

Of Animals and Monsters and Missiles over Damascus

It seems to be very difficult to be the leader of a state, particularly a strong and/or ideologically driven leader, and not end up a “monster,” muses Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson



President Donald Trump ordered the bombing of selective targets in the Syrian capital, Damascus last Friday night. He did so because he was emotionally upset by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s *alleged* use of chemical weapons against civilians in the town of Douma – the last rebel (ISIS-style) stronghold adjacent to the capital.

Just prior to Trump’s actualizing his emotions by throwing missiles into Damascus, he had expressed his opinion (and keep in mind that there is no difference between fact and opinion for Trump) that President Assad is a “monster” as well as an “animal.” This was at least in part because the Syrian President stooped to “killing his own people.” The problem with all this is (1) Trump has no hard evidence that Assad was behind the alleged gas attack and (2) killing your own people is, unfortunately, what civil wars are all about.

Alas, the world has always been, and still is, full of “monsters” and “animals.” And, since we are throwing around such epithets, we might as well give a couple of close-to-home examples of those qualifying behaviors.

– How about the invasion of a nation along with the subsequent killing of at least half a million people, all based on “false and overstated intelligence”? That is what the “monster” and “animal” President George W. Bush did back in 2003 in Iraq.

–How about lining up a 100 “sharpshooters” at a border for what seems to be the almost gleeful act of repeatedly shooting down unarmed protesters? That is what the “monster” and “animal” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been doing at Israel’s border with Gaza during the month of April 2018.

We can go on citing examples such as these – all about the “monsters” and “animals” in power in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar and, at one time or other, just about every other nation. Donald Trump himself, with his racist tendencies and impulsive behavior, is also a very good candidate for wearing the epithets he assigns to others.



A lesson learned from this endless list is that it seems to be very difficult to be the leader of a state, particularly a strong and/or ideologically driven leader, and not end up a “monster.” It is not only the power that rests in the leader’s hands, but also the corrupting organizational pressures and expectations to use that power that create the slippery slope to abuse. Even those who come to office with relatively decent reputations, such as in the case of the U.S., Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama, end up with bloody hands.

Minions

However, the problem does not end there. After all, the “monster” must have his or her minions. Albert Einstein once said that “the pioneers of a warless world are the youth that refuse military service.” More recently, the Israeli human rights organization B’ tselem has called on Israeli soldiers “to refuse orders to open fire on Palestinian protesters in the Gaza Strip.” These public positions have made no a noticeable difference. The massive violence continues.

Human violence might have something to do with our evolutionary history, but why should this inclination be so readily indulged? After all, just because we are evolutionarily inclined in a certain way doesn’t mean that we can’t exercise a modicum of self-control. And indeed, a good number of folks do go through life in a relatively non-violent fashion. Yet, put just about any of us in a rotten barrel and we turn bad.

Part of the problem might be that our cultures and institutions infantilize too many of us. By this I mean that from infancy through old age we are taught to follow orders and go along with the group. As children we are taught to obey our parents, then our teachers. When, as teens we (at least in the West) begin to

break away from parental control, we more often than not replace parental guidance with that of our peer group. Then, on to a career, where a new set of rules and expectations is imposed. Of course, there is sociological logic to all of this. We could have no societal structure and stability without a certain level of rules and obedience to them. However, there is a price. The price at the state level may be seen in terms of all too often unquestioning loyalty, patriotism and solidarity that leads the average citizen to simply follow the leader, and thereby participate in the violence the state has declared as necessary.

“Monsters” like George W. Bush, Benjamin Netanyahu and now Donald Trump do not actually pull the triggers. Someone else does on their orders – someone trained to obey. Actually “someone” is misleading. It is not one. It is millions. Military establishments are the most obvious environments where this follow the leader cum infantilization takes place. Put into a military organization, the citizen is back in that childhood environment where he or she is expected to just obey. There may be specified situations where one does not have to obey, but they are so rare and so strongly counterbalanced by peer pressure that they almost never come into play. Thus, in the military, all soldiers of whatever rank are infantilized relative to their superiors: told to shoot, they shoot; told to fire the missile, they fire it; told to drop the bomb, they drop it; and told to guide the weaponized drone onto a target half a world away (oops! It turns out to be a wedding party) they guide it.

