controlling the various inter-agency task forces that were responsible for implementing psyops and other propaganda strategies.

In Raymond's files, I found an influential November 1983 paper, written by Col. Alfred R. Paddock Jr. and entitled "Military Psychological Operations and US Strategy," which stated: "the planned use of communications to influence attitudes or behavior should, if properly used, precede, accompany, and follow all applications of force. Put another way, psychological operations is the one weapons system which has an important role to play in peacetime, throughout the spectrum of conflict, and during the aftermath of conflict."

Paddock continued, "Military psychological operations are an important part of the 'PSYOP Totality,' both in peace and war. ... We need a program of psychological operations as an integral part of our national security policies and programs. ... The continuity of a standing interagency board or committee to provide the necessary coordinating mechanism for development of a coherent, worldwide psychological operations strategy is badly needed."

One declassified "top secret" document in Raymond's file – dated Feb. 4, 1985, from Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger – urged the fuller implementation of President Reagan's National Security Decision Directive 130, which was signed on March 6, 1984, and which authorized peacetime psyops by expanding psyops beyond its traditional boundaries of active military operations into peacetime situations in which the U.S. government could claim some threat to national interests.

"This approval can provide the impetus to the rebuilding of a necessary strategic capability, focus attention on psychological operations as a national – not solely military – instrument, and ensure that psychological operations are fully coordinated with public diplomacy and other international information activities," Weinberger's document said.

An Inter-Agency Committee

This broader commitment to psyops led to the creation of a Psychological Operations Committee (POC) that was to be chaired by a representative of Reagan's National Security Council with a vice chairman from the Pentagon and with representatives from CIA, the State Department and USIA.

"This group will be responsible for planning, coordinating and implementing psychological operations activities in support of United States policies and interests relative to national security," according to a "secret" addendum to a memo, dated March 25, 1986, from Col. Paddock, the psyops advocate who had become the U.S. Army's Director for Psychological Operations.

"The committee will provide the focal point for interagency coordination of detailed contingency planning for the management of national information assets during war, and for the transition from peace to war," the addendum added. "The POC shall seek to ensure that in wartime or during crises (which may be defined as periods of acute tension involving a threat to the lives of American citizens or the imminence of war between the U.S. and other nations), U.S. international information elements are ready to initiate special procedures to ensure policy consistency, timely response and rapid feedback from the intended audience."

In other words, the U.S. government could engage in psyops virtually anytime because there are always "periods of acute tension involving a threat to the lives of American citizens."

The Psychological Operations Committee took formal shape with a "secret" memo from Reagan's National Security Advisor John Poindexter on July 31, 1986. Its first meeting was called on Sept. 2, 1986, with an agenda that focused on Central America and "How can other POC agencies support and complement DOD programs in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama." The POC was also tasked with "Developing National PSYOPS Guidelines" for "formulating and implementing a national PSYOPS program." (Underlining in original)

Raymond was named a co-chair of the POC along with CIA officer Vincent Cannistraro, who was then Deputy Director for Intelligence Programs on the NSC staff, according to a "secret" memo from Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Craig Alderman Jr.

The memo also noted that future POC meetings would be briefed on psyops projects for the Philippines and Nicaragua, with the latter project codenamed "Niagara Falls." The memo also references a "Project Touchstone," but it is unclear where that psyops program was targeted.

Another "secret" memo dated Oct. 1, 1986, co-authored by Raymond, reported on the POC's first meeting on Sept. 10, 1986, and noted that "The POC will, at each meeting, focus on an area of operations (e.g., Central America, Afghanistan, Philippines)."

The POC's second meeting on Oct. 24, 1986 – for which the sign-in sheet was just released – concentrated on the Philippines, according to a Nov. 4, 1986 memo also co-authored by Raymond.

But the Reagan administration's primary attention continued to go back to Central America, including "Project Niagara Falls," the psyops program aimed at Nicaragua. A "secret" Pentagon memo from Deputy Under Secretary Alderman on Nov. 20, 1986, outlined the work of the 4th Psychological Operations Group on this

psyops plan “to help bring about democratization of Nicaragua,” by which the Reagan administration meant a “regime change.” The precise details of “Project Niagara Falls” were not disclosed in the declassified documents but the choice of codename suggested a cascade of psyops.

