

The Foundering Russia-gate 'Scandal'

Exclusive: Taking on water from revealed FBI conflicts of interest, the foundering Russia-gate probe – and its mainstream media promoters – are resorting to insults against people who note the listing ship, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The disclosure of fiercely anti-Trump text messages between two romantically involved senior FBI officials who played key roles in the early Russia-gate inquiry has turned the supposed Russian-election-meddling “scandal” into its own scandal, by providing evidence that some government investigators saw it as their duty to block or destroy Donald Trump’s presidency.

As much as the U.S. mainstream media has mocked the idea that an American “deep state” exists and that it has maneuvered to remove Trump from office, the text messages between senior FBI counterintelligence official Peter Strzok and senior FBI lawyer Lisa Page reveal how two high-ranking members of the government’s intelligence/legal bureaucracy saw their role as protecting the United States from an election that might elevate to the presidency someone as unfit as Trump.

In one Aug. 6, 2016 text exchange, Page told Strzok: “Maybe you’re meant to stay where you are because you’re meant to protect the country from that menace.” At the end of that text, she sent Strzok a link to a David Brooks [column](#) in The New York Times, which concludes with the clarion call: “There comes a time when neutrality and laying low become dishonorable. If you’re not in revolt, you’re in cahoots. When this period and your name are mentioned, decades hence, your grandkids will look away in shame.”

Apparently after reading that stirring advice, Strzok replied, “And of course I’ll try and approach it that way. I just know it will be tough at times. I can protect our country at many levels, not sure if that helps.”

At a House Judiciary Committee hearing on Wednesday, Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, criticized Strzok’s boast that “I can protect our country at many levels.” Jordan said: “this guy thought he was super-agent James Bond at the FBI [deciding] there’s no way we can let the American people make Donald Trump the next president.”

In the text messages, Strzok also expressed visceral contempt for working-class Trump voters, for instance, writing on Aug. 26, 2016, “Just went to a southern Virginia Walmart. I could SMELL the Trump support. ... it’s scary real down here.”

Another text message suggested that other senior government officials – alarmed at the possibility of a Trump presidency – joined the discussion. In an apparent reference to an August 2016 meeting with FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, Strzok wrote to Page on Aug. 15, 2016, “I want to believe the path you threw out for consideration in Andy’s office – that there’s no way he gets elected – but I’m afraid we can’t take that risk.”

Strzok added, “It’s like an insurance policy in the unlikely event that you die before you’re 40.”

It’s unclear what strategy these FBI officials were contemplating to ensure Trump’s defeat, but the comments mesh with what an intelligence source told me after the 2016 election, that there was a plan among senior Obama administration officials to use the allegations about Russian meddling to block Trump’s momentum with the voters and – if elected – to persuade members of the Electoral College to deny Trump a majority of votes and thus throw the selection of a new president into the House of Representatives under the rules of the Twelfth Amendment.

The scheme involved having some Democratic electors vote for former Secretary of State Colin Powell (which did happen), making him the third-place vote-getter in the Electoral College and thus eligible for selection by the House. But the plan fizzled when enough of Trump’s electors stayed loyal to their candidate to officially make him President.

After that, Trump’s opponents turned to the Russia-gate investigation as the vehicle to create the conditions for somehow nullifying the election, impeaching Trump, or at least weakening him sufficiently so he could not take steps to improve relations with Russia.

In one of her text messages to Strzok, Page made reference to a possible Watergate-style ouster of Trump, writing: “Bought all the president’s men. Figure I needed to brush up on watergate.”

As a key feature in this oust-Trump effort, Democrats have continued to lie by claiming that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred” in the assessment that Russia hacked the Democratic emails last year on orders from President Vladimir Putin and then slipped them to WikiLeaks to undermine Hillary Clinton’s campaign.

That canard was used in the early months of the Russia-gate imbroglio to silence any skepticism about the “hacking” accusation, and the falsehood was repeated again by a Democratic congressman during Wednesday’s hearing of the House Judiciary Committee.

But the “consensus” claim was never true. In May 2017 testimony, President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged that the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” was put together by “hand-picked” analysts from only three agencies: the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

Biased at the Creation

And, the new revelations of high-level FBI bias puts Clapper’s statement about “hand-picked” analysts in sharper perspective, since any intelligence veteran will tell you that if you hand-pick the analysts you are effectively hand-picking the analysis.

Although it has not yet been spelled out exactly what role Strzok and Page may have had in the Jan. 6 report, I was told by one source that Strzok had a direct hand in writing it. Whether that is indeed the case, Strzok, as a senior FBI counterintelligence official, would almost surely have had input into the selection of the FBI analysts and thus into the substance of the report itself. [For challenges from intelligence experts to the Jan. 6 report, see Consortiumnews.com’s “More Holes in the Russia-gate Narrative.”]

If the FBI contributors to the Jan. 6 report shared Strzok’s contempt for Trump, it could explain why claims from an unverified dossier of Democratic-financed “dirt” on Trump, including salacious charges that Russian intelligence operatives videotaped Trump being urinated on by prostitutes in a five-star Moscow hotel, was added as a classified appendix to the report and presented personally to President-elect Trump.

Though Democrats and the Clinton campaign long denied financing the dossier – prepared by ex-British spy Christopher Steele who claimed to rely on second- and third-hand information from anonymous Russian contacts – it was revealed in October 2017 that the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign shared in the costs, with the payments going to the “oppo” research firm, Fusion GPS, through the Democrats’ law firm, Perkins Coie.

That discovery helped ensnare another senior Justice Department official, Associate Attorney General Bruce Ohr, who talked with Steele during the campaign and had a post-election meeting with Fusion GPS co-founder Glenn Simpson. Recently, Simpson has acknowledged that Ohr’s wife, Nellie Ohr, was hired by Fusion GPS last year to investigate Trump.

Bruce Ohr has since been demoted and Strzok was quietly removed from the Russia-gate investigation last July although the reasons for these moves were not publicly explained at the time.

Still, the drive for “another Watergate” to oust an unpopular – and to many

insiders, unfit – President remains at the center of the thinking among the top mainstream news organizations as they have scrambled for Russia-gate “scoops” over the past year even at the cost of making serious reporting errors.

For instance, last Friday, CNN – and then CBS News and MSNBC – trumpeted an email supposedly sent from someone named Michael J. Erickson on Sept. 4, 2016, to Donald Trump Jr. that involved WikiLeaks offering the Trump campaign pre-publication access to purloined Democratic National Committee emails that WikiLeaks published on Sept. 13, nine days later.

Grasping for Confirmation

Since the Jan. 6 report alleged that WikiLeaks received the “hacked” emails from Russia – a claim that WikiLeaks and Russia deny – the story seemed to finally tie together the notion that the Trump campaign had at least indirectly colluded with Russia.

This new “evidence” spread like wildfire across social media. As The Intercept’s Glenn Greenwald wrote in an article critical of the media’s performance, some Russia-gate enthusiasts heralded the revelation with graphics of cannons booming and nukes exploding.

But the story soon collapsed when it turned out that the date on the email was actually Sept. 14, 2016, i.e., the day *after* WikiLeaks released the batch of DNC emails, not Sept. 4. It appeared that “Erickson” – whoever he was – had simply alerted the Trump campaign to the public existence of the WikiLeaks disclosure.

Greenwald noted, “So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all.”

Yet, despite the cascade of errors and grudging corrections, including some belated admissions that there was no “17-intelligence-agency consensus” on Russian “hacking” – The New York Times made a preemptive strike against the new documentary evidence that the Russia-gate investigation was riddled with conflicts of interest.

The Times’ lead editorial on Wednesday mocked reporters at Fox News for living in an “alternate universe” where the Russia-gate “investigation is ‘illegitimate and corrupt,’ or so says Gregg Jarrett, a legal analyst who appears regularly on [Sean] Hannity’s nightly exercise in presidential ego-stroking.”

Though briefly mentioning the situation with Strzok’s text messages, the Times offered no details or context for the concerns, instead just heaping ridicule on anyone who questions the Russia-gate narrative.

“To put it mildly, this is insane,” the Times declared. “The primary purpose of Mr. Mueller’s investigation is not to take down Mr. Trump. It’s to protect America’s national security and the integrity of its elections by determining whether a presidential campaign conspired with a foreign adversary to influence the 2016 election – a proposition that grows more plausible every day.”

The Times fumed that “roughly three-quarters of Republicans still refuse to accept that Russia interfered in the 2016 election – a fact that is glaringly obvious to everyone else, including the nation’s intelligence community.” (There we go again with the false suggestion of a consensus within the intelligence community.)

The Times also took to task Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, for seeking “a Special Counsel to investigate ALL THINGS 2016 – not just Trump and Russia.” The Times insisted that “None of these attacks or insinuations are grounded in good faith.”

But what are the Times editors so afraid of? As much as they try to insult and intimidate anyone who demands serious evidence about the Russia-gate allegations, why shouldn’t the American people be informed about how Washington insiders manipulate elite opinion in pursuit of reversing “mistaken” judgments by the unwashed masses?

Do the Times editors really believe in democracy – a process that historically has had its share of warts and mistakes – or are they just elitists who think they know best and turn away their noses from the smell of working-class people at Walmart?

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 Illegal Syrian Mission Creep

Even as the Islamic State’s “caliphate” in Syria collapses, the U.S. government is keeping about 2,000 soldiers in-country despite lacking any legal right to be there, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar discusses.

By Paul R. Pillar

The other day we learned that there are four times more U.S. troops in Syria than any earlier official figure had acknowledged. The discrepancy did not get much public attention, perhaps because the numbers are small compared to some other U.S. military deployments: about 2,000 troops in Syria, with the earlier official figure being 500.

The incomplete count evidently had omitted personnel on short-term assignments and some others performing sensitive missions. A Pentagon spokesman said that release of the newer, more complete figure is part of an effort by Secretary of Defense James Mattis to be more transparent.