There is no ready solution to any of this. The number of people who will refuse military orders, as suggested by Einstein, or refuse to shoot protesters, as suggested by B’tselem, is much too few to stop the mayhem. Our proclivity to violence has been institutionalized and our fundamental societal need to maintain group cohesion has been perverted by the those who claim to be our leaders. It is something of a vicious circle – or maybe just an eternal Catch 22.

This article originally appeared on <http://www.tothepointanalyses.com/>

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in 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.

War Fever

There is a fever that seizes this land from time to time and it is the fever of war, a condition that this time seems immune to all known cures, starting with reason, as Daniel Lazare explores.

By **Daniel Lazare** *Special to Consortium News*



What happens when an unthinkable war meets an unbeatable case of war fever? Thanks to Russia-gate, unsubstantiated reports about the use of poison gas in Syria, and a slew of similar factoids and pseudo-scandals, the world may soon find out.

In saner times, including during the Cold War at even its most heated, political leaders knew not to push a conflict with a rival nuclear power too far. After all, what was the point of getting into a fight in which everyone would lose?

Cooler heads thus prevailed in Washington while more excitable sorts were shipped off to where they could do no harm. This is what kept the peace during the U-2 affair, the Berlin Wall, and the Cuban missile crisis and what promised to continue doing so even after the advent of American “unipolarity” in 1989-92.

But that was then. Today, the question is no longer how to avoid a fight that can only lead to catastrophe, but how to avoid a showdown with a country that “in the past four years has annexed Crimea, intervened in eastern Ukraine, sought to influence the American election in 2016, allegedly poisoned a former Russian spy living in Britain and propped up the murderous government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria,” to quote the bill of indictment in a recent front-page [article](#) in *The New York Times*.

Given that the list of alleged atrocities expands with virtually each passing week, the answer, increasingly, is: no way, no how. Since Russia is bent on spreading “conflict and discord” throughout the west – if only in the eyes of the U.S., that is – confrontation grows more and more likely.

A Very American Coup

This is despite the fact that the offenses cited by the *Times*

are each more complex or dubious than the “newspaper of record” is willing to concede. The annexation of the Crimea, for instance, was a response to a US-financed, neo-Nazi-spearheaded coup in Kiev in February 2014 that caused the rickety Ukrainian state to collapse and sent Russophones in the east fleeing for

protection into the arms of Moscow. After investing more than \$5 billion to steer the Ukraine in such a disastrous direction according to then-Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, the US blamed Russia for the consequences. (See quote beginning at [7:42](#).) As for charges of interference in the 2016 election, the *Times* itself noted back in January 2017 that the formal CIA-FBI-NSA “assessment” blaming the Kremlin was notably bereft of factual back-up. As the paper [put it](#):

“[T]he declassified report contained no information about how the agencies had collected their data or had come to their conclusions. So it is bound to be attacked by skeptics and by partisans of Mr. Trump, who see the review as a political effort to impugn the legitimacy of his election.”

Quite right. But now evidence-free assertions are accepted as fact while anyone who says otherwise is ignored or shouted down. Questions linger with regard to the March 4 poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, most notably why a supposedly ultra-powerful nerve agent would not take effect for more than seven hours. (Someone supposedly smeared the nerve agent on [the front door of Sergei’s home](#) in Salisbury, England, which he and his daughter left around nine in the morning. Yet it was not until 4:15 p.m. that they were found incapacitated on a park bench after visiting a pub and eating at a local restaurant.)

