

The Silent Slaughter of the US Air War

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media voiced moral outrage when Russian warplanes killed civilians in Aleppo but has gone silent as U.S. warplanes slaughter innocents in Mosul and Raqqa, notes Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

April 2017 was another month of mass slaughter and unimaginable terror for the people of Mosul in Iraq and the areas around Raqqa and Tabqa in Syria, as the heaviest, most sustained U.S.-led bombing campaign since the American War in Vietnam entered its 33rd month.

The Airwars monitoring group has compiled reports of 1,280 to 1,744 civilians killed by at least 2,237 bombs and missiles that rained down from U.S. and allied warplanes in April (1,609 on Iraq and 628 on Syria). The heaviest casualties were in and around Old Mosul and West Mosul, where 784 to 1,074 civilians were reported killed, but the area around Tabqa in Syria also suffered heavy civilian casualties.

In other war zones, as I have explained in previous articles ([here](#) and [here](#)), the kind of “passive” reports of civilian deaths compiled by Airwars have only ever captured between 5 percent and 20 percent of the actual civilian war deaths revealed by comprehensive mortality studies. Iraqbodycount, which used a similar methodology to Airwars, had only counted 8 percent of the deaths discovered by a mortality study in occupied Iraq in 2006.

Airwars appears to be collecting reports of civilian deaths more thoroughly than Iraqbodycount 11 years ago, but it classifies large numbers of them as “contested” or “weakly reported,” and is deliberately conservative in its counting. For instance, in some cases, it has counted local media reports of “many deaths” as a minimum of one death, with no maximum figure. This is not to fault Airwars’ methods, but to recognize its limitations in contributing to an actual estimate of civilian deaths.

Allowing for various interpretations of Airwars’ data, and assuming that, like such efforts in the past, it is capturing between 5 percent and 20 percent of actual deaths, a serious estimate of the number of civilians killed by the U.S.-led bombing campaign since 2014 would by now have to be somewhere between 25,000 and 190,000.

The Pentagon recently revised its own facetious estimate of the number of civilians it has killed in Iraq and Syria since 2014 to 352. That is less than a

quarter of the 1,446 victims whom Airwars has positively identified by name.

Airwars has also collected reports of civilians killed by Russian bombing in Syria, which outnumbered its reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing for most of 2016. However, since the U.S.-led bombing escalated to over 10,918 bombs and missiles dropped in the first three months of 2017, the heaviest bombardment since the campaign began in 2014, Airwars' reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing have surpassed reports of deaths from Russian bombing.

Because of the fragmentary nature of all Airwars' reports, this pattern may or may not accurately reflect whether the U.S. or Russia has really killed more civilians in each of these periods. There are many factors that could affect that.

For example, Western governments and NGOs have funded and supported the White Helmets and other groups who report civilian casualties caused by Russian bombing, but there is no equivalent Western support for the reporting of civilian casualties from the Islamic State-held areas that the U.S. and its allies are bombing. If Airwars' reporting is capturing a greater proportion of actual deaths in one area than another due to factors like this, it could lead to differences in the numbers of reported deaths that do not reflect differences in actual deaths.

Shock, Awe ... and Silence

To put the 79,000 bombs and missiles with which the U.S. and its allies have bombarded Iraq and Syria since 2014 in perspective, it is worth reflecting back to the "more innocent" days of "Shock and Awe" in March 2003. As NPR reporter Sandy Tolan reported in 2003, one of the architects of that campaign predicted that dropping 29,200 bombs and missiles on Iraq would have, "the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on Japan."

When "Shock and Awe" was unleashed on Iraq in 2003, it dominated the news all over the world. But after eight years of "disguised, quiet, media-free" war under President Obama, the U.S. mass media don't even treat the daily slaughter from this heavier, more sustained bombardment of Iraq and Syria as news. They cover single mass casualty events for a few days, but quickly resume normal "Trump Show" programming.