Key Operatives

Other documents from Raymond’s NSC file shed light on who other key operatives in the psyops and propaganda programs were. For instance, in undated notes on efforts to influence the Socialist International, including securing support for U.S. foreign policies from Socialist and Social Democratic parties in Europe, Raymond cited the efforts of “Ledeen, Gershman,” a reference to neoconservative operative Michael Ledeen and Carl Gershman, another neocon who has served as president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), from 1983 to the present. (Underlining in original.)

Although NED is technically independent of the U.S. government, it receives the bulk of its funding (now about \$100 million a year) from Congress. Documents from the Reagan archives also make clear that NED was organized as a way to replace some of the CIA’s political and propaganda covert operations, which had fallen into disrepute in the 1970s. Earlier released documents from Raymond’s file show CIA Director William Casey pushing for NED’s creation and Raymond, Casey’s handpicked man on the NSC, giving frequent advice and direction to Gershman. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “CIA’s Hidden Hand in ‘Democracy’ Groups.”]

While the initials USAID conjure up images of well-meaning Americans helping to drill wells, teach school and set up health clinics in impoverished nations, USAID also has kept its hand in financing friendly journalists around the globe.

In 2015, USAID issued a fact sheet summarizing its work financing “journalism education, media business development, capacity building for supportive institutions, and strengthening legal-regulatory environments for free media.” USAID estimated its budget for “media strengthening programs in over 30 countries” at \$40 million annually, including aiding “independent media organizations and bloggers in over a dozen countries,”

In Ukraine before the 2014 coup, USAID offered training in “mobile phone and website security,” which sounds a bit like an operation to thwart the local government’s intelligence gathering, an ironic position for the U.S. with its surveillance obsession, including prosecuting whistleblowers based on evidence that they talked to journalists.

USAID, working with billionaire George Soros’s Open Society, also funded the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), which engages in

“investigative journalism” that usually goes after governments that have fallen into disfavor with the United States and then are singled out for accusations of corruption.

The USAID-funded OCCRP also collaborates with Bellingcat, an online investigative website founded by blogger Eliot Higgins, who is now a senior non-resident fellow of the Atlantic Council, a pro-NATO think tank that receives funding from the U.S. and allied governments.

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

Despite his dubious record of accuracy, Higgins has gained mainstream acclaim, in part, because his “findings” always match up with the propaganda theme that the U.S. government and its Western allies are peddling. Though most genuinely independent bloggers are ignored by the mainstream media, Higgins has found his work touted by both The New York Times and The Washington Post, and Google has included Bellingcat on its First Draft coalition, which will determine which news will be deemed real and which fake.

In other words, the U.S. government has a robust strategy for deploying direct and indirect agents of influence who are now influencing how the titans of the Internet will structure their algorithms to play up favored information and disappear disfavored information.

A Heritage of Lies

During the first Cold War, the CIA and the U.S. Information Agency refined the art of “information warfare,” including pioneering some of its current features like having ostensibly “independent” entities and cut-outs present U.S. propaganda to a cynical public that would reject much of what it hears from government but may trust “citizen journalists” and “bloggers.”

USIA, which was founded in 1953 and gained new life in the 1980s under its Reagan-appointed director Charles Wick, was abolished in 1999, but its propaganda functions were largely folded into the new office of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, which became a new fount of disinformation.

For instance, in 2014, President Obama’s Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Richard Stengel engaged in a series of falsehoods and misrepresentations regarding Russia’s RT network. In one instance, he claimed that the RT had made

the “ludicrous assertion” that the U.S. had invested \$5 billion in the regime change project in Ukraine. But that was an obvious reference to a public speech by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland on Dec. 13, 2013, in which she said “we have invested more than \$5 billion” to help Ukraine to achieve its “European aspirations.”

