

My First Day as CIA Director

Former CIA analyst and founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity Ray McGovern, in this tongue-in-cheek article, outlines steps he would take on Day One as CIA Director to get to the bottom of Russiagate.

By Ray McGovern

Now that I have been nominated again – this time by author Paul Craig Roberts – to be CIA director, I am preparing to hit the ground running.

Last time my name was offered in nomination for the position – by *The Nation* publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel – I did not hold my breath waiting for a call from the White House. Her nomination came in the afterglow of my fortuitous, four-minute debate with then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, when I confronted him on his lies about the attack on Iraq, on May 4, 2006 on national TV. Since it was abundantly clear that Rumsfeld and I would not get along, I felt confident I had royally disqualified myself.

This time around, on the off-chance I do get the nod, I have taken the time to prepare the agenda for my first few days as CIA director. Here's how Day One looks so far:

Get former National Security Agency Technical Director William Binney back to CIA to join me and the “handpicked” CIA analysts who, with other “handpicked” analysts (as described by former National Intelligence Director James Clapper on May 8, 2017) from the FBI and NSA, prepared the so-called Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) of Jan. 6, 2017. That evidence-impooverished assessment argued the case that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his minions “to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton.”

When my predecessor, CIA Director Mike Pompeo invited Binney to his office on Oct. 24, 2017 to discuss cyber-attacks, he told Pompeo that he had been fed a pack of lies on “Russian hacking” and that he could prove it. Why Pompeo left that hanging is puzzling, but I believe this is the kind of low-hanging fruit we should pick pronto.

The low-calorie Jan. 6 ICA was clumsily cobbled together:

“We assess with high confidence that Russian military intelligence ... used the Guccifer 2.0 persona and DCLeaks.com to release US victim data obtained in cyber operations publicly and in exclusives to media outlets and relayed material to WikiLeaks.”

Binney and other highly experienced NSA alumni, as well as other members of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), drawing on their intimate familiarity with how the technical systems and hacking work, have been saying for a year and a half that this CIA/FBI/NSA conclusion is a red herring, so to speak. Last summer, the results of forensic investigation enabled VIPS to apply the principles of physics and the known capacity of the internet to confirm that conclusion.

Oddly, the FBI chose not to do forensics on the so-called “Russian hack” of the Democratic National Committee computers and, by all appearances, neither did the drafters of the ICA.

Again, Binney says that the main conclusions he and his VIPS colleagues reached are based largely on principles of physics – simple ones like fluid dynamics. I want to hear what that’s all about, how that applies to the “Russian hack,” and hear what my own CIA analysts have to say about that.

I will have Binney’s clearances updated to remove any unnecessary barriers to a no-holds-barred discussion at a highly classified level. After which I shall have a transcript prepared, sanitized to protect sources and methods, and promptly released to the media.

Like Sisyphus Up the Media Mountain

At that point things are bound to get very interesting. Far too few people realize that they get a very warped view on such issues from the *New York Times*. And, no doubt, it would take some time, for the Times and other outlets to get used to some candor from the CIA, instead of the far more common tendentious leaks. In any event, we will try to speak truth to the media – as well as to power.

I happen to share the view of the handful of my predecessor directors who believed we have an important secondary obligation to do what we possibly can to inform/educate the public as well as the rest of the government – especially on such volatile and contentious issues like “Russian hacking.”

What troubles me greatly is that the NYT and other mainstream print and TV media seem to be bloated with the thin gruel-cum-Kool Aid they have been slurping at our CIA trough for a year and a half; and then treating the meager fare consumed as some sort of holy sacrament. That goes in spades for media handling of the celebrated ICA of Jan. 6, 2017 cobbled together by those “handpicked” analysts from CIA, FBI, and NSA. It is, in all candor, an embarrassment to the profession of intelligence analysis and yet, for political reasons, it has attained the status of Holy Writ.

The Paper of (Dubious) Record

I recall the banner headline spanning the top of the entire front page of the NYT on Jan. 7, 2017: "Putin Led Scheme to Aid Trump, Report Says;" and the electronic version headed "Putin Led a Complex Cyberattack Scheme to Aid Trump, Report Finds." I said to myself sarcastically, "Well there you go! That's exactly what Mrs. Clinton – not to mention the NY Times, the Washington Post and The Establishment – have been saying for many months."

Buried in that same edition of the Times was a short paragraph by Scott Shane: "What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies' claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. That is a significant omission."