Less transparent than the new data about numbers of U.S. troops is the reason any of those troops are staying in Syria. The one uncontested rationale for the deployment in Syria has been to combat the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which is an unconventional non-state actor but presented conventional sorts of military targets when it established a state-like entity occupying significant territory in Syria and Iraq.

The ISIS mini-state is now all but eliminated. Nonetheless, the U.S. military presence in Syria, although down from its peak strength, shows no sign of ending. Mattis has said that the United States “won’t just walk away” from its efforts in Syria.

Signs of Mission Creep

The United States is exhibiting mission creep in Syria, with new rationales being spun to replace the mission of armed combat against the ISIS caliphate. Underlying the mission creep are some familiar patterns of thinking that have been behind other U.S. military expeditions as well. Donald Trump did not originate these patterns but his administration has slid into them.

Mattis’s comment about not walking away from where the United States already has been involved points to one of those American habits of thought, which is to believe that the United States is best equipped, and should be most responsible, for setting right any troubled country in which the United States has had more than a passing interest. To believe this about Syria goes well beyond the mission of combating ISIS and gets into pacification and even some elements of nation-building.

Other patterns of thinking about the Syrian case entail amnesia about recent relevant experiences and the lessons that should have been drawn from them but evidently weren’t. American attitudes toward ISIS, the Syrian regime, and Syria’s Russian and Iranian allies are all involved.

The dominant American perspective toward counterterrorism, and thus toward ISIS,

has been a heavily militarized one inherent in the notion of a “war on terror.” Use of the military instrument has been appropriate insofar as ISIS, as a mini-state, presented military targets. But ISIS, which lives on as more of a clandestine movement and ideology, no longer presents many such targets. Non-military counterterrorist instruments are now relatively more important.

Too often forgotten is how much war itself, and specifically the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, was a boon to ISIS. Also too often forgotten is how much the collateral casualties and damage that are almost unavoidable byproducts of U.S. military action in complicated conflicts tend to boost rather than reduce anti-U.S. extremism, including extremism that takes the form of international terrorism.

‘Regime Change’ Dreams

One habitual thought about ISIS has been that Assad must be toppled if there is to be any hope of killing off ISIS. Max Abrahms and John Glaser catalog the many iterations, voiced over the past two years, of the theme that defeating ISIS would require defeating Assad. Today’s situation, with the ISIS caliphate extinguished while Assad remains ensconced in Damascus, demonstrates how erroneous that argument was.

Many who propounded the argument are among those now pushing for continuation and expansion of the U.S. military expedition in Syria, with no acknowledgment of how wrong was their earlier assessment. This demonstrates anew how little accountability there is for faulty policy analysis among the Washington chattering classes.

The dream of felling Assad does not die, even though with the help of his friends he does not appear to be going anywhere in the foreseeable future. Persistence of the dream involves more amnesia, in at least two respects. One is to forget the consequences of earlier U.S. or U.S.-backed efforts at regime change in the region. These include the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which gave birth to the group that we later came to know as ISIS, and the chaos-fomenting ouster of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

There also seems to be forgetfulness of how long the Assads – including the father Hafez, who put down internal opposition at least as brutally as his son Bashar – have been in power. Forty-seven years, to be exact. Anyone arguing that continuation of Bashar Assad in power is intolerable needs to answer the question “why now?” and to explain how the world and U.S. interests somehow have survived nearly a half century of the Assads.

As for Bashar Assad’s Russian and Iranian friends, the dominant American

perspective is the zero-sum assumption that any presence or influence of either Iran or Russia is *ipso facto* bad and contrary to U.S. interests. This perspective makes no effort to sort out the respects in which Russian or Iranian actions conflict with U.S. interests, parallel U.S. interests, or are irrelevant to those interests.

This absence of effort persists despite the glaring example (not just in Syria, but also in Iraq and beyond), of the fight against ISIS as a parallel interest. Joined to this habitual perspective is the also habitual use of the misleading vacuum metaphor, according to which not just U.S. involvement but physical and preferably military involvement to fill a space is needed to counter bad-by-definition Iranian or Russian influence in that same space.

These habits of thinking, taken together, close off an escape route from Syria. They imply no end to the U.S. military expedition there. They preclude declaring victory (that is, a military victory against ISIS) and going home. Vladimir Putin, more conscious than most American pundits are of the hazards of indefinitely being stuck in Syria, is doing that now.

Thus Syria is becoming one more place, like Afghanistan, in which the United States endlessly wages a war. Meanwhile the Russians will keep reminding everyone that they were there at the invitation of the incumbent government and the United States is not. The Turks will keep getting angry about U.S. tactical cooperation with Kurds. Sunni extremists will keep exploiting for propaganda and recruitment any damage done by the United States or its local clients. And the Pentagon may or may not tell us how many U.S. troops are actually there.

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

Silencing of Courageous Documentaries

Historically, documentaries have told important truth in powerful ways and often challenging powerful groupthinks, but such brave films are becoming an endangered species, explains John Pilger.

By John Pilger

I first understood the power of the documentary during the editing of my first

film, *The Quiet Mutiny*. In the commentary, I make reference to a chicken, which my crew and I encountered while on patrol with American soldiers in Vietnam.

“It must be a Vietcong chicken – a communist chicken,” said the sergeant. He wrote in his report: “enemy sighted.” The chicken moment seemed to underline the farce of the war – so I included it in the film. That may have been unwise.

The regulator of commercial television in Britain – then the Independent Television Authority or ITA – had demanded to see my script. What was my source for the political affiliation of the chicken? I was asked. Was it really a communist chicken, or could it have been a pro-American chicken?

Of course, this nonsense had a serious purpose; when *The Quiet Mutiny* was broadcast by ITV in 1970, the U.S. ambassador to Britain, Walter Annenberg, a personal friend of President Richard Nixon, complained to the ITA. He complained not about the chicken but about the whole film. “I intend to inform the White House,” the ambassador wrote. Gosh.

The Quiet Mutiny had revealed that the U.S. Army in Vietnam was tearing itself apart. There was open rebellion: drafted men were refusing orders and shooting their officers in the back or “fragging” them with grenades as they slept. None of this had been news. What it meant was that the war was lost; and the messenger was not appreciated.

The Director-General of the ITA was Sir Robert Fraser. He summoned Denis Foreman, then Director of Programmes at Granada TV, and went into a state of apoplexy. Spraying expletives, Sir Robert described me as a “dangerous subversive.”

What concerned the regulator and the ambassador was the *power* of a single documentary film: the power of its facts and witnesses: especially young soldiers speaking the truth and treated sympathetically by the film-maker.

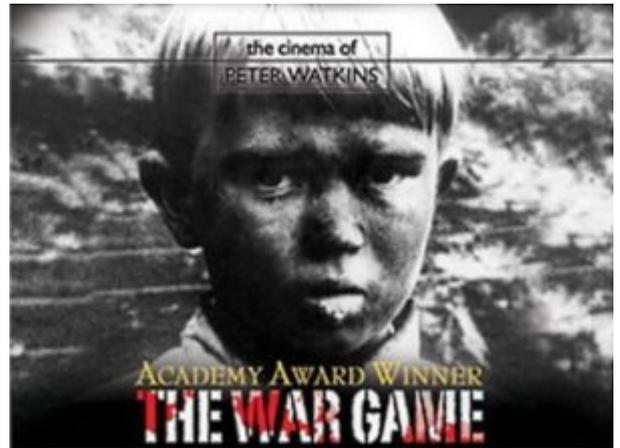
I was a newspaper journalist. I had never made a film before and I was indebted to Charles Denton, a renegade producer from the BBC, who taught me that facts and evidence told straight to the camera and to the audience could indeed be subversive.

This subversion of official lies *is* the power of documentary. I have now made 60 films and I believe there is nothing like this power in any other medium.

Nuclear Warning

In the 1960s, a brilliant young film-maker, Peter Watkins, made *The War Game* for the BBC. Watkins reconstructed the aftermath of a nuclear attack on London. *The*

War Game was banned.



“The effect of this film,” said the BBC, “has been judged to be too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting.”

The then chairman of the BBC’s Board of Governors was Lord Normanbrook, who had been Secretary to the Cabinet. He wrote to his successor in the Cabinet, Sir Burke Trend: “*The War Game* is not designed as propaganda: it is intended as a purely factual statement and is based on careful research into official material ... but the subject is alarming, and the showing of the film on television might have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent.”

In other words, the power of this documentary was such that it might alert people to the true horrors of nuclear war and cause them to question the very existence of nuclear weapons. The Cabinet papers show that the BBC secretly colluded with the government to ban Watkins’s film. The cover story was that the BBC had a responsibility to protect “the elderly living alone and people of limited mental intelligence.”

Most of the press swallowed this. The ban on *The War Game* ended the career of Peter Watkins in British television at the age of 30. This remarkable film-maker left the BBC and Britain, and angrily launched a worldwide campaign against censorship. Telling the truth, and dissenting from the *official* truth, can be hazardous for a documentary film-maker.

In 1988, Thames Television broadcast *Death on the Rock*, a documentary about the war in Northern Ireland. It was a risky and courageous venture. Censorship of the reporting of the so-called Irish Troubles was rife, and many of us in documentaries were actively discouraged from making films north of the border. If we tried, we were drawn into a quagmire of compliance.