As for “the murderous government of President Bashar al-Assad,” such talk would be silly if the consequences weren’t so dire. After all, it wasn’t Assad who flooded Syria with tens of thousands of jihadis bent on massacring Christian, Druse, Alawites, and secularists. To the contrary, it was the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Arab Gulf states. As a now declassified Defense Intelligence Agency [report](#) noted back in August 2012:

- “The Salafist[s], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [i.e. Al Qaeda in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency”;
- “The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the [rebel] opposition”;
- “If the situation unravels further, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria”;
- “...[T]his is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition [i.e. the US, Turkey, and the gulf states] want in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion...”

A Sectarian War

In other words, the US and its Sunni Arab allies launched a sectarian war

against the Alawite-backed Syrian regime with the full knowledge that an Al Qaeda state in eastern Syria might well be the result. Yet now they blame Assad for defending himself against the Salafist onslaught and Russia for helping him. It is a case of launching a neo-medieval sectarian war and then crying foul when the other side dares to fight back.

One would think that cooler heads might inject a note of sanity before things get completely out of hand. But the opposite seems to be the case. The more temperatures rise, the more congressmen, journalists, think-tank experts, and other hangers-on conclude that it is advantageous to jump on the bandwagon and drive passions up even more. Pro-war frenzy leads to more of the same. The more reason is needed, the scarcer it becomes.

Indeed, it sometimes seems that the only halfway sane person left in Washington is Donald Trump, who, according to [a strange report](#) in Sunday's *Washington Post*, is fighting a desperate rear-guard action against neocons bent on ratcheting up tensions to ever higher levels.

Reporters Greg Jaffe, John Hudson, and Philip Rucker described a bizarre scene at Trump's Mar-a-Lago Florida resort last month in which aides were only able to persuade the president to expel sixty Russian diplomats in retaliation for the Skripal poisoning by promising him that allies would toss out an equal number in Europe. When France and Germany only expelled four Russians each, Trump felt double-crossed. "I don't care about the total," he reportedly screamed when the aides tried to explain that the number expelled by all European nations would eventually approach the U.S. figure. "There were curse words," one official told the *Post*, "a lot of curse words."

Similarly, when Congress approved a new round of anti-Russian sanctions in July, the article says it took aides four days to persuade Trump to sign the bill even though it had cleared with a veto-proof majority that made it a virtual *fait accompli*. The *Post* said the same thing occurred when aides tried to convince him to sell antitank missiles to the Ukraine for use against pro-Russian separatists. "Why is this our problem?" he reportedly asked. "Why not let the Europeans deal with Ukraine?" When CIA Director Mike Pompeo, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis added their voices to the chorus, all the president could do was whine, "I just want peace."

Everyone Agreed—Except Trump

Of course, when Donald Trump is the sole remaining voice of reason, then we're really in trouble. The infighting escalated even further on Monday after Haley vowed to slap still more sanctions on Russia for the crime of backing Assad. "They have done nothing but brutalize their people and destroy their

land, all in the name of power,” she [said](#) of the Baathists on CBS News’s “Face the Nation.” So Russia would have to pay the price.

Everyone agreed, Republicans, Democrats, and the corporate media – everyone, that is, except Trump. Defying his neocon captors, he undercut Haley by declaring that sanctions would not be forthcoming after all. White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders was left to gamely [assert](#) that “the president has been clear that he’s going to be tough on Russia, but at the same time he’d still like to have a good relationship with them.”

Times columnist Michelle Goldberg was so flabbergasted by Trump’s about-face that she [wondered](#) whether reports that Putin was using a secret “pee tape” to force him into line might not be true after all.

But of course – who else would want an end to hostilities with Russia other than a crazy man or someone under duress? War with a nuclear power is something that no sane person really wants to avoid, right?

U.S. foreign policy is caught in a powerful contradiction. A military showdown with a fellow nuclear power is unthinkable. Yet pausing for a moment to consider where all this madness is leading is out of the question. Two forces are colliding, war on one hand and a general inability to think things through in a clear-headed way on the other.

It’s a case of a herd of independent minds stampeding over a cliff – not because someone is forcing them to, but because they don’t know how to stop.

Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and other books about American politics. He has written for a wide variety of publications from *The Nation* to *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and his articles about the Middle East, terrorism, Eastern Europe, and other topics appear regularly on such websites as Jacobin and The American Conservative.

On the Criminal Referral of Comey, Clinton et al: Will the Constitution Hold and the Media Continue to Suppress the Story?

Ray McGovern reports on a major development in the Russia-gate story that has

been ignored by corporate media: a criminal referral to the DOJ against Hillary Clinton, James Comey and others, exposing yet again how established media suppresses news it doesn't like—about as egregious an example of unethical journalism as there is.

By Ray McGovern *Special to Consortium News*



Wednesday's criminal referral by 11 House Republicans of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as well as several former and serving top FBI and Department of Justice (DOJ) officials is a giant step toward a Constitutional crisis.

Named in the referral to the DOJ for possible violations of federal law are: Clinton, former FBI Director James Comey; former Attorney General Loretta Lynch; former Acting FBI Director Andrew McCabe; FBI Agent Peter Strzok; FBI Counsel Lisa Page; and those DOJ and FBI personnel "connected to" work on the "Steele Dossier," including former Acting Attorney General Sally Yates and former Acting Deputy Attorney General Dana Boente.

With no attention from corporate media, the referral was sent to Attorney General Jeff Sessions, FBI Director Christopher Wray, and U.S. Attorney for the District of Utah John Huber. Sessions appointed Huber months ago to assist DOJ Inspector General (IG) Michael Horowitz. By most accounts, Horowitz is doing a thoroughly professional job. As IG, however, Horowitz lacks the authority to prosecute; he needs a U.S. Attorney for that. And this has to be disturbing to the alleged perps.

This is no law-school case-study exercise, no arcane disputation over the fine points of this or that law. Rather, as we say in the inner-city, "It has now hit the fan." Criminal referrals can lead to serious jail time. Granted, the upper-crust luminaries criminally "referred" enjoy very powerful support. And that will come especially from the mainstream media, which will find it hard to retool and switch from Russia-gate to the much more delicate and much less welcome "FBI-gate."

As of this writing, a full day has gone by since the

letter/referral was reported, with total silence so far from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and other big media as they grapple with how to spin this major development. News of the criminal referral also slipped by Amy Goodman's non-mainstream *DemocracyNow!*, as well as many alternative websites.

The 11 House members chose to include the following egalitarian observation in

the first paragraph of the letter conveying the criminal referral: “Because we believe that those in positions of high authority should be treated the same as every other American, we want to be sure that the potential violations of law outlined below are vetted appropriately.” If this uncommon attitude is allowed to prevail at DOJ, it would, in effect, revoke the *de facto* “David Petraeus exemption” for the be-riboned, be-medaled, and well-heeled.

Stonewalling

Meanwhile, the patience of the chairmen of House committees investigating abuses at DOJ and the FBI is wearing thin at the slow-rolling they are encountering in response to requests for key documents from the FBI. This in-your-face intransigence is all the more odd, since several committee members have already had access to the documents in question, and are hardly likely to forget the content of those they know about. (Moreover, there seems to be a good chance that a patriotic whistleblower or two will tip them off to key documents being withheld.)

The DOJ IG, whose purview includes the FBI, has been cooperative in responding to committee requests for information, but those requests can hardly include documents of which the committees are unaware.

Putting aside his partisan motivations, House Intelligence Committee Chair Devin Nunes (R-CA) was unusually blunt two months ago in warning of legal consequences for officials who misled the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court in order to enable surveillance on Trump and his associates. Nunes’s words are likely to have sent chills down the spine of those with lots to hide: “If they need to be put on trial, we will put them on trial,” he said. “The reason Congress exists is to oversee these agencies that we created.”

Whether the House will succeed in overcoming the resistance of those criminally referred and their many accomplices and will prove able to exercise its Constitutional prerogative of oversight is, of course, another matter – a matter that matters.