Omission? No hard evidence? No problem. The publication of the Jan. 6, 2017 assessment got the ball rolling. And Democrats like Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, were kicking the ball hard down the streets of Washington. On Jan. 25, 2017, I had a chance to confront Schiff personally about the lack of evidence – something that even Obama had acknowledged just before slipping out the door. I think our two-minute conversation speaks volumes.

Now I absolutely look forward to dealing with Adam Schiff from my new position as CIA director. I will ask him to show me the evidence of "Russian hacking" that he said he could not show me on Jan. 25, 2017 – on the chance his evidence includes more than reports from the *New York Times*.

Sources

Intelligence analysts put great weight, of course, on sources. The authors of the lede, banner-headlined NYT article of Jan. 7, 2017 were Michael D. Shear and David E. Sanger; Sanger has had a particularly checkered career, while always landing on his feet. Despite his record of parroting CIA handouts (or perhaps partly because of it), Sanger is now the NYT's chief Washington correspondent.

Those whose memories go back more than 15 years may recall his promoting weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as flat fact. In a July 29, 2002 article co-written with Them Shanker, for example, Iraq's (non-existent) "weapons of mass destruction" appear no fewer than seven times as flat fact.

More instructive still, in May 2005, when first-hand documentary evidence from the now-famous "Downing Street Memorandum" showed that President George W. Bush had decided by early summer 2002 to attack Iraq, the NYT ignored it for six weeks until David Sanger rose to the occasion with a tortured report claiming just the opposite. The title given his article of June 13 2005 was "Prewar

British Memo Says War Decision Wasn't Made."

Against this peculiar reporting record, I was not inclined to take at face value the Jan. 7, 2017 report he co-authored with Michael D. Shear – "Putin Led a Complex Cyberattack Scheme to Aid Trump, Report Finds."

Nor am I inclined to take seriously former National Intelligence Director James Clapper's stated views on the proclivity of Russians to be, well, just really bad people – like it's in their genes. I plan to avail myself of the opportunity to discover whether intelligence analysts who labored under his "aegis" were infected by his quaint view of the Russians.

I shall ask any of the "handpicked" analysts who specialize in analysis of Russia (and, hopefully, there are at least a few): Do you share Clapper's view, as he explained it to NBC's Meet the Press on May 30, 2017, that Russians are "typically, almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever"? I truly do not know what to expect by way of reply.

End of Day One

In sum, my priority for Day One is to hear both sides of the story regarding "Russian hacking" with all cards on the table. All cards. That means no questions are out of order, including what, if any, role the "Steele dossier" may have played in the preparation of the Jan. 6, 2017 assessment.

I may decide to seek some independent, disinterested technical input, as well. But it should not take me very long to figure out which of the two interpretations of alleged "Russian hacking" is more straight-up fact-based and unbiased. That done, in the following days I shall brief both the Chair, Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) and ranking member Schiff of the House Intelligence Committee, as well as the Chair and ranking member of its counterpart in the Senate. I will then personally brief the NYT's David Sanger and follow closely what he and his masters decide to do with the facts I present.

On the chance that the Times and other media might decide to play it straight, and that the "straight" diverges from the prevailing, Clapperesque narrative of Russian perfidy, the various mainstream outlets will face a formidable problem of their own making. Mark Twain put it this way: "It is easier to fool people than it is to convince them they have been fooled."

And that will probably be enough for Day One.

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Time to Admit the Afghan War is 'Nonsense'

Exclusive: Officially, the U.S. military objective in Afghanistan is to force the Taliban to the negotiating table, but just last month President Trump said that talks with the Taliban are off the table, indicating an incoherent policy, as Jonathan Marshall notes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Whatever happened to the Donald Trump who tweeted in 2013, "Let's get out of Afghanistan ... we waste billions there. Nonsense!"

And whatever happened to the reality TV star who used to tell under-performers, "you're fired"?

Today, as commander in chief, President Trump is indefinitely extending the Afghan war's record as the longest in U.S. history. He's wasting \$45 billion to wage it this year alone. And he's not even thinking of firing his huckster generals who claim that sending a few thousand more troops and stepping up the bombing will be a "game changer."

Much like the Vietnam War, every day's news of war from Afghanistan puts the lie to optimistic claims of a military solution. A recent BBC study concluded that Taliban forces are now active in 70 percent of the country, more than at any time since the end of 2001. Unofficial U.S. estimates of their strength have soared from about 20,000 in 2014 to at least 60,000 today.