The journalist Liz Curtis calculated that the BBC had banned, doctored or delayed some 50 major TV programs on Ireland. There were, of course, honorable

exceptions, such as John Ware

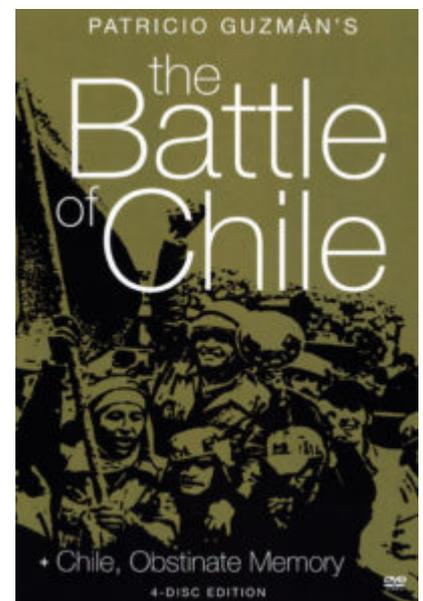
Roger Bolton, the producer of *Death on the Rock*, was another. *Death on the Rock* revealed that the British Government deployed SAS death squads overseas against the IRA, murdering four unarmed people in Gibraltar. A vicious smear campaign was mounted against the film, led by the government of Margaret Thatcher and the Murdoch press, notably the *Sunday Times*, edited by Andrew Neil.

It was the only documentary ever subjected to an official inquiry – and its facts were vindicated. Murdoch had to pay up for the defamation of one of the film's principal witnesses. But that wasn't the end of it. Thames Television, one of the most innovative broadcasters in the world, was eventually stripped of its franchise in the United Kingdom.

Did Prime Minister Thatcher exact her revenge on ITV and the film-makers, as she had done to the miners? We don't know. What we do know is that the power of this one documentary stood by the truth and, like *The War Game*, marked a high point in filmed journalism.

Artistic Heresy

I believe great documentaries exude an artistic heresy. They are difficult to categorize. They are not like great fiction. They are not like great feature movies. Yet, they can combine the sheer power of both.



The Battle of Chile: the fight of an unarmed people, is an epic documentary by Patricio Guzman. It is an extraordinary film: actually a trilogy of films. When it was released in the 1970s, the *New Yorker* asked: "How could a team of five people, some with no previous film experience, working with one Éclair camera, one Nagra sound-recorder, and a package of black and white film, produce a work of this magnitude?"

Guzman's documentary is about the overthrow of democracy in Chile in 1973 by fascists led by General Augusto Pinochet and directed by the CIA. Almost everything is filmed hand-held, on the shoulder. And remember this is a *film* camera, not video. You have to change the magazine every ten minutes, or the camera stops; and the slightest movement and change of light affects the image.

In the *Battle of Chile*, there is a scene at the funeral of a naval officer, loyal to President Salvador Allende, who was murdered by those plotting to destroy Allende's reformist government. The camera moves among the military faces: human totems with their medals and ribbons, their coiffed hair and opaque eyes. The sheer menace of the faces says you are watching the funeral of a whole society: of democracy itself.

There is a price to pay for filming so bravely. The cameraman, Jorge Muller, was arrested and taken to a torture camp, where he "disappeared" until his grave was found many years later. He was 27. I salute his memory.

In Britain, the pioneering work of John Grierson, Denis Mitchell, Norman Swallow, Richard Cawston and other film-makers in the early Twentieth Century crossed the great divide of class and presented another country. They dared put cameras and microphones in front of ordinary Britons and allowed them to talk in their own language.

John Grierson is said by some to have coined the term "documentary." "The drama is on your doorstep," he said in the 1920s, "wherever the slums are, wherever there is malnutrition, wherever there is exploitation and cruelty."

Speaking from Below

These early British film-makers believed that the documentary should speak from below, not from above: it should be the medium of people, not authority. In other words, it was the blood, sweat and tears of ordinary people that gave us the documentary.



Denis Mitchell was famous for his portraits of a working-class street. "Throughout my career," he said, "I have been absolutely astonished at the quality of people's strength and dignity."

When I read those words, I think of the survivors of Grenfell Tower, most of them still waiting to be re-housed, all of them still waiting for justice, as the cameras move on to the repetitive circus of a royal wedding.

The late David Munro and I made *Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia* in 1979. This film broke a silence about a country subjected to more than a decade of bombing and genocide, and its power involved millions of ordinary men, women and children in the rescue of a society on the other side of the world.

Even now, *Year Zero* puts the lie to the myth that the public doesn't care, or that those who do care eventually fall victim to something called "compassion fatigue." *Year Zero* was watched by an audience greater than the audience of the current, immensely popular British "reality" program *Bake Off*. It was shown on mainstream TV in more than 30 countries, but not in the United States, where PBS rejected it outright, fearful, according to an executive, of the reaction of the new Reagan administration.

In Britain and Australia, it was broadcast without advertising – the only time, to my knowledge, this has happened on commercial television. Following the British broadcast, more than 40 sacks of post arrived at ATV's offices in Birmingham, 26,000 first-class letters in the first post alone. Remember this was a time before email and Facebook.

In the letters was £1 million – most of it in small amounts from those who could least afford to give.

"This is for Cambodia," wrote a bus driver, enclosing his week's wages. Pensioners sent their pension. A single mother sent her savings of £50. People came to my home with toys and cash, and petitions for Thatcher and poems of indignation for Pol Pot and for his collaborator, President Richard Nixon, whose bombs had accelerated the fanatic's rise.

For the first time, the BBC supported an ITV film. The *Blue Peter* program asked children to "bring and buy" toys at Oxfam shops throughout the country. By Christmas, the children had raised the astonishing amount of £3,500,000.

Across the world, *Year Zero* raised more than \$55 million, mostly unsolicited, and which brought help directly to Cambodia: medicines, vaccines and the installation of an entire clothing factory that allowed people to throw away the black uniforms they had been forced to wear by Pol Pot. It was as if the audience had ceased to be onlookers and had become participants.

Murrow's Message

Something similar happened in the United States when CBS Television broadcast

Edward R. Murrow's film, *Harvest of Shame*, in 1960. This was the first time that many middle-class Americans glimpsed the scale of poverty in their midst.

Harvest of Shame is the story of migrant agricultural workers who were treated little better than slaves. Today, their struggle has such resonance as migrants and refugees fight for work and safety in foreign places. What seems extraordinary is that the children and grandchildren of some of the people in this film will be bearing the brunt of the abuse and strictures of President Trump.

In the United States today, there is no equivalent of Edward R. Murrow. His eloquent, unflinching kind of American journalism has been abolished in the so-called mainstream and has taken refuge in the Internet.

Britain remains one of the few countries where documentaries are still shown on mainstream television in the hours when most people are still awake. But documentaries that go against the received wisdom are becoming an endangered species, at the very time we need them perhaps more than ever.

In survey after survey, when people are asked what they would like more of on television, they say documentaries. I don't believe they mean a type of current affairs program that is a platform for politicians and "experts" who affect a specious balance between great power and its victims. Observational documentaries are popular; but films about airports and motorway police do not make sense of the world. They entertain.

David Attenborough's brilliant programs on the natural world are making sense of climate change – belatedly. The BBC's Panorama is making sense of Britain's secret support of jihadism in Syria – belatedly. But why is Trump setting fire to the Middle East? Why is the West edging closer to war with Russia and China?

Mark the words of the narrator in Peter Watkins's *The War Game*: "On almost the entire subject of nuclear weapons, there is now practically total silence in the press, and on TV. There is hope in any unresolved or unpredictable situation. But is there real hope to be found in this silence?"

In 2017, that silence has returned. It is not news that the safeguards on nuclear weapons have been quietly removed and that the United States is now spending \$46 million per hour on nuclear weapons: that's \$46 million every hour, 24 hours a day, every day. Who knows that?

The Coming War on China, which I completed last year, has been broadcast in the United Kingdom but not in the United States – where 90 per cent of the population cannot name or locate the capital of North Korea or explain why Trump wants to destroy it. China is next door to North Korea.

According to one “progressive” film distributor in the U.S., the American people are interested only in what she calls “character-driven” documentaries. This is code for a “look at me” consumerist cult that now consumes and intimidates and exploits so much of our popular culture, while turning away film-makers from a subject as urgent as any in modern times.

“When the truth is replaced by silence,” wrote the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “the silence is a lie.”

Whenever young documentary film-makers ask me how they can “make a difference,” I reply that it is really quite simple. They need to break the silence.

This is an edited version of an address John Pilger gave at the British Library on Dec. 9 as part of a retrospective festival, “The Power of the Documentary,” held to mark the Library’s acquisition of Pilger’s written archive. www.johnpilger.com

North Korea’s Understandable Fears

By escalating threatening rhetoric – and staging provocative military maneuvers – President Trump may believe he can intimidate North Korea into capitulation but history would tell you something else, writes David William Pear.

By David William Pear

Like Pavlov’s dog, the mainstream media slobbers predicable reactions every time North Korea launches another test missile. Listening to the blather one would think that once Kim Jong Un has a missile capable of reaching the U.S., he is going to use it in an unprovoked nuclear attack on the U.S. mainland killing millions of Americans.

However, for Kim to attack the U.S., he would have to be insane, paranoid, and suicidal. Top officials in the U.S. intelligence agencies say he is not. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats has said publicly that Kim is acting very rationally; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says that Kim is “not insane”; the CIA deputy director of the Korea Mission Center, Yong Suk Lee, says that Kim is not suicidal, either.

So we can rest fairly assured that Kim Jong Un is highly unlikely to wake up one morning and nuke America because he can. According to Yong, Kim “wants to rule

for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed.”[[CNN, October 6, 2017](#)]. Everyone in the mainstream media knows this or should.

And, North Korea has long had more reasons to fear the U.S. than vice versa. North Korea is not an existential threat to the U.S. national security; but the opposite is not the case – and the U.S. government is not shy about reminding North Korea of that fact. The U.S. regularly practices nuclear attacks on North Korea by air, land and sea, which draw the predictable response from Kim.

Yet, North Korea has offered to stop testing nuclear bombs, if the U.S. would stop playing nuclear war games on its border [[The Guardian](#)]. The reality is that the U.S. has been threatening North Korea for over 70 years.