As in George Orwell's *1984*, the public knows that our military forces are at war with somebody somewhere, but the details are sketchy. "Is that still a thing?" "Isn't North Korea the big issue now?"

There is almost no political debate in the U.S. over the rights and wrongs of

the U.S. bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Never mind that bombing Syria without authorization from its internationally recognized government is a crime of aggression and a violation of the U.N. Charter. The freedom of the United States to violate the U.N. Charter at will has already been politically (not legally!) normalized by 17 years of serial aggression, from the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

So who will enforce the Charter now to protect civilians in Syria, who already face violence and death from all sides in a bloody civil and proxy war, in which the U.S. was already deeply complicit well before it began bombing Syria in 2014?

In terms of U.S. law, three successive U.S. regimes have claimed that their unconstrained violence is legally justified by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by the U.S. Congress in 2001. But sweeping as it was, that bill said only,

“That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11th, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.”

How many of the thousands of civilians the U.S. has killed in Mosul in the past few months played any such role in the September 11th terrorist attacks? Every person reading this knows the answer to that question: probably not one of them. If one of them was involved, it would be by sheer coincidence.

Any impartial judge would reject a claim that this legislation authorized 16 years of war in at least eight countries, the overthrow of governments that had nothing to do with 9/11, the killing of about 2 million people and the destabilization of country after country – just as surely as the judges at Nuremberg rejected the German defendants’ claims that they invaded Poland, Norway and the U.S.S.R. to prevent or “preempt” imminent attacks on Germany.

U.S. officials may claim that the 2002 Iraq AUMF legitimizes the bombardment of Mosul. That law at least refers to the same country. But while it is also still on the books, the whole world knew within months of its passage that it used false premises and outright lies to justify overthrowing a government that the U.S. has since destroyed.

The U.S. war in Iraq officially ended with the withdrawal of the last U.S.

occupation forces in 2011. The AUMF did not and could not possibly have approved allying with a new regime in Iraq 14 years later to attack one of its cities and kill thousands of its people.

Caught in a Web of War Propaganda

Do we really not know what war is? Has it been too long since Americans experienced war on our own soil? Perhaps. But as thankfully distant as war may be from most of our daily lives, we cannot pretend that we do not know what it is or what horrors it brings.

This month, two friends and I visited our Congresswoman's office representing our local Peace Action affiliate, Peace Justice Sustainability Florida, to ask her to cosponsor legislation to prohibit a U.S. nuclear first strike; to repeal the 2001 AUMF; to vote against the military budget; to cut off funding for the deployment of U.S. ground troops to Syria; and to support diplomacy, not war, with North Korea.

When one of my friends explained that he'd fought in Vietnam and started to talk about what he'd witnessed there, he had to stop to keep from crying. But the staffer didn't need him to go on. She knew what he was talking about. We all do.

But if we all have to see dead and wounded children in the flesh before we can grasp the horror of war and take serious action to stop it and prevent it, then we face a bleak and bloody future. As my friend and too many like him have learned at incalculable cost, the best time to stop a war is before it starts, and the main lesson to learn from every war is: "Never again!"

Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump won the presidency partly by presenting themselves as "peace" candidates. This was a carefully calculated and calibrated element in both their campaigns, given the pro-war records of their main opponents, John McCain and Hillary Clinton. The American public's aversion to war is a factor that every U.S. president and politician has to deal with, and promising peace before spinning us into war is an American political tradition that dates back to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

As Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering admitted to American military psychologist Gustave Gilbert in his cell at Nuremberg, "Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship."

"There is one difference," Gilbert insisted, "In a democracy, the people have

some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.”

Goering was unimpressed by Madison's and Hamilton's cherished constitutional safeguards. “Oh, that is all well and good,” he replied, “but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.”

Our commitment to peace and our abhorrence of war are too easily undermined by the simple but timeless techniques Goering described. In the U.S. today, they are enhanced by several other factors, most of which also had parallels in World War Two Germany:

–Mass media that suppress public awareness of the human costs of war, especially when U.S. policy or U.S. forces are responsible.