Afghan government forces number several times as many, but—like their counterparts in the Vietnam War—they "lack the one thing the U.S. cannot provide: the will to fight a protracted campaign against a committed enemy," in the words of Bill Roggio, editor of the Long War Journal at the hawkish Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

The Taliban have proven that no place in Afghanistan is safe from their long arm. At the beginning of February, they infiltrated a bomb-laden ambulance into Kabul, just blocks from a meeting at the Afghan Ministry of Defense with the head of the U.S. Central Command. Its blast killed more than 100 people and injured 235. It followed only days after Taliban gunmen stormed the

Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, killing at least 20 people, including four Americans.

Inspector General Finds No Progress

The latest Inspector General report on the status of “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel,” issued Feb. 18, declares that U.S. and Afghan government forces made no progress last year in expanding their control of the country or in forcing the Taliban to the peace table, one of the administration’s stated goals.

“In addition,” the report said, “there were growing concerns about whether Afghanistan will be able to hold parliamentary elections as planned in July 2018, and the country was struggling to provide assistance to nearly two-million internally displaced persons.”

The report also highlighted the lethality of Taliban operations against Afghan military and police forces, but it declined to offer numbers, noting that the U.S. military had classified them at the request of the Afghan government.

To justify its optimism, the Trump administration has touted its ostensibly new tactic of bombing drug labs to deny the Taliban revenue. The Inspector General notes that such operations were undertaken as far back as 2009, to no end:

“The United Nations reported that opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan set a new record in 2017. Cultivated land increased 63 percent over 2016 levels and potential opium production set a new record at 9,000 tons. The United Nations stated that the Afghan government’s strategic focus on protecting population centers in 2017 might have made rural populations more vulnerable to the influence of anti-government entities who pay local farmers to grow poppy and protect farmers from government eradication efforts.”

Similarly, U.S. military operations have failed to suppress Afghanistan’s version of ISIS, which recently conducted several spectacular terror attacks in Kabul. The U.S. command made “no discernible progress” on convincing Pakistan to close its borders to insurgents. Last but not least, the Afghan government remains a mess, riven by factional fights between President Ashraf Ghani and provincial warlords.

An Incoherent Policy

Meanwhile, unaddressed by the IG is the basic incoherence of a policy of bombing the Taliban into reconciliation. On paper, Washington aims to force the Taliban to the negotiating table, acknowledging that outright victory is impossible. But only this January, President Trump told members of the UN Security Council, “we don’t want to talk with the Taliban,” and a spokesman for President Ghani said

recently, “We never negotiate with groups who resort to crime and the brutal killing of people and then claim responsibility for it.”

That sounds like a policy of stalemate if ever there was one.

“For years, we have been pursuing a strategy that will not win, but at the same time, we are doing just enough to ensure that we do not entirely lose,” concedes Kevin Hulbert, former CIA station chief in Kabul. “The way forward will be determined by clarifying our objectives, which to this point, have remained ambiguous at best.”

Clarifying our objectives would certainly help, but just as important are clarity about U.S. interests and capabilities.

Ever since 9/11, policy makers have largely taken American interests for granted. Yet aside from fantasies about developing Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, it’s hard to make a serious case that American lives and treasure will be more at risk from getting out of Afghanistan than continuing an endless war. The only significant interest at stake is political: no president wants to lose such a war.

And as to capabilities, the Obama-era surge proved that even with 100,000 troops, the United States cannot win a war against committed, indigenous insurgents who enjoy unlimited funding and protected foreign sanctuaries. Unlike the United States, the Taliban have nowhere to go. They will wait us out, even if that means fighting for another 16 years.

A decade ago, a top-level policy analysis requested by President George W. Bush admitted, “The United States is not losing in Afghanistan, but it is not winning either, and that is not good enough.” Those words are as true in 2018 as they were in 2008. The situation is still not good enough, and there’s no chance of it getting any better. It’s time for President Trump to wake up and say “you’re fired!” to anyone on his team who pretends otherwise.

Jonathan Marshall is the author or co-author of five books on U.S. foreign policy and international affairs. His articles on Afghanistan include “The Goal of ‘Not Losing’ in Afghanistan,” “Blaming the Afghan War Failure on – Russia,” and “Afghanistan: President Obama’s Vietnam.”