While the U.S. mainstream media excites the U.S. public with warnings about “crazy” Kim Jong Un, what should frighten the American people is the long history of U.S. crazies who seriously contemplated and/or implicitly threatened to start a nuclear war with a variety of countries. President Trump is not the first president who cannot be trusted with the nuclear button. It is only by sheer luck that the world has escaped a nuclear war or a cataclysmic nuclear accident. There have been many close calls, and one day there may be one too many.

The U.S. keeps gambling with nuclear roulette, threatening North Korea, Iran, Russia, and the enemy *du jour*. One of the favorite U.S. verbal threats is to say that “all options are on the table,” which adversaries understand to include the nuclear option. The U.S. has even used nuclear bombs twice against civilian populations in 1945, and according to many historians unnecessarily, because Japan had already offered to surrender. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese died mostly so that President Harry Truman could impress Soviet leader Josef Stalin with a terrifying show of U.S. military might.

During the Korean War (1950 to 1953). President Truman publicly threatened to use the atomic bomb, and the military planned, practiced and shipped nuclear bombs to Asia to be dropped on North Korea. General Douglas MacArthur wanted to use 26 nuclear bombs and start a war with China, too [[History News Network](#)].

Truman gave General Matthew Ridgeway pre-authorization to use nuclear bombs, even after MacArthur was relieved of his command. Instead, the [U.S. chose to destroy North Korea](#) with conventional bombs and napalm, killing an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of the population.

The Korean War is called the “Forgotten War” for a number of reasons, including that the U.S. military suffered what amounted to a humiliating defeat with some 37,000 American soldiers killed while they were being used essentially as

negotiating chips. They “died for a tie,” where to draw the Military Demarcation Line between the North and South; and South Korea, too, was largely “destroyed to save it” from communism.

The South Koreans deserve a lot of credit for rebuilding a modern highly advanced society in all categories such as education, healthcare, technology, and their standard of living. But contrary to propaganda mythology, they did not develop under capitalist free-trade and democracy. The South Korean “miracle on the Han River” was achieved under a U.S.-backed military dictatorship, a highly planned economy, and billions of dollars from U.S. aid, loans and direct investment. [“Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism”, by Ha-Joon Chang].

Very Good Reasons

So, Kim Jong Un has very good reasons to fear U.S. threats. He knows that the U.S. is ruthless enough to kill millions of his people and destroy his country (along with gruesomely dispatching its leaders), much like the U.S. did in Iraq and Libya.

Sen. John McCain’s daughter Meghan McCain said on Fox News that the U.S. should assassinate the “Crazy Fat Kid”. Words like that along with Trump’s insults (“Little Rocket Man”), threats and nuclear war games are sure to draw bombastic verbal reactions by Kim Jong Un and cause him to redouble his nuclear and missile programs. [The Nation].

While the U.S. constantly talks about a denuclearized Korean peninsula, it is the U.S. that first nuclearized it, starting with President Harry Truman’s threats in 1951. Then in July 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower unilaterally withdrew from section 13(d) of the 1953 Armistice Agreement, which made the introduction of any new weapon systems in the Korean peninsula forbidden to both sides. The U.S. broke the promise so that it could “equip U.S. forces in Korea with modern weapons;” dual capability (nuclear-conventional) weapons, such as the Honest John and the 280 mm. cannon, i.e. tactical nuclear weapons [National Security Council Report].

All during the rest of the Cold War the U.S. stationed at least 950 nuclear weapons in South Korea. The U.S. may have withdrawn its nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991 as it says, but it still has plenty in Guam and elsewhere that it uses to constantly threaten North Korea with a nuclear attack.

While the U.S. mainstream media ponders how to get North Korea to sit down at the negotiating table, it is the U.S. that refuses to talk. North Korea has often offered to sign a permanent peace treaty and non-aggression agreement, but

the U.S. has consistently rebuffed the offers. The State Department has repeatedly said in news conferences that it will not negotiate with North Korea unless North Korean officials meet unspecified preconditions first [[U.S. Department of State](#)]. What is puzzling is what the preconditions are, and how to get the U.S. to sit down at the table. Yet, the U.S. and its media constantly say it is North Korea that refuses to talk.

Understandable Paranoia

Unless there is a diplomatic solution, Kim Jong Un is rationally following in his father's footsteps by developing a credible nuclear deterrent against threatened U.S. aggression.

In 2000, George W. Bush scoffed at President Clinton's nuclear agreement with North Korea, and then, as President in 2002, Bush intensified threats with his "Axis of Evil" speech, which put North Korea on an enemies list with Iraq and Iran. Bush followed that speech by invading Iraq in 2003 with "Shock and Awe," leaving the cradle of human civilization in ruins and later hanging Saddam Hussein.

Bush did not plan to stop with Iraq. Retired Gen. Wesley Clark says he was told at the Pentagon that Bush planned to invade seven countries in five years: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran [[YouTube](#)].

It is the U.S. that has been paranoid, unpredictable and insane during the Twenty-first Century. And the problem did not start with Trump. After the initial U.S. invasion of Iraq, a smug-looking Bush got out of the passenger seat of a fighter jet that the pilot had landed on the USS Abraham Lincoln. He strutted over to the microphone in his flight suit and gave a premature "Mission Accomplished" speech.

[Lisa Schiffren gushed](#) in the Wall Street Journal that Bush's performance made him look hot and sexy in his flight suit, adding with admiration that Bush is "credible as a Commander in Chief." The mainstream media has been the cheerleader for all of the Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Obama, Clinton and Kerry wars. The media is now inciting the U.S. public with propaganda for war with North Korea, Iran and Russia.

What can be said of Trump is that he seems to take pride in acting even crazier than his predecessors. So, Kim Jong Un is not paranoid to be fearful of what the U.S. might do and he has been acting predictably. The U.S. has left him little choice other than to defend his country with the deterrent of nuclear weapons.

As part of the "Axis of Evil" strategy, President George W. Bush sabotaged the negotiated nuclear agreement that the U.S. and North Korea had made under

President Bill Clinton in the 1990s. That is what precipitated North Korea withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and resuming its nuclear program.

Lessons Learned

Other countries tried submissive tactics to mollify Washington. For instance, in 2003, Bush persuaded Libya's Muammar Gaddafi to abandon his nuclear program. At the time, Bush encouraged North Korea to follow suit, saying "we want to have lessons learned, because we want Libya to be a model for other countries" to unilaterally disarm.

So, North Korea was paying close attention in 2011 when President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton backed a military campaign that exploited Libya's defenselessness, destroyed the country, and led to Gaddafi's torture-murder. In a TV interview, Clinton gloated "we came, we saw, he died!, hahaha!"

The lesson of Libya, according to Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, is that "unfortunately, if you have nukes, never give them up – if you don't have them, get them."

Based on that history, the North Koreans are not going to trust a U.S. agreement again. They will trust in themselves, as they did when Kim's grandfather Kim Il-sung led the guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. Korea's historical philosophy is based on the principle of self-sufficiency and resistance against foreign domination, especially in the North.

The North Koreans now call their historical philosophy "Juche." North Korea is determined to follow the principle of Juche to the "realization of independence in politics, self-sufficiency in the economy and self-reliance in national defence." [official DPRK Juche link].

Now, President Trump has slammed the door shut on negotiations with Kim Jong Un by threatening to totally destroy North Korea with "fire and fury" and insulting him as the "Little Rocket Man."

Kim takes it seriously when the U.S. repeatedly threatens to destroy his country. Trump's insults also caused Kim to "lose face (kibun)," a very serious affront in Korean culture. The natural reaction for a Korean who has been disrespected is to become infuriated. It is predictable, and the U.S. knows it.

U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley's latest outburst that "if war comes, the North Korean regime will be utterly destroyed" is a further provocation, which the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called "a really bloodthirsty tirade."

But Lavrov added that “Moscow has been closely working with the U.S. on the North Korean issue, with several meetings being held between the countries’ diplomats in the Russian capital, and other venues.”

Vast Bloodshed

In the late Twentieth and early Twentieth-first centuries, U.S. wars and embargoes have killed millions of people around the planet, according to some estimates. Besides deploying devastating high-tech military weapons, the U.S. has interdicted food and medical supplies as part of total-war concepts.

As President Bill Clinton’s U.N. Ambassador (and later Secretary of State) Madeleine Albright once said, 500,000 dead children in Iraq – victims of U.S. sanctions – were “worth it” to punish the Iraqi government’s behavior. That is what the U.S. sanctions are now doing to North Korea. But as Russian President Vladimir Putin said, “North Korea will ‘eat grass’ before giving up nukes.”

The Koreans know the history of U.S. war-making well. The U.S. first contact with Korea in the Nineteenth Century involved a U.S. military expedition in support of a U.S. trade mission that challenged Korea’s isolation, self-sufficiency and refusal to trade. The appearance of U.S. warships sparked a conflict that led to the Americans killing some 243 Koreans at the cost of three American lives. When Japan colonized and annexed Korea in 1910, the Western colonial powers including the U.S. cheered approval.

All Korea has ever wanted was to be left alone. During its 4,000-year history, Korea has not been an aggressive expansionist country. To the contrary, Korea has been invaded by China, Mongolia, Japan, Russia and the U.S. Historically, Korea has resisted contact with foreigners because foreigners had always brought invasions.

Like his Korean ancestors, Kim Jong Un wants North Korea to be left alone for the Korean people to determine their own future.

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Trump, N. Korea & the Phony ‘Terror

List'

Seeing what happened to the leaders of Iraq and Libya, North Korea's Kim Jong Un won't surrender his nuclear bombs – and getting put on the U.S. "terrorism list" won't change that, as Independent Institute's Ivan Eland explains.

By Ivan Eland

In an effort to further tighten the screws on North Korea in what is likely to be another failed U.S. attempt to convince North Korea to give up its nuclear program, President Trump put that country back on its list of countries sponsoring terrorism. North Korea will join Iran, Sudan and Syria on the list. In response, North Korea has conducted another ballistic missile test.