And Nothing Matters More Than the Media

The media will be key to whether this Constitutional issue is resolved. Largely because of Trump’s own well earned reputation for lying, most Americans are susceptible to slanted headlines like this recent one – “Trump escalates attacks on FBI ...” – from an article in *The Washington Post*, commiserating with the treatment accorded fired-before-retired prevaricator McCabe and the FBI he (dis)served.

Nor is the *Post* above issuing transparently clever warnings – like this one in a

lead article on March 17: "Some Trump allies say they worry he is playing with fire by taunting the FBI. 'This is open, all-out war. And guess what? The FBI's going to win,' said one ally, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to be candid. 'You can't fight the FBI. They're going to torch him.'" [sic]

Mind-Boggling Criminal Activity

What motivated the characters now criminally "referred" is clear enough from a wide variety of sources, including the text messages exchange between Strzok and Page. Many, however, have been unable to understand how these law enforcement officials thought they could get away with taking such major liberties with the law.

None of the leaking, unmasking, surveillance, "opposition research," or other activities directed against the Trump campaign can be properly understood, if one does not bear in mind that it was considered a sure thing that Secretary Clinton would become President, at which point illegal and extralegal activities undertaken to help her win would garner praise, not prison. The activities were hardly considered high-risk, because candidate Clinton was sure to win.

But she lost.

Comey himself gives this away in the embarrassingly puerile book he has been hawking, "A Higher Loyalty" – which

amounts to a pre-emptive move motivated mostly by loyalty-to-self, in order to obtain a Stay-Out-of-Jail card. Hat tip to Matt Taibbi of Rolling Stone for a key observation, in his recent [article](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/james-comey-j-edgar-hoover-w519214), "James Comey, the Would-Be J. Edgar Hoover," about what Taibbi deems the book's most damning passage, where Comey discusses his decision to make public the re-opening of the Hillary Clinton email investigation.

Comey admits, "It is entirely possible that, because I was making decisions in an environment where Hillary Clinton was sure to be the next president, my concern about making her an illegitimate president by concealing the re-started investigation bore greater weight than it would have if the election appeared closer or if Donald Trump were ahead in the polls."

The key point is not Comey's tortured reasoning, but rather that Clinton was "sure to be the next president." This would, of course, confer automatic immunity on those now criminally referred to the Department of Justice. Ah, the best laid plans of mice and men – even very tall men. One wag claimed that the "Higher" in "A Higher Loyalty" refers simply to the very tall body that houses an outsized ego.

I think it can be said that readers of Consortiumnews.com may be unusually well equipped to understand the anatomy of FBI-gate as well as Russia-gate. Listed below chronologically are several links that might be viewed as a kind of “whiteboard” to refresh memories. You may wish to refer them to any friends who may still be confused.

2017

[Russia-gate’s Mythical ‘Heroes’ June 6, 2017](#)

[What Did Hillary Clinton Know? Oct. 25, 2017](#)

[The Democratic Money Behind Russia-gate Oct. 29, 2017](#)

[The Foundering Russia-gate ‘Scandal’ Dec. 13, 2017](#)

2018

[The FBI Hand Behind Russia-gate Jan. 11, 2018](#)

[Will Congress Face Down the Deep State? Jan. 30, 2018](#)

[Nunes Memo Reports Crimes at Top of FBI and DOJ Feb. 2, 2018](#)

[‘This is Nuts’: Liberals Launch ‘Largest Mobilization in History’ in Defense of Russiagate Probe Feb. 9, 2018](#)

[Nunes: FBI and DOJ Perps Could Be Put on Trial Feb. 19, 2018](#)

[‘Progressive’ Journalists Jump the Shark on Russia-gate March 7, 2018](#)

[Intel Committee Rejects Basic Underpinning of Russiagate March 14, 2018](#)

[McCabe: A War on \(or in\) the FBI? March 18, 2018](#)

[Former CIA Chief Brennan Running Scared March 19, 2018](#)

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served as an Army Infantry/Intelligence officer and then a CIA analyst for a total of 30 years. In retirement, he co-created Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).