–A media blackout on voices of reason who advocate alternative policies based on peace, diplomacy or the rule of international law.

–In the ensuing silence regarding rational alternatives, politicians and media present “doing something,” meaning war, as the only alternative to the perennial straw man of “doing nothing.”

–The normalization of war by stealth and deception, especially by public figures otherwise seen as trustworthy, like President Obama.

–The dependence of progressive politicians and organizations on funding from labor unions that have become junior partners in the military industrial complex.

–The political framing of U.S. disputes with other countries as entirely the result of actions by the other side, and the demonization of foreign leaders to dramatize and popularize these false narratives.

–The pretense that the U.S. role in overseas wars and global military occupation stems from a well-meaning desire to help people, not from U.S. strategic ambitions and business interests.

Taken altogether, this amounts to a system of war propaganda, in which the heads of TV networks bear a share of responsibility for the resulting atrocities along with political and military leaders. Trotting out retired generals to bombard the home front with euphemistic jargon, without disclosing the hefty directors' and consultants' fees they collect from weapons manufacturers, is only one side

of this coin.

The equally important flip-side is the media's failure to even cover wars or the U.S. role in them, and their systematic marginalization of anyone who suggests there is anything morally or legally wrong with America's wars.

The Pope and Gorbachev

Pope Francis recently suggested that a third party could act as a mediator to help resolve our country's nearly 70-year-old conflict with North Korea. The Pope suggested Norway. Even more importantly, the Pope framed the problem as a dispute between the United States and North Korea, not, as U.S. officials do, as North Korea posing a problem or a threat to the rest of the world.

This is how diplomacy works best, by correctly and honestly identifying the roles that different parties are playing in a dispute or a conflict, and then working to resolve their disagreements and conflicting interests in a way that both sides can live with or even benefit from. The JCPOA that resolved the U.S. dispute with Iran over its civilian nuclear program is a good example of how this can work.

This kind of real diplomacy is a far cry from the brinkmanship, threats and aggressive alliances that have masqueraded as diplomacy under a succession of U.S. presidents and secretaries of state since Truman and Acheson, with few exceptions. The persistent desire of much of the U.S. political class to undermine the JCPOA with Iran is a measure of how U.S. officials cling to the use of threats and brinkmanship and are offended that the "exceptional" United States should have to come down from its high horse and negotiate in good faith with other countries.

At the root of these dangerous policies, as historian William Appleman Williams wrote in The Tragedy of American Diplomacy in 1959, lies the mirage of supreme military power that seduced U.S. leaders after the allied victory in the Second World War and the invention of nuclear weapons. After running headlong into the reality of an unconquerable post-colonial world in Vietnam, this American Dream of ultimate power faded briefly, only to be reborn with a vengeance after the end of the Cold War.

Much as its defeat in the First World War was not decisive enough to convince Germany that its military ambitions were doomed, a new generation of U.S. leaders saw the end of the Cold War as their chance to "kick the Vietnam syndrome" and revive America's tragic bid for "full spectrum dominance."

As Mikhail Gorbachev lamented in a speech in Berlin on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014, "the West, and particularly the United

States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia's weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination of the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here."

This post-Cold War triumphalism has predictably led us into an even more convoluted maze of delusions, disasters and dangers than the Cold War itself. The folly of our leaders' insatiable ambitions and recurrent flirtations with mass extinction are best symbolized by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock, whose hands once again stand at two and a half minutes to midnight.

The inability of the costliest war machine ever assembled to defeat lightly-armed resistance forces in country after country, or to restore stability to any of the countries it has destroyed, has barely dented the domestic power of the U.S. military-industrial complex over our political institutions and our national resources. Neither millions of deaths, trillions of dollars wasted, nor abject failure on its own terms has slowed the mindless spread and escalation of the "global war on terror."