Nuland also was a leading proponent of the Ukraine coup, personally cheering on the anti-government rioters. In an intercepted phone call with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, Nuland discussed how “to glue” or “midwife this thing” and who the new leaders would be. She picked Arseniy Yatsenyuk – “Yats is the guy” – who ended up as Prime Minister after elected President Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown.

Despite all the evidence of a U.S.-backed coup, The New York Times simply ignored the evidence, including the Nuland-Pyatt phone call, to announce that there never was a coup. The Times’ obeisance to the State Department’s false narrative is a good example of how the legacy of Walter Raymond, who died in 2003, extends to the present.

Over several decades, even as the White House changed hands from Republicans to Democrats, the momentum created by Raymond continued to push the peacetime psyops strategy forward.

In more recent years, the wording of the program may have changed to more pleasing euphemisms. But the idea is the same: how you can use psyops, propaganda and disinformation to sell U.S. government policies abroad and at home.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).

Trump’s Mendacious Speech on Iran

President Trump, in decertifying the Iran-nuclear deal, trotted out all the tripe about the “world leading sponsor of terrorism” and ties to Al Qaeda. But his new policy is one of dangerous incoherence, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump's speech on Iran is the latest chapter in his struggle to reconcile his overriding impulse to denigrate and destroy any significant achievements of his predecessor with the fact that the most salient of those achievements in foreign policy— the Iran nuclear agreement or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – is working.

It is fulfilling its objective of keeping closed all paths to an Iranian nuclear weapon. As international inspectors have repeatedly determined, Iran is fulfilling its obligations under the agreement.

The struggle for Trump is more difficult on Iran policy than with the Affordable Care Act, where Trump has been using his own executive actions to destroy directly what he has denigrated. However painful his actions on health care are to American citizens who are adversely affected, there is no international multilateral agreement that direct destruction violates. With health care there are no equivalents to the adults, in the person of senior national security officials in his administration, who have been telling him what a bad idea abrogation of the JCPOA would be.

With those adults uncomfortably restraining him, Trump is turning to Congress to square the circle between impulse and reality, to do what the adults are advising him not to do, and to come up with an Iran strategy that is markedly different from what previous administrations have done.

Neither the brief boilerplate in the speech about countering Iran's "destabilizing activity" and conventional weapons development nor the paper labeled as a "new strategy on Iran" that the White House released shortly before the speech provide such a strategy. Most of the paper could have been written in either of the previous two administrations and probably in any of the previous half dozen.

Compliance Confirmed

The issue of Iranian compliance with the JCPOA is where the dissonance Trump is experiencing, in the face of the International Atomic Energy Agency's confirmation of that compliance, is most acute. Trump's speechwriters went to the usual wells that have been tapped by longtime opponents of the JCPOA who have tried to find any possible ground for claiming an Iranian violation.

There was mention of heavy water, without any mention that in the two instances in which Iran's supply of heavy water bumped up against the agreed-upon limits, Iran promptly did exactly what it is supposed to do under the agreement, which is to sell or otherwise dispose of the excess. Nor was there any mention of how, given Iran's reconfiguration of its heavy water reactor at Arak and permanent

obligation under the JCPOA not to reprocess spent fuel, the heavy water does not represent a proliferation concern.

Trump also asserted that Iran had “intimidated international inspectors,” a line which evidently hinges on some Iranian rhetorical bravado about not giving foreigners the run of their country, and which continues a theme pushed by Nikki Haley that is intended to foster the belief that Iran is denying inspectors access to suspect sites. Neither Trump nor Haley has provided a shred of evidence that there has been any such denial, or that the procedures under JCPOA for inspection of non-declared as well as declared sites are not working well.

The key to reality as far as Iranian compliance is concerned can be found in Trump’s own speech. When he announced that he was withholding certification under the terms of the legislation governing Congressional review, he explicitly said he was doing so on the basis of the clause in the legislation that does *not* pertain to Iranian compliance but instead refers to whether sanctions relief is still “appropriate and proportionate” to the benefits from the JCPOA. If the administration had genuine grounds for claiming Iranian noncompliance, Trump surely would have invoked the clauses in the law that instead refer to whether Iran is meeting its obligations.