Originally, some justification existed for putting North Korea on this list in 1988. In 1987, according to a North Korean agent, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un's father and predecessor as North Korean leader, directed that a bomb be placed on a South Korean passenger jet, which resulted in the deaths of 115 civilians. Although for years after that incident, North Korea remained a quirky, despotic country trying to get nuclear weapons, it did not commit any acts that objectively could be called terrorism, if that term is used to describe deliberate attacks on civilians to attempt to scare them into pressuring their government for changes in policy. Showing that the U.S. terrorism list has a large political element to it, North Korea was only removed about 20 years later when President George W. Bush was trying to save a deal with North Korea that would have stopped its nuclear program—something that had nothing to do with whether North Korea was committing or sponsoring acts of terrorism.

Of course, President Trump's re-imposing the moniker of "state sponsor of terrorism" on North Korea is also political. The move is designed to increase only symbolic pressure against a regime that is unlikely to give up its nuclear program, which among other things, is designed to deter the United States from ousting Kim Jong-un from power – just as the U.S. has done with the leaders of non-nuclear nations, such as Haiti, Panama, Serbia, Iraq, and Libya.

Although North Korea certainly gets accused of mischief making – shelling a South Korean island, sinking a South Korean Navy vessel, conducting a cyber attack on Sony Pictures, and assassinating a member of the North Korean "royal family" who could someday have taken Kim Jong-un's job – none of these includes the mass slaughter of civilians for political purposes.

Politicized List

Castros' Cuba also remained on the list of state sponsors of terrorism long after it stopped sponsoring such acts, simply because the United States did not like the Cuban government and wanted to keep maximum pressure on it. Laudably, President Obama, as part of his warming of relations with Cuba, finally took that country off the list in 2015.

In addition, the other countries remaining – Iran, Syria, and Sudan – and many groups on the terrorism list don't really focus their attacks on the United States. However, continuing its expensive role as the world's policeman, despite having a national debt north of \$20 trillion, the United States insists on making new enemies worldwide by calling out groups and nations that don't focus their attacks on the United States – that is, fighting other countries' battles for them.

And the expanding war on terrorism is not just to be found on paper. For example, to show he is tougher than Barack Obama, President Trump has unilaterally approved new authorities to attack miscreants across the globe. Obama had enlarged George W. Bush's illegal and unending wars on terror in the developing world, and Trump is now trying to one-up Obama by further expanding these unconstitutional authorities. For example, in Somalia, the United States is escalating the attacks on the Islamist Shabab group.

Even in Afghanistan, in which the Congress passed a post-9/11 authority for the use of military force (AUMF), the Trump administration has expanded the authorities to attack opium labs that fund the militant Taliban insurgency. Let's hope this war on narcotics goes better than the colossal waste of taxpayer dollars that the war on drugs in Latin America has become. And all of this escalation despite terrorism experts' constant refrain that it difficult to kill your way out of an insurgency.

The war on terror failed long ago during the George W. Bush administration; expanding it both on paper and in the field may look tough, but it's just doubling down on a dubiously counterproductive policy.

Ivan Eland is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at the Independent Institute. [This article also appeared as a blog post at HuffingtonPost and at <http://www.independent.org/newsroom/article.asp?id=9219>]

Trump's Lethal Decision on Jerusalem

President Trump has won praise from Christian Zionists and many staunch supporters of Israel for declaring Jerusalem Israel's capital, but critics say it only makes peace a more distant goal, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Protests have broken out across the Middle East against President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital – and Western critics complain that the move adds one more brick in the wall against the prospects for peace.

Professor Francis Boyle, who teaches international law at the University of Illinois College of Law and served as a long-time legal adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), calls Trump's announcement a "symbolic but still critical step in Israeli designs to control not just Jerusalem, but all of historic Palestine." I spoke with Boyle on Dec. 6.

Dennis Bernstein: What was your initial response to the announcement by President Trump that the United States will be moving its embassy to Jerusalem?

Francis Boyle: It is always a sad day when you know that people are going to die. It is a defeat for the human spirit. In the last intifada [September 2000-February 2005], about 3,000 Palestinians died and 1,000 Israelis. I don't know what will happen this time. The Palestinians have called for "three days of rage." Trump could very well set off a third intifada here.

Dennis Bernstein: Trump says this doesn't get in the way of the US being an honest broker, that the vision is for peace. From the legal perspective, how do you see this?

Francis Boyle: First of all, the United States has never been an honest broker here. I was legal advisor to the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace Negotiations from 1991, when they began, to the signing of Oslo. It was very clear that the United States was always serving as Israel's lawyer. You had Miller, Ross, and Kurtzer, all three American Jews, two of them orthodox.

The Palestinians had to go hat-in-hand to present their case to American Jews. Nothing has changed: We now have Kushner, Greenblatt and Friedman, all three of whom are orthodox Jews. The whole thing has been preposterous from the beginning. We have always been in favor of Israel, using lies, threats and intimidation to force the Palestinians to accept whatever the Israelis are

giving them. That is international diplomacy for you, conducted by the United States, not only in the Middle East but all over the world.

Dennis Bernstein: Would you say that what is going on here is not just Israel trying to control Jerusalem but all of Palestine?

Francis Boyle: That has always been Israel's policy. I had a conversation with the chair of the Palestinian Delegation to the Middle East peace negotiations. He told me that the Zionists have not changed their position since the Basel Convention of 1897. They want all of Palestine. What is happening now in Jerusalem is a step in that direction.

If you look at the recently leaked so-called peace plan that was presented to [Palestinian President Mahmoud] Abbas in Saudi Arabia, he was basically given an ultimatum to either accept some tiny bantustan or forget it. It is very clear that they want all of Palestine, all of the West Bank, all of Jerusalem. They want the Golan Heights and maybe even some more of Syria.

Dennis Bernstein: We have revelations now that Jared Kushner, our chief peace negotiator in the Middle East, failed to disclose in ethics filings his role as director of a family foundation that funded Israeli settlements. Do you think that is a problem?

Francis Boyle: Of course, because basically he is aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity in Palestine.

Dennis Bernstein: Is the United States participating in illegal actions in Israel, or doesn't it matter anymore?

Francis Boyle: For most of the Arab and Muslim world, it matters. Here in the United States, apart from the BDS movement, we have basically thrown in our lot with the Israeli government. Congress has been bought and paid for by the Israel lobby. During his campaign, Trump made explicit promises in order to secure Jewish funding and votes.

We arm, equip, supply and train Israel. What is going on in Gaza right now is a form of genocide. They are being strangled to death. The 1948 Genocide Convention, to which both Israel and the United States are parties, says that "deliberately inflicting on a people conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part" is genocide. That is exactly what is going on in Gaza today.

Dennis Bernstein: How would you assess the situation now? Is a two-state solution at all viable?

Francis Boyle: That is for the Palestinians to decide. Their right of self determination is at stake here. As of today, their official position is two states with their capital in East Jerusalem. There have been hints that they might go back to the one-state solution, which was their position before the Palestinian Declaration of Independence of December 15, 1988, when they officially accepted a two-state solution. Since then they have gotten nothing. Every day Israel just steals more land and drives out more Palestinians.

Dennis Bernstein: Are there any options for the Palestinians in the international arena, for example, at the United Nations?

Francis Boyle: I have advised them to invoke the "Uniting for Peace" resolution adopted by the general assembly in 1950, so that they can be admitted to the UN General Assembly as a full-fledged UN member state, recognizing their capital as East Jerusalem. And, as you know, after Palestine became a UN observer state, you and I discussed the concept of a "legal intifada" that the Palestinians could pursue.

My advice to the Palestinians is a full-court press in all specialized United Nations agencies and affiliated organizations, using all available legal mechanisms. This would include suing Israel at the International Court of Justice, which I have offered to do for them. And of course they have filed a complaint against Israel for war crimes and crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court. According to press reports, they are meeting right now to decide what to do and President Abbas will soon be addressing the Palestinian people.

Dennis Bernstein: I suppose it is important to emphasize the fact that this could turn very violent.

Francis Boyle: I am afraid so. This could turn into the third intifada. The First Intifada, which took place in 1987, was spontaneous. The Second Intifada [September 2000-February 2005] was provoked when Ariel Sharon went to the Al-Aqsa mosque with a couple hundred soldiers. Eventually, about 3,000 Palestinians lost their lives as a result.

Now we have Trump provoking the situation. His people, including Bannon and Flynn, know exactly what they are doing. They believe in Sam Huntington's concept of "the clash of civilizations." They truly believe that they are leading a crusade against the Muslim world. This is being done very deliberately.

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

Russia-gate's Litany of Corrections

Exclusive: As much as the U.S. mainstream media insists that the Russia-gate scandal is growing, what is undeniably growing is the list of major corrections that news outlets have been forced to issue, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The U.S. mainstream media's year-long hysteria over Russia's alleged role in the election of Donald Trump has obliterated normal reporting standards leading to a rash of journalistic embarrassments that have both disgraced the profession and energized Trump's backers over new grievances about the MSM's "fake news."



Misguided groupthink is always a danger when key elements of the Washington establishment and the major news media share the same belief – whether that is Iraq's supposed possession of WMD or the need to bring down some foreign or domestic leader unpopular with the elites.

Yet, we have rarely witnessed such a cascading collapse of journalistic principles as has occurred around the Russia-gate "scandal." It is hard to keep track of all the corrections or to take note of all the dead ends that the investigation keeps finding.

But anyone who dares note the errors, the inconsistencies or the illogical claims is either dismissed as a "Kremlin stooge" or a "Trump enabler." The national Democrats and the mainstream media seem determined to keep hurtling down the Russia-gate roadway assuming that the evidentiary barriers ahead will magically disappear at some point and the path to Trump's impeachment will be clear.