Futurists debate whether robotic technology and artificial intelligence will one day lead to a world in which autonomous robots could launch a war to enslave and destroy the human race, maybe even incorporating humans as components of the machines that will bring about our extinction. In the U.S. armed forces and military industrial complex, have we already created exactly such a semi-human, semi-technological organism that will not stop bombing, killing and destroying unless and until we stop it in its tracks and dismantle it?

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Playing Games with America's Health Care

President Trump reneged on promises about health insurance for all to win a House vote on a bill to repeal Obamacare and cut taxes on the rich, but now Republicans have to live with the consequences, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

This just in: Health care is not a game. It's a matter life or death for millions and millions of Americans. But you sure wouldn't know it from watching Donald Trump and House Republicans celebrate their narrow victory on Thursday.

The House managed to pass a bill, the American Health Care Act (AHCA), aimed at altering or eradicating provisions of Obamacare, a somewhat muted version of the "repeal and replace" battle cry screamed throughout the election campaign but one that nevertheless will still devastate all but the richest of society with exorbitant medical costs that many cannot afford. Medicaid would be slashed by hundreds of millions. Twenty-four million fewer would be left without health insurance.

But the Republicans celebrated this impending tragedy with cheers on Capitol Hill and then got on buses to the White House for some further revelry in the Rose Garden.

"Trump basked in adulation as lawmakers heaped praise on him," Ashley Parker reported in *The Washington Post*: "... Including Trump and [vice president Mike] Pence, a dozen lawmakers and officials spoke, a snaking queue – nearly all white men – who took turns stepping to the lectern to claim their reward: cable news coverage, orchestrated by a president who values it above almost all else."

Trump shouted, "How am I doing? I'm president. Hey, I'm president. Can you believe it?" Not if I don't want to. It all felt like a chintzy version of the victory party after a high school football championship, except no one dared douse Coach Trump or assistant coaches Pence and Paul Ryan with Gatorade. Which was unfortunate.

Democrats got into the act, too, singing, "Hey hey hey, goodbye!" at the Republicans in the House chamber, reminding the GOP that they had just cast a vote that may cost many of them their seats in the 2018 midterms. The whole thing was very classy, as if the Founders high-fived, fist-bumped and burst into "We Are the Champions" after signing the Declaration of Independence.

The fact is, few Republicans have even read the bill. They did not wait for a cost estimate from the Congressional Budget Office before ramming it through. No hearings were held; no group was given the opportunity to raise its objections in such a public forum: no American Cancer Society, AARP, the March of Dimes, the American Hospital Association – all of which, along with many other professional and advocacy organizations, have made their opposition known. No American Medical Association, which announced, "millions of Americans will lose their health insurance as a direct result of this proposal..."

"Not only would the AHCA eliminate health insurance coverage for millions of

Americans, the legislation would, in many cases, eliminate the ban against charging those with underlying medical conditions vastly more for their coverage.”

Tax Cut for the Rich

But if you’re looking for the real reasons Republicans were throwing themselves a frat party on Thursday, heed first the words of Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association of the United States: “It is critically important to look at this bill for what it is. It is not in any way a health care bill. Rather, it is legislation whose aim is to take significant funding allocated by Congress for health care for very low-income people and use that money for tax cuts for some of our wealthiest citizens. This is contrary to the spirit of who we are as a nation, a giant step backward that should be resisted.”

Then remember, as Paul Kane noted in *The Post*, that the GOP “viewed the measure as a necessary step to demonstrate some sense of momentum and some ability to govern in GOP-controlled Washington ... inside the White House, President Trump’s advisers became increasingly concerned about how little they had to show in terms of early victories.”

And so they were willing to vote for a lousy, misbegotten piece of legislation just so they could get the first round of tax cuts for the rich and to make it look as if they had accomplished something. Not exactly the Age of Pericles.

I remembered that old poem, *After Blenheim*, in which Robert Southey recounts the 1704 battle in which Britain’s Duke of Marlborough (ancestor of Winston Churchill) defeated the forces of France’s Louis XIV. The poem concludes:

“And everybody praised the Duke

Who this great fight did win.

‘But what good came of it at last?’

Quoth little Peterkin.