Trump also went to the usual wells in complaining about “flaws” in the JCPOA. Also as usual, the implicit comparison was with a mythical, impossible-to-achieve pact, with no attention given to what the real negotiating possibilities were when the JCPOA was laboriously being hammered out nor what those possibilities are now.

The ‘Sunset’ Clauses

This was true, for example, of what Trump said about the “sunset” provisions. He disregarded the key considerations about these provisions, including how the most important elements of the agreement never expire and how whether such restrictions remain in place years from now will depend more on how all the parties to the JCPOA see their interests years from now (including whether the United States lives up to its commitments) than on the fine print of a past agreement.

Most important about the sunset clauses is that if the JCPOA were killed, the relevant restrictions on Iranian nuclear activities would vanish right away, not 10 or 20 years from now. This fact makes especially ironic Trump’s closing threat that if Congress doesn’t somehow come up with legislation to his liking, and other parties to the JCPOA do not – contrary to every indication those parties have been giving – bend to whatever it is Trump wants, then “the agreement will be terminated.” If he really is worried about those sunset

clauses, then this threat is akin to committing suicide because of fear of death.

The entire speech was filled with what is hoary, well-rehearsed, and well-refuted. This was true of Trump's efforts to encourage other misconceptions about the JCPOA, including the favorite one among opponents that Iran got its benefits "up front" before fulfilling most of its obligations. In fact, the reverse was true, with Iran having to dismantle centrifuge cascades, dilute enriched uranium, gut its reactor, and take most of the steps it was required to take to close pathways to a nuclear weapon before it got an ounce of additional sanctions relief.

Besides the outright falsehoods, there was hardly a syllable of recognition in the speech that what is one of the most significant nuclear nonproliferation agreements in recent years had accomplished anything at all.

The first portion of Trump's speech was a play to emotions that consisted of a recitation of bad things Iran had done through the years, dating back to the hostage crisis of almost 40 years ago and featuring terrorist attacks by Iranian-supported groups in the 1980s. One need not disagree that there were indeed many reprehensible Iranian deeds during those years to note the misrepresentations in the speech.

The Al Qaeda Fiction

Trump tried to tie Iran to al-Qaeda (evidently relying on the fact of some al-Qaeda members having been in Iran, in a status that probably was most like house arrest) and its attacks, including the attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa. That sort of linkage has as much validity as George W. Bush alleging an "alliance" between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda as one of the selling points for launching the Iraq War.

Missing from Trump's bill of historical particulars about Iranian conduct was any sense of the possibility or desirability of regimes changing their conduct – partly through evolution of their own perception of self-interest and partly through inducements, which is what the JCPOA is all about in keeping Iran from building nuclear weapons. Also missing was any reference to the responsibility of other players for much of the mayhem involved (as with the Saudi-led, U.S.-supported war in Yemen).

Missing as well was any genuine connection between all of the recited reasons to dislike Iran and a rationale for Trump undermining the JCPOA. Trump offered the usual assertions about unfrozen assets that Iran "could use to fund terrorism" while offering no reason to believe that the level of what is unfrozen has

anything to do with the level of Iran's activity outside its borders.

Trump even used the chestnut about a payment by the Obama administration to Iran in the form of pallets of cash – without mentioning, of course, that this payment was settlement of an old claim involving aircraft that Iran under the shah had ordered but the United States never delivered, and that cash was used because Iran was still frozen out of Western banking systems.

Although Trump claimed to be offering an entire new strategy on Iran and not just making a statement about the JCPOA, something else that was missing was any reason to believe that his administration has new and better ideas to do anything about non-nuclear Iranian actions, whether this involves missiles, terrorism, or anything else.

Neither in this speech nor on other occasions has Trump shown any awareness of the need to look at the reasons the other state is doing what it is doing, how this fits in with what other states are doing, and what incentives would be required to elicit any changes.