On Friday, the rush to finally prove the Russia-gate narrative led CNN – and then CBS News and MSNBC – to trumpet an email supposedly sent from someone named Michael J. Erickson on Sept. 4, 2016, to Donald Trump Jr. that involved

WikiLeaks offering the Trump campaign pre-publication access to purloined Democratic National Committee emails that WikiLeaks published on Sept. 13, nine days later.

With CNN finally tying together the CIA's unproven claim that WikiLeaks collaborates with Russia and the equally unproven claim that Russian intelligence "hacked" the Democratic emails, CNN drew the noose more tightly around the Trump campaign for "colluding" with Russia.

After having congressional reporter Manu Raju lay out the supposed facts of the scoop, CNN turned to a panel of legal experts to pontificate about the crimes that the Trump campaign may have committed now that the "evidence" proving Russia-gate was finally coming together.

Not surprisingly the arrival of this long-awaited "proof" of Russian "collusion" exploded across social media. As *The Intercept's* Glenn Greenwald noted in an article critical of the media's performance, some Russia-gate enthusiasts heralded the CNN revelation with graphics of cannons booming and nukes exploding.

The problem, however, was that CNN and other news outlets that jumped on the story misreported the date of the email; it was Sept. 14, 2016, i.e., the day *after* WikiLeaks released the batch of DNC emails, not Sept. 4. In other words, it appeared that "Erickson" – whoever he was – was simply alerting the Trump campaign to the WikiLeaks disclosure.

CNN later issued a quiet correction to its inflammatory report – and not surprisingly people close to Trump cited the false claim as yet another example of "fake news" being spread by the mainstream media, which has put itself at the forefront of the anti-Trump Resistance over the past year.

But this sloppy journalism – compounded by CNN's rush to put the "Sept. 4 email" in some criminal context and with CBS and MSNBC panting close behind – was not a stand-alone screw-up. A week earlier, ABC News made a similar mistake in claiming that candidate Donald Trump instructed Michael Flynn to contact Russian officials during the campaign, when Trump actually made the request after the election when Flynn was national security adviser-designate, a thoroughly normal move for a President-elect to make. That botched story led ABC News to suspend veteran investigative reporter Brian Ross.

Another inaccurate report from Bloomberg News, *The Wall Street Journal* and other news outlets – that Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller had subpoenaed Deutsche Bank records of President Trump and his family – was denied by Trump's lawyer and later led to more corrections. The error apparently was that the bank

records were not those of Trump and his family but possibly other associates.

A Pattern of Bias

But it wasn't just a bad week for American mainstream journalism. The string of errors followed a pattern of earlier false and misleading reporting and other violations of journalistic standards, a sorry record that has been the hallmark of the Russia-gate "scandal." Many stories have stirred national outrage toward nuclear-armed Russia before petering out as either false or wildly exaggerated. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Russia-gate Jumps the Shark.](#)"]

As Greenwald noted, "So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all."

The phenomenon began in the weeks after Trump's shocking victory over Hillary Clinton as Democrats and the mainstream media looked for people to blame for the defeat of their much-preferred candidate.

So, on Thanksgiving Day, just weeks after the election, The Washington Post published a front-page story based on an anonymous group called PropOrNot accusing 200 Web sites of acting as propaganda agents for Russia. The list included some of the Internet's leading independent news sources, including Consortiumnews, but the Post did not bother to contact the slandered Web sites nor to dissect the dubious methodology of the unnamed accusers.

Apparently, the "crime" of the Web sites was to show skepticism toward the State Department's claims about Syria and Ukraine. In conflating a few isolated cases of "fake news" in which people fabricated stories for political or profitable ends with serious dissent regarding the demonizing of Russia and its allies, the Post was laying down a marker that failure to get in line behind the U.S. government's propaganda on these and other topics would get you labeled a "Kremlin tool."

As the Russia-gate hysteria built in the run-up to Trump's inauguration during the final weeks of the Obama administration, the Post also jumped on a claim from the Department of Homeland Security that Russian hackers had penetrated into the nation's electrical grid through Vermont's Burlington Electric.

As journalist Gareth Porter noted, "The Post failed to follow the most basic rule of journalism, relying on its DHS source instead of checking with the Burlington Electric Department first. The result was the Post's sensational Dec. 30 story under the headline 'Russian hackers penetrated U.S. electricity grid through a utility in Vermont, U.S. officials say.' ...

"The electric company quickly issued a firm denial that the computer in question

was connected to the power grid. The Post was forced to retract, in effect, its claim that the electricity grid had been hacked by the Russians. But it stuck by its story that the utility had been the victim of a Russian hack for another three days before admitting that no such evidence of a hack existed.”

The Original Sin

In other cases, major news outlets, such as The New York Times, reported dubious Russia-gate claims from U.S. intelligence agencies as flat fact, rather than unproven allegations that remain in serious dispute. The Times and others reported Russian “hacking” of Democratic emails as true even though WikiLeaks denied getting the material from the Russians and the Russians denied providing it.

For months into 2017, in dismissing or ignoring those denials, the U.S. mainstream media reported routinely that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the conclusion that Russia was behind the disclosure of Democratic emails as part of a plot initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin to help elect Trump. Anyone who dared question this supposed collective judgment of all the U.S. intelligence agencies risked being called a “conspiracy theorist” or worse.

But the “consensus” claim was never true. Such a consensus judgment would have called for a comprehensive National Intelligence Estimate, which was never commissioned on the Russian “hacking” issue. Instead there was something called an “Intelligence Community Assessment” on Jan. 6 that – according to testimony by President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in May 2017 – was put together by “hand-picked” analysts from only three agencies: the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

Even after Clapper’s testimony, the “consensus” canard continued to circulate. For instance, in The New York Times’ White House Memo of June 25, correspondent Maggie Haberman mocked Trump for “still refus[ing] to acknowledge a basic fact agreed upon by 17 American intelligence agencies that he now oversees: Russia orchestrated the attacks, and did it to help get him elected.”

Finally, the Times ran a correction appended to that article. The Associated Press ran a similar “clarification” applied to some of its fallacious reporting which used the “17-intelligence-agencies” meme.

After the correction, however, the Times simply shifted to other deceptive wording to continue suggesting that U.S. intelligence agencies were in accord on Russian “hacking.” Other times, the Times just asserted the claim of Russian email hacking as flat fact. All of this was quite unprofessional, since the Jan.

6 “assessment” itself stated that it was not asserting Russian “hacking” as fact, explaining: “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact.”

Even worse than the Times, the “fact-checking” site Politifact, which is part of Google’s First Draft Coalition for deciding what the search engine’s algorithms will promote as true and what information will be disappeared as false, simply decided to tough it out and continued insisting that the false “consensus” claim was true.

When actual experts, such as former National Security Agency technical director William Binney, sought to apply scientific analysis to the core claim about Russian “hacking,” they reached the unpopular conclusion that the one known download speed of a supposed “hack” was not possible over the Internet but closely matched what would occur via a USB download, i.e., from someone with direct access to the Democratic National Committee’s computers using a thumb drive. In other words, the emails more likely came from a DNC insider, not an external “hack” from the Russians or anyone else.

You might have thought that the U.S. news media would have welcomed Binney’s discovery. However, instead he was either ignored or mocked as a “conspiracy theorist.” The near-religious belief in the certainty of the Russian “hack” was not to be mocked or doubted.

‘Hand-picked’ Trouble

In recent days, former DNI Clapper’s reference to “hand-picked” analysts for the Jan. 6 report has also taken on a more troubling odor, since questions have been raised about the objectivity of the Russia-gate investigators and – as any intelligence expert will tell you – if you “hand-pick” analysts known for their personal biases, you are hand-picking the conclusion, a process that became known during the Reagan administration as “politicizing intelligence.”

Though little is known about exactly who was “hand-picked” by President Obama’s intelligence chiefs to assess the Russian “hacking” suspicions, Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller has been forced to reassign Peter Strzok, one of the top FBI investigators who worked on both the Hillary Clinton email-server case and the Trump-Russia inquiry, after it was discovered that he exchanged anti-Trump and pro-Clinton text messages with a lawyer who also works at the FBI.

Last week, Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee sought answers from new FBI Director Christopher Wren about Strzok’s role in clearing Hillary Clinton of criminal wrongdoing in her use of a private unsecured email server to handle

official State Department communications while Secretary of State. They also wanted to know what role in the Russia-gate probe was played by a Democratic-funded "opposition research" report from ex-British intelligence officer Christopher Steele, which included unverified hearsay claims by unnamed Russians about Trump.

Wren avoided direct answers by citing an ongoing Inspector General's review and Mueller's criminal investigation, but Republicans expressed displeasure at this evasiveness.

The Republican questions prompted E.J. Dionne Jr., a liberal columnist at The Washington Post, to publish a spirited attack on the GOP committee members, accusing them of McCarthyistic tactics in questioning the FBI's integrity.

Dionne's straw man was to postulate that Republicans – because of this discovery of anti-Trump bias – would discount evidence that proves Trump's collusion with Russia: "if Strzok played some role in developing [the] material. ... Trump's allies want us to say: Too bad the president lied or broke the law or that Russia tried to tilt our election. This FBI guy sending anti-Trump texts is far more important, so let's just forget the whole thing. Really?"

But the point is that no such evidence of Russian collusion has been presented and to speculate how people might react if such evidence is discovered is itself McCarthyistic, suggesting guilt based on hypotheticals, not proof. Whatever one thinks of Trump, it is troubling for Dionne or anyone to imply treasonous activities based on speculation. That is the sort of journalistic malfeasance that has contributed to the string of professional abuses that pervades Russia-gate.

What we are witnessing is such an intense desire by mainstream journalists to get credit for helping oust Trump from office that they have forgotten that journalism's deal with the public should be to treat everyone fairly, even if you personally disdain the subject of your reporting.

Journalists are always going to get criticized when they dig up information that puts some politician or public figure in a negative light, but that's why it's especially important for journalists to strive for genuine fairness and not act as if journalism is just another cover for partisan hatchetmen.