‘Why that I cannot tell,’ said he,

‘But ’twas a famous victory.’”

Never confuse motion for action, Republicans. And your “famous” victory may be Pyrrhic. Fortunately, this horrible health care legislation has a long way to go through the Senate before Donald Trump gets the chance to affix his EKG-like signature. As South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham tweeted on Friday, “A bill –

finalized yesterday, has not been scored, amendments not allowed, and 3 hours final debate – should be viewed with caution.”

Perhaps the most relevant – if unintentional – comment came from Trump himself Thursday night when he told Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, “You have better health care than we do.” The Land Down Under has universal health care with a private insurance option. They call it Medicare.

If the Democrats don’t immediately start playing Trump’s statement on a constant video loop between now and November 2018, they’ve lost the will to live. The White House said Trump didn’t mean anything by it (although he then doubled down on his words with a tweet) but if you’re in the mood to have a celebration of your own, lift a glass to what he told the Australian PM and make a toast to blowing up this bogus health care reform bill and giving us what Americans truly need – Medicare for all.

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<http://billmoyers.com/story/americas-health-hands-gop-frat-boys/>

How Trump Fixes Facts Around Policy

President Trump’s disdain for inconvenient truth has led to the deletion of climate science from the EPA’s web site and other moves to fix the facts around his policies, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Many of us have had more than our fill of the 100-day assessments of Donald Trump’s presidency. Besides the arbitrary nature of this point on the calendar, and besides the sheer overload of the number of attempts at such a first-quarter report card, most of what gets put on such cards does not get at what is most important in evaluating any presidency.

Heavy emphasis gets placed on legislative acts. Although an ability to work with Congress is one attribute we like to see in a president, it is only one and hardly the most important one. Besides, the reasons for lack of legislative accomplishment are apt to be found less in the White House than in obduracy and dysfunction in whoever has majority control at the other end of Pennsylvania

Avenue.

The artificial reporting period encourages not only silly claims about accomplishments but also an incentive to give the impression of motion and progress even when substance is lacking. The Trump White House certainly has been no exception to this pattern.

There has been, for example, the counting as an “accomplishment” the appointment and confirmation this early in the presidential term of a Supreme Court justice – without mentioning, of course, that this event was the direct result of the Republican majority in the Senate refusing for a year even to consider the previous president’s nominee (and then expanding the “nuclear option” to shove through Trump’s nominee). Also added to the count are executive orders that only undo something that President Obama did, or, in many cases, that order a cabinet secretary to study how something that Obama did could be undone.

Reading Trump

It’s not just the White House and its supporters who have indulged in the 100-day excesses. There has been much over-analysis, sometimes tinged with either hope or worry, depending on the analyst’s policy preferences, that attempts to discern larger substance and implications from individual actions or exclamations from Trump. Such attempts to extrapolate doctrine and direction from this inconsistent presidency are mostly a blood-from-a-turnip exercise.

Some lessons can indeed be drawn from the first 100 days, but with Trump the lessons are less a matter of either doctrine or accomplishment than of whether the habits, and the character and ability or lack thereof, that Trump exhibited during the campaign and in his earlier business career are continuing while he is office.

One of the best summary observations in this regard is from *Washington Post* columnist Steven Pearlstein, who writes on business and financial matters but whose conclusions could apply as well to Trump’s handling of a wide range of foreign and domestic matters:

“What we know, first and foremost, is that it hardly matters what Trump says because what he says is as likely as not to have no relationship to the truth, no relationship to what he said last year during the campaign or even what he said last week. What he says bears no relationship to any consistent political or policy ideology or world-view. What he says is also likely to bear no relationship to what his top advisers or appointees have said or believe, making them unreliable interlocutors even if they agreed among themselves, which they don’t.

“This lack of clear policy is compounded by the fact that the president, despite his boasts to the contrary, knows very little about the topics at hand and isn’t particularly interested in learning. In other words, he’s still making it up as he goes along.”