Trump referred repeatedly in his speech to the "Iranian dictatorship." There was no hint of recognition that the Iranian regime is currently one of the more democratic ones in the Middle East (and much more so than some other regimes in the region that Trump prefers to associate with). There was no acknowledgement that the JCPOA was negotiated with the government of a popularly elected Iranian president who won re-election over hard-line opposition partly because of the promise of better relations, including economic relations, with the West under the JCPOA.

The misrepresentations in the speech were too numerous to catalog entirely, but one of the biggest was Trump's assertion that "the previous administration lifted sanctions just before what would have been the complete collapse of the regime." There is no evidence whatsoever that the Iranian regime was on the brink of any such collapse.

Piling on more and more sanctions in the absence of engagement and diplomacy had merely seen the spinning of more and more centrifuges enriching uranium. This line in the speech points to the vacuity of what Trump is offering for a policy toward Iran: endless hostility and confrontation, and with it the risk of war, sustained by a baseless hope of regime change – a hope that has brought costs and chaos that the United States knows all too well.

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

Trump's War for Coal Raises Risks

Exclusive: President Trump's war for coal is threatening progress on alternative energy while creating hazards both in the weather effects from global warming and in health risks from breathing dirty air, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

When Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt proudly declared "The war against coal is over," as part of his Oct. 9 announcement of plans to repeal the Obama-era Clean Power Plan, he neglected to mention the thousands of Americans whose lives will be sacrificed so coal producers and utilities can declare victory in the nation's environmental wars.

As Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement, "Donald Trump and Scott Pruitt will go down in infamy for launching one of the most egregious attacks ever on public health, our climate, and the safety of every community in the United States. He's proposing to throw out a plan that would prevent thousands of premature deaths and tens of thousands of childhood asthma attacks every year."

Coal burning produces deadly particulates, toxic metals, and other pollutants that have a ruinous effect on public health, even with current controls on smokestack emissions. A 2015 analysis by the EPA of the Clean Power Plan, which proposed flexible measures to curb carbon pollution from power plants across the country, noted that associated cuts to smog and soot would "bring major health benefits for American families."

By 2030, when its provisions fully kicked in, the plan would result in "up to 3,600 fewer premature deaths; 90,000 fewer asthma attacks in children; 1,700 fewer hospital admissions; and avoiding 300,000 missed days of school and work."

Those numbers reflected only the projected impact of the Clean Power Plan, not the total impact of coal burning. Carnegie Mellon professor Jay Apt recently cited a vast scientific literature that supports estimates of premature deaths from U.S. power plant emissions at between 7,500 and 52,000 annually – roughly comparable to total fatalities from car crashes.

Switching electric utilities completely from coal to natural gas would slash

those emissions and lower human health costs by upward of \$50 billion a year, Apt and a team of fellow scientists calculated in a 2016 paper.

That process is already underway for economic reasons. Thanks to cheap natural gas prices, nearly half of U.S. coal-fired power plants have shut down or announced plans to retire in recent years—including nearly a dozen since Trump took office.

A recent study issued by the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University noted, “A surge in US natural gas production due to the shale revolution has driven down prices and made coal increasingly uncompetitive in US electricity markets. Coal has also faced growing competition from renewable energy, with solar costs falling 85 percent between 2008 and 2016 and wind costs falling 36 percent.”

Unless those basic economic facts change, it declared, “US coal consumption will continue its decline despite Trump’s aggressive rollback of Obama-era regulations.”

War on Renewable Energy

This March, for the first time ever, wind and solar produced 10 percent of all electricity in the United States, reflecting their growing challenge to coal and their rapidly declining cost. The Trump administration is looking for ways to reverse that trend, even if that means ending the tremendous job boom in alternative energy industries.

At EPA, besides attempting to kill the Clean Power Plan, Trump apparently hopes to roll back costly regulations of mercury emissions and coal ash from power plants by appointing former coal company lobbyist Andrew Wheeler to serve as deputy administrator of the agency.

EPA’s Pruitt has also publicly urged repeal of federal tax credits for wind and solar power – without noting that they are scheduled to disappear by 2020 and 2022, respectively, and without acknowledging that extensive federal subsidies for coal for years tilted the playing field in favor of fossil fuels. (President Trump is said by West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice to be “really interested” in providing a lavish new federal subsidy for Appalachian coal.)