The loss of faith among large swaths of Americans in the professionalism of journalists will ultimately do severe harm to the democratic process by transforming information into just one more ideological weapon. Some would say that the damage has already been done.

It was, if you recall, the U.S. mainstream media that started the controversy

over “fake news,” expanding the concept from the few low-lives who make up stories for fun and profit into a smear against anyone who expressed skepticism toward State Department narratives on foreign conflicts. That was the point of The Washington Post’s PropOrNot story.

But now many of these same mainstream outlets are livid when Trump and his backers throw the same “fake news” epithet back at the major media. The sad truth is that The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, MSNBC and other leading news organizations that have let their hatred of Trump blind them from their professional responsibilities have made Trump’s job easy.

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](#)).

National Democrats Resist Reforms

Still refusing to face why Donald Trump and the Republicans won in 2016, the national Democratic Party rebuffs proposals from progressives to make the party more democratic and less corporate-dominated, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

With the Democratic Party’s “Unity Reform Commission” now history, major political forces are entering a new stage of contention over the future of the party. Seven months after the commission’s first meeting – and nine months after Hillary Clinton backer Tom Perez won a close election over Bernie Sanders supporter Keith Ellison to become chair of the Democratic National Committee – the battle lines are coming into focus for next year.

The commission’s final meeting adjourned on Saturday after a few steps toward democratizing the party had won approval – due to the grassroots strength of progressives. But the recommendations from the commission will go to the Rules and Bylaws Committee, which was one of the DNC decision-making bodies that Perez subjected to a purge two months ago. Now, in the words of Jim Zogby (who was removed from the Executive Committee by Perez), “There are virtually no Bernie supporters on the Rules and Bylaws Committee.”

When the latest Unity Reform Commission meeting got underway, Perez talked a lot about unity. But kicking Sanders supporters off of key DNC committees is the ugly underside of an ongoing dual discourse. (Are we supposed to believe Perez’s

soothing words or our own eyes?) And party unity behind a failed approach – internally undemocratic and politically hitched to corporate wagons – would hardly be auspicious.

“Emerging sectors of the electorate are compelling the Democratic Party to come to terms with adamant grassroots rejection of economic injustice, institutionalized racism, gender inequality, environmental destruction and corporate domination,” says the recent report “Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis” (which I co-authored). The report adds: “Siding with the people who constitute the base isn’t truly possible when party leaders seem to be afraid of them.”

DNC Chairman Perez and allied power brokers keep showing that they’re afraid of the party’s progressive base. No amount of appealing rhetoric changes that reality.

“We pride ourselves on being inclusive and welcoming to all,” the Democratic National Committee proclaimed anew at the start of this month, touting the commission meeting as “open to the public.” Yet the DNC delayed and obscured information about the meeting, never replying to those who filled out an online RSVP form – thus leaving them in the dark about the times of the meeting. In short, the DNC went out of its way to suppress public turnout rather than facilitate it.

Rebuking the DNC

One member of the task force that wrote the Autopsy, Karen Bernal, is the chair of the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party. After traveling across the country and sitting in the sparse audience during the first day of the Unity Reform Commission meeting, she took the liberty of speaking up as the second day got underway. Bernal provided a firm rebuke of the DNC’s efforts to suppress public attendance.

“For all of the talk about wanting to improve and reform and make this party more transparent, the exact opposite has happened,” Bernal told the commission. (Her intervention, which lasted a little more than two minutes, aired in full on C-SPAN.)

On Sunday, a mass email from Zogby via Our Revolution summed up: “We are fighting for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice. The Democratic Party needs everyone, regardless of their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, country of origin, language, or socioeconomic status, to be deeply involved in order to change the course of this country.”

For those reasons, he added, “we are calling for an end to superdelegates, [for]

open primaries and caucuses, [for] same-day registration, and [for] more transparent, fair, and accountable leadership at the helm of the DNC.”

Overall, the commission approved some recommendations that were partial victories for progressives. Among the most notable: It called for reducing the number of notoriously undemocratic superdelegates to the national convention from 712 to about 300, while the only democratic number would be zero.

[Superdelegates are party insiders who are not chosen through a primary or caucus but nevertheless get to vote for the party’s nominees. In 2016, they broke overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton.]

The commission somewhat improved transparency for often-dubious DNC contracts with high-paid consultants and vendors, while defeating sensible amendments by commission member Nomiki Konst – who spoke with notable clarity about the need to clamp down on financial conflicts of interest among DNC decision-makers.

The eight Sanders appointees – Konst, Zogby, Larry Cohen, Lucy Flores, Jane Kleeb, Gus Newport, Nina Turner and Jeff Weaver – put up a good fight as members of the Unity Reform Commission. They were outnumbered, and on key issues were often outvoted, by the 13 who’d been selected by Clinton or Perez. Next year, the odds to overcome will be much worse.

With the purged Rules and Bylaws Committee now overwhelmingly stacked against progressives, only massive pressure from the grassroots will be able to sustain momentum toward a democratic Democratic Party. Meanwhile, corporate forces will do all they can to prevent the Democratic Party from living up to its first name.

Norman Solomon, the national coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org, is a member of the task force that wrote “Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis.” His books include *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.

The Corruption of College Athletics

The U.S. likes to view itself as the epitome of sports integrity, but beyond its own professional and amateur doping scandals, there is the institutionalized corruption around U.S. college athletics, reports Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is an old saying when it comes to college sports: "they are played not quite for fun, and not quite for money." Of course, that sentiment is supposed to apply to the players. It certainly does not apply to the college administrations and athletic departments which nurture these sports.

For the schools with "big name" teams, college sports is *all* about the money. In the U.S., "the 231 NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] Division 1 schools that make income data available generated a total of \$9.15 billion in revenue during the 2015 fiscal year." At least 25 U.S. schools make almost or more than \$100 million a year. We are talking about money generated directly or indirectly by the teams themselves, and we all know about the corruptive power of that sort of cash.

So how would that corruption work? We are not talking about gambling schemes and fixing games here. But, as it turns out, we are talking about fixing the "eligibility" to play of "student" athletes. According to the academic eligibility rules used by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, student athletes must maintain between 90 and 100 percent of the *minimum* GPA (Grade Point Average) required for graduation at the school they attend.

Freshman athletes need 90 percent to be eligible to play their sport, sophomores need 95 percent, and then it is 100 percent for juniors and seniors. OK, that is a bit of a break already, at least for the freshmen and sophomores. And maintaining a minimum GPA should not be that hard. However, with all the money at stake for the institution, most of these schools do not want to take any chances about high-performing athletes staying eligible.

The result of this pressure was laid bare by a *New York Times* article of Oct. 14. It appeared in the Sports Saturday section and was entitled "N.C.A.A. Declines to Punish North Carolina for Academic Fraud." It seems that for nearly the last 20 years the administrators of the highly regarded University of North Carolina were "running one of the worst academic fraud schemes in college sports history, involving [200] fake classes that enabled dozens of athletes to gain and maintain their eligibility."

However, the university was not penalized by the N.C.A.A. because the organization has no rules against fraudulent classes as long as they are not open only to athletes. In this case, although really designed with student athletes in mind, the "paper" classes were technically open to everyone. "Similar misconduct has been alleged at Auburn [in Georgia] and Michigan."

No one at North Carolina has lost their job, and no student academic records have been reviewed. The embarrassment of it all did move the administration to "correct" these "academic irregularities." Yet the school representatives will

still argue with you about the term “fraudulent.”

Mark Merritt, the university’s general counsel, says that “the fact that the courses did not meet our expectations doesn’t make them fraudulent.”

But, of course, he is dissembling. These pseudo-courses did meet expectations: keeping the money coming in by keeping athletes unable or unwilling to also be students on the field.

The Fans

How is it that college athletic teams are so popular that they can generate this level of wealth? The answer involves our instinctive need to identify with, and cheerlead for, a group we have made our own. The intensity of this proclivity varies with individuals, but generally we all feel the need to some extent. And, when we really get into the role of cheerleader, that which we identify with becomes an extension of ourselves. Its fate becomes our fate.

The number of candidates for your enthusiasm is very large. They can be religious, political or cultural organizations. They can range from a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post to the community glee club. Or it can be that fondly remembered college you graduated from, now symbolized by its sports teams.

It must be pointed out that such wholehearted identification isn’t entirely misguided. For instance, devoted followers of sports teams do get something, besides overpriced tickets and team paraphernalia, for their money.

Daniel Wann, a psychology professor who has made a career researching the mind-set of sports spectators, tells us that there is a correlation between identifying with a sports team and a sense of psychological well-being: “Higher identification with a team is associated with significantly lower levels of alienation [and] loneliness, and higher levels of collective self-esteem.”

Colleges with popular sports teams have simply learned how to turn the satisfaction of this psychological need into a \$9 billion-a-year niche industry.

Sports Teams and the Nature of Education

Unfortunately, there is a downside. When it comes to the enthusiasm around college sports, the notion of education gets lost. Thus, it seems not to have occurred to most college sports fans that whatever satisfaction they might derive from supporting their teams, they are simultaneously helping to undermine the education of the players.

This situation is, in good part, a consequence of the fact that the very definition of a college education and, indeed its ultimate value, has been long

under question. It used to be that relatively few went to college and those who did went for a "liberal education."

For the first two years of what then was a four-year degree program, one took a mandatory sampling of courses in the arts, sciences, social sciences and humanities. Having a taste of the breadth of knowledge out there, the student then spent the last two years specializing, or "majoring," in their chosen field: history, English, anthropology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, economics, aspects of art, music, etc.

This traditional, non-vocational, approach to education ran into trouble in the 1960s, an unsettled time when a lot of revered traditions were being questioned. At that time the complaint arose from students, parents, and that anomalous category known as employers, that colleges were not teaching anything "useful."