Meanwhile, over at the Department of Energy, the White House has asked for cuts of nearly 70 percent in the department’s programs for renewable energy and energy efficiency, including its much-acclaimed advanced research program.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry last month asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to ram through new economic regulations favoring ailing coal and

nuclear plants. His transparent attempt to interfere with energy markets ran into determined opposition not only from wind and solar representatives, but members of the gas industry. One of Trump's own appointees to FERC objected, saying "I did not sign up to go blow up the markets."

The Interior Department has weighed in, too, with Secretary Ryan Zinke declaring during National Clean Energy Week that solar companies should stop looking for sites to produce energy on federal lands. To date, his department has approved only one solar project, compared to the 60 approved by the Obama administration over eight years.

Zinke's anti-solar stance conflicts with the opinion of two-thirds of adult Americans, who believe the United States should give priority to renewable energy over fossil fuels.

Perhaps the Trump administration's biggest threat to renewable energy is its potential support for a new ruling by the U.S. International Trade Commission, which found that cheap Chinese solar panels have hurt U.S.-based manufacturers. The Solar Energy Industry Association, the main industry lobby, has decried the ruling and warned that punitive tariffs would raise panel prices, slam the breaks on solar adoption, and cost nearly 90,000 U.S. jobs.

The ruling was also opposed by the conservative Heritage Foundation, at least two Republican governors, and a group of retired military energy experts.

"But for Trump," observed the *Washington Post's* Dino Grandoni, "the commission's decision presents a rare opportunity for him to penalize two of his favorite punching bags – China and Mexico, which was also named in the ITC ruling . . . – without Congress getting in the way." Just as important, it would allow Trump to land another blow for the coal industry.

By waging war against renewable energy industry, the Trump administration isn't just putting hundreds of thousands of good jobs at risk. In the long run, it is jeopardizing efforts to slow the pace of global warming, which has contributed to the vast scale and devastation of recent natural disasters ranging from hurricanes to fires.

Just as significant, the administration threatens to condemn to misery or death thousands of Americans who will be forced to breathe dirtier air in order to line the pockets of Trump's coal-industry supporters. By fighting for coal, Trump is waging war on our very lives.

Jonathan Marshall is a frequent contributor to Consortiumnews.com.

As Trump Fumes, Puerto Rico Struggles

Angered by criticism from desperate U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico, President Trump lashed out with threats to remove federal rescue and recovery personnel – even as the crisis grows worse, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Some three weeks after Hurricane Maria shredded Puerto Rico, the situation on the U.S. island territory remains grave with only about 10 percent of Puerto Rico's residents having electricity, according to the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority. Meanwhile, thousands of people remain in packed shelters in San Juan.

Health and public officials now worry about a developing public health crisis with outbreaks of several deadly water and airborne diseases that have not plagued the island for years, including four confirmed cases of Leptospirosis, a rat urine-borne disease that can be deadly. The death toll has risen to about 50 although a precise count is difficult given the lack of telephone service in remote areas.

On Oct. 11, I spoke with Attorney and Human Rights Activist Judith Berkan about the ongoing rescue and recovery, and the major failures on the part of the Trump Administration to deal with a very serious ongoing life and death situation.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us about your day today. You were delivering generators?

Judith Berkan: People are organizing here like crazy, given the absence of effective official relief. We went out into the countryside today to deliver a generator, flashlights and batteries.

Dennis Bernstein: Before we get into the government failure, tell us about the situation on the ground and the other kinds of actions taken by people who obviously realize that there is racism at play and the federal government is out of town.

Judith Berkan: In some ways it has gotten a little worse than when we spoke last week. The electrical power, which was beginning to come on at a very slow rate, has now basically collapsed again. Virtually no one has power.

The other thing that has changed is that we are beginning to see in concrete ways a public health crisis developing. We have four confirmed cases of Leptospirosis, a rat urine-borne disease you get from being exposed to water or mud and which must be treated very early or it is fatal. About seven other cases

have been identified in four island towns. We also have mosquito-borne diseases and stagnant waters are breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

We are experiencing major problems with our hospitals. A lot of them no longer have electrical power. Everything we anticipated happening is beginning to happen. People cannot get fresh food. Asthma and other respiratory diseases are rampant. People are dying in nursery homes with limited access to power. They are rationing dialysis at most hospitals.

Apparently there is some kind of official narrative being heard in the United States that things are vastly improved, that the federal and state response has been good. This is not at all the case. The long-term effects of this storm are going to be worse than the storm itself. It is a lot worse in the countryside than it is here in San Juan, and it has been from the beginning. About half the island now has water, but the water is unsafe for drinking. Health officials are telling people to boil the water before drinking it, but no one has electricity!

There is no strategic planning and there is a sense of total chaos in coordination of services, whether it is the Red Cross or FEMA or the Coast Guard. Nobody seems to know who is supposed to do what. It is a devastating situation and I believe it is going to get worse before it gets better.

Dennis Bernstein: On the island of Vieques, people are concerned that toxins there are being scattered around by the storms.

Judith Berkan: Yes, on the offshore islands the situation is even worse. In 1942 and 1943 the US expropriated the islands and continued to bomb Vieques until 2003. There is so much toxic material still in the ground water and one of the problems with the lack of sanitation is that the toxins tend to propagate.

Another issue is that we have had extraordinarily heavy rains in the last three days, which has caused flooding because the waterways are full of debris. There hasn't been a cleanup since Irma.

Dennis Bernstein: For a brief moment there seemed to be some hope with the suspension of the Jones Act.

Judith Berkan: The Jones Act was a 1920's statute that was passed largely to benefit the US shipping industry. What it says is that, if you are going to ship anything from US ports to Puerto Rico, you have to do it on US flag ships staffed by US crews. This makes everything much more expensive in Puerto Rico. There are some relief groups in the States who made contact with foreign flag ships to send supplies down here but cannot anymore.

Today it was reported that Trump has proposed to Congress a \$4.9 billion loan to

Puerto Rico. This is quite remarkable because Puerto Rico is in a desperate situation with our debt and all we need now is to get more into debt! Right now there is talk that the Puerto Rican government will not be able to meet any payments after October.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us something about the people's reaction to this devastating crisis.

Judith Berkan: People are taking collective actions which are real models for what Puerto Rico may look like in the future, as a self-sustaining country rather than a dependant colony. You see it in casual ways, with neighbors coming with machetes to help other neighbors, people checking up on each other, on the elderly.

But you also see a lot of new organizational activity. It is collective activity to make sure that people's needs are met: delivering generators, delivering water, doing censuses of people's needs, taking people out of dangerous situations, making sure they get medical care. It is a very egalitarian and democratic way of doing things.

There are some agricultural collectives who are trying to figure out how to get fresh food out to people. There are medical collectives offering free medical services. There is a marvelous sense of community. You walk around the streets and talk to strangers, you figure out what people's needs are, you share experiences.

Before this there had been a gradual process of more alienation, more dependence on electronic devices, on fossil fuels. All that served to break with what was remarkable about Puerto Rican society, which was its sense of collective well-being.

We know we cannot rely on the government anymore. We used to demand things of the government but at this point we don't expect anything. In Washington, we currently have a particularly racist government in power. But there is a long history of colonial relationship in which all economic structure was developed to meet the needs of imperial power. It has been exacerbated with the current administration and there is clearly no interest in making sure the most basic needs are met.

Dennis Bernstein: We now have FEMA picking up where the president left off, in terms of insulting the mayor of San Juan and other local politicians, blaming you and making believe that the oppressed are responsible.

Judith Berkan: And you have to understand that our market system is based on the US market system and we pay for services like FEMA. Our current statehood

government is trying to paint a rosy picture in order to curry favor with the administration, which is boasting about how great conditions are in Puerto Rico.

In some ways we are making progress, but the entire island is basically without power. Right now the official death count is 44 and there are 113 people still missing. There has been a spike in suicides. The situation is dire, people are suffering.

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.