In other words they were not adequately preparing students for the job market. As a result, increasing numbers of colleges, urged on by state governments, did away with the liberal arts approach to education. As they did so, education itself, at least as traditionally understood as a broad introduction to a world of knowledge, ceased to be the goal.

In the resulting new vocationally oriented environment in which career preparation took center stage, traditional standards of educational judgment deteriorated. For instance, grade inflation became rampant, reflecting an administrative notion that the student is really a consumer who needs to be satisfied with the "product" the college is peddling. As time went on, a process of confirmation bias occurred as both administrators and faculty who had bought into this new "business model" of education, replicated themselves in new hires.

That is the background against which the University of North Carolina could devise and then run, for nearly 20 years, "one of the worst academic fraud schemes in college sports history." You see, most of the athletes in those fraudulent courses were in school for the vocational purpose of moving into professional sports careers. For them, the playing field was (and still is) the only classroom that mattered. And the pseudo-courses? They were, shall we say, a form of grade inflation. The fans, when they noticed at all, seemed to take the irregularities in stride.

Thus, within the context of the modern commercial culture of the United States, the vocational nature of college sports is really "normal." These sports also make barrels of money for the sponsoring institution and give a lot of people something to cheer about. Isn't all of that worth 20 years of fraud?

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Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*. He blogs at www.tothepointanalyses.com.

When Washington Cheered the Jihadists

Exclusive: Official Washington helped unleash hell on Syria and across the Mideast behind the naïve belief that jihadist proxies could be used to transform the region for the better, explains Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

When a Department of Defense intelligence report about the Syrian rebel movement became public in May 2015, lots of people didn't know what to make of it. After all, what the report said was unthinkable – not only that Al Qaeda had dominated the so-called democratic revolt against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for years, but that the West continued to support the jihadis regardless, even to the point of backing their goal of creating a Sunni Salafist principality in the eastern deserts.

The United States lining up behind Sunni terrorism – how could this be? How could a nice liberal like Barack Obama team up with the same people who had brought down the World Trade Center?

It was impossible, which perhaps explains why the report remained a non-story long after it was released courtesy of a Judicial Watch freedom-of-information lawsuit. The New York Times didn't mention it until six months later while the Washington Post waited more than a year before dismissing it as “loopy” and “relatively unimportant.” With ISIS rampaging across much of Syria and Iraq, no one wanted to admit that U.S. attitudes were ever anything other than hostile.

But three years earlier, when the Defense Intelligence Agency was compiling the report, attitudes were different. Jihadis were heroes rather than terrorists, and all the experts agreed that they were a low-risk, high-yield way of removing Assad from office.

After spending five days with a Syrian rebel unit, for instance, New York Times reporter C.J. Chivers wrote that the group “mixes paramilitary discipline,

civilian policing, Islamic law, and the harsh demands of necessity with battlefield coldness and outright cunning.”

Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, assured the Washington Post that “al Qaeda is a fringe element” among the rebels, while, not to be outdone, the gossip site Buzzfeed published a pin-up of a “ridiculously photogenic” jihadi toting an RPG.

“Hey girl,” said the subhead. “Nothing sexier than fighting the oppression of tyranny.”

And then there was Foreign Policy, the magazine founded by neocon guru Samuel P. Huntington, which was most enthusiastic of all. Gary Gambill’s “Two Cheers for Syrian Islamists,” which ran on the FP web site just a couple of weeks after the DIA report was completed, didn’t distort the facts or make stuff up in any obvious way. Nonetheless, it is a classic of U.S. propaganda. Its subhead glibly observed: “So the rebels aren’t secular Jeffersonians. As far as America is concerned, it doesn’t much matter.”

Assessing the Damage

Five years later, it’s worth a second look to see how Washington uses self-serving logic to reduce an entire nation to rubble.

First a bit of background. After displacing France and Britain as the region’s prime imperial overlord during the 1956 Suez Crisis and then breaking with Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser a few years later, the United States committed itself to the goal of defeating Arab nationalism and Soviet Communism, two sides of the same coin as far as Washington was concerned. Over the next half-century, this would mean steering Egypt to the right with assistance from the Saudis, isolating Libyan strong man Muammar Gaddafi, and doing what it could to undermine the Syrian Baathist regime as well.

William Roebuck, the American embassy’s chargé d’affaires in Damascus, thus urged Washington in 2006 to coordinate with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to encourage Sunni Syrian fears of Shi’ite Iranian proselytizing even though such concerns are “often exaggerated.” It was akin to playing up fears of Jewish dominance in the 1930s in coordination with Nazi Germany.

A year later, former NATO commander Wesley Clark learned of a classified Defense Department memo stating that U.S. policy was now to “attack and destroy the governments in seven countries in five years,” first Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran. (Quote starts at 2:07.)

Since the United States didn’t like what such governments were doing, the

solution was to install more pliable ones in their place. Hence Washington's joy when the Arab Spring struck Syria in March 2011 and it appeared that protesters would soon topple the Baathists on their own.

Even when lofty democratic rhetoric gave way to ominous sectarian chants of "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin," U.S. enthusiasm remained strong. With Sunnis accounting for perhaps 60 percent of the population, strategists figured that there was no way Assad could hold out against religious outrage welling up from below.

Enter Gambill and the FP. The big news, his article began, is that secularists are no longer in command of the burgeoning Syrian rebel movement and that Sunni Islamists are taking the lead instead. As unfortunate as this might seem, he argued that such a development was both unavoidable and far from entirely negative.

"Islamist political ascendancy is inevitable in a majority Sunni Muslim country brutalized for more than four decades by a secular minoritarian dictatorship," he wrote in reference to the Baathists. "Moreover, enormous financial resources are pouring in from the Arab-Islamic world to promote explicitly Islamist resistance to Assad's Alawite-dominated, Iranian-backed regime."

So the answer was not to oppose the Islamists, but to use them. Even though "the Islamist surge will not be a picnic for the Syrian people," Gambill said, "it has two important silver linings for US interests." One is that the jihadis "are simply more effective fighters than their secular counterparts" thanks to their skill with "suicide bombings and roadside bombs."

The other is that a Sunni Islamist victory in Syria will result in "a full-blown strategic defeat" for Iran, thereby putting Washington at least part way toward fulfilling the seven-country demolition job discussed by Wesley Clark.

"So long as Syrian jihadis are committed to fighting Iran and its Arab proxies," the article concluded, "we should quietly root for them – while keeping our distance from a conflict that is going to get very ugly before the smoke clears. There will be plenty of time to tame the beast after Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions have gone down in flames."

Deals with the Devil

The U.S. would settle with the jihadis only after the jihadis had settled with Assad. The good would ultimately outweigh the bad. This kind of self-centered moral calculus would not have mattered had Gambill only spoken for himself. But he didn't. Rather, he was expressing the viewpoint of Official Washington in general, which is why the ultra-respectable FP ran his piece in the first place.

The Islamists were something America could employ to their advantage and then throw away like a squeezed lemon. A few Syrians would suffer, but America would win, and that's all that counts.

The parallels with the DIA are striking. "The west, gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition," the intelligence report declared, even though "the Salafist[s], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [i.e. Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency."

Where Gambill predicted that "Assad and his minions will likely retreat to northwestern Syria," the DIA speculated that the jihadis might establish "a declared or undeclared Salafist principality" at the other end of the country near cities like Hasaka and Der Zor (also known as Deir ez-Zor).

Where the FP said that the ultimate aim was to roll back Iranian influence and undermine Shi'ite rule, the DIA said that a Salafist principality "is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran)."

Bottle up the Shi'ites in northwestern Syria, in other words, while encouraging Sunni extremists to establish a base in the east so as to put pressure on Shi'ite-influenced Iraq and Shi'ite-ruled Iran.

As Gambill put it: "Whatever misfortunes Sunni Islamists may visit upon the Syrian people, *any* government they form will be strategically preferable to the Assad regime, for three reasons: A new government in Damascus will find continuing the alliance with Tehran unthinkable, it won't have to distract Syrians from its minority status with foreign policy adventurism like the *ancien régime*, and it will be flush with petrodollars from Arab Gulf states (relatively) friendly to Washington."

With the Saudis footing the bill, the U.S. would exercise untrammelled sway.

Disastrous Thinking

Has a forecast that ever gone more spectacularly wrong? Syria's Baathist government is hardly blameless in this affair. But thanks largely to the U.S.-backed sectarian offensive, 400,000 Syrians or more have died since Gambill's article appeared, with another 6.1 million displaced and an estimated 4.8 million fleeing abroad.

War-time destruction totals around \$250 billion, according to U.N. estimates, a staggering sum for a country of 18.8 million people where per-capita income prior to the outbreak of violence was under \$3,000. From Syria, the specter of

sectarian violence has spread across Asia and Africa and into Europe and North America as well. Political leaders throughout the advanced industrial world are still struggling to contain the populist fury that the Middle East refugee crisis, the result of U.S.-instituted regime change, helped set off.

So instead of advancing U.S. policy goals, Gambill helped do the opposite. The Middle East is more explosive than ever while U.S. influence has fallen to sub-basement levels. Iranian influence now extends from the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean, while the country that now seems to be wobbling out of control is Saudi Arabia where Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is lurching from one self-induced crisis to another. The country that Gambill counted on to shore up the status quo turns out to be undermining it.

It's not easy to screw things up so badly, but somehow Washington's bloated foreign-policy establishment has done it. Since helping to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, Gambill has moved on to a post at the rightwing Middle East Forum where Daniel Pipes, the group's founder and chief, now inveighs against the same Sunni ethnic cleansing that his employee defended or at least apologized for.

The forum is particularly well known for its Campus Watch program, which targets academic critics of Israel, Islamists, and – despite Gambill's kind words about “suicide bombings and roadside bombs” – anyone it considers the least bit apologetic about Islamic terrorism.

Double your standard, double the fun. Terrorism, it seems, is only terrorism when others do it to the U.S., not when the U.S. does it to others.

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