Reasons to Worry

Many elements of dismay can follow from the fact of having this kind of president. We are apt to get a better idea of which specific things are most worthy of dismay as the rest of this presidency unfolds. I suggest, however, that a prime, overarching reason to worry is Trump’s utter disregard for the truth. Not just a disregard, actually, but a determination to crush the truth and to instill falsehood in the minds of as many people as possible.

The *Post*’s fact checker, [Glenn Kessler](#), summarizes the situation by noting that “the pace and volume of the president’s misstatements” are so great that he and other fact checkers “cannot possibly keep up.” Kessler also observes how Trump’s handling of falsehoods is qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from the garden variety of lying in which many politicians indulge: “Many will drop a false claim after it has been deemed false. But Trump just repeats the claim over and over.”

It is a technique reminiscent of the Big Lie that totalitarian regimes have used, in which the repetition and brazenness of a lie help lead to its acceptance. The problem is fundamental, and relates to a broad spectrum of policy issues both foreign and domestic, because truth – factual reality – is a necessary foundation to consider and evaluate and debate policy on any subject.

Crushing the truth means not just our having to endure any one misdirected policy; it means losing the ability even to address policy intelligently. To the extent that falsehood is successfully instilled in the minds of enough people, the political system loses what would otherwise be its ability to provide a check on policy that is bad policy because it is inconsistent with factual reality.

Ignoring Climate Science

One hundred days is enough time for the Trumpian assault on truth to start to become institutionalized. The process has become plain at the website of the Environmental Protection Agency. Changes at the website since Trump’s inauguration include not only what would be expected after a change of administrations in keeping any policy statements consistent with the new regime’s preferences; it also has involved [expunging the truth](#).

Specifically, a section of the site that had existed for 20 years and provided

detailed data and scientific information on climate change has been removed. The deleted site, according to climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University, included “important summaries of climate science and indicators that clearly and unmistakably explain and document the impacts we are having on our planet.”

The site was a go-to place for authoritative information about climate change. This is the sort of service one should expect to get from a government agency such as EPA (just like, before I took some recent foreign travel, the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention served as a go-to site for authoritative information about what inoculations I would need). Now that part of the EPA site is gone.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt approved the deletion because, according to an anonymous staffer under Pruitt, “we can’t have information which contradicts the actions we have taken in the last two months.”

So instead of defending those actions in a well-informed policy debate based on truth, the administration’s approach was to delete the truth. If the policy doesn’t conform with reality, then deny the reality and make it as hard as possible for citizens to be informed of the reality.

Orwell’s Ministry of Truth may be closer than we thought.

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Risk of Baiting Trump on His 100 Days

As President Trump reaches the 100-day mark, the liberal and mainstream criticism is that he hasn’t accomplished much, but that baiting only makes Trump likely to wage more wars and push a more right-wing agenda, says Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

A CNN headline blares before the end of President Trump’s “First 100 Days”: “Trump’s race against the clock to do something.” Similarly, “Democracy Now” headlines a segment: “‘It Has Not Gone Well’: 100 Days of President Trump and No Major Achievements.”

It certainly hasn't gone well, but Trump has in fact accomplished a great deal. For one, Neil Gorsuch was put on the Supreme Court using "pro-life" rhetoric and has already facilitated death. Gorsuch provided the deciding vote in denying convicted murderer Ledell Lee's request for a DNA test to prove his innocence because Arkansas' supply of the execution drug midazolam was nearing its expiration date. Gorsuch's ascension to the high court basically consolidates rightwing control over all three branches of government.

Trump also has assembled an incredible cabinet of corporate bosses, Wall Street operators and pro-war apparatchiks. And he has adroitly broken the letter and spirit of virtually any positive promises he made to curtail U.S. interventionism and war-making around the world; to take on Wall Street; to up taxes on the wealthy; etc. He appears to be escalating Obama's war on whistleblowers to a war on publishers by threatening WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange.

What are euphemistically called "flip flops" are actually betrayals of the interests of most of the people who actually voted for Trump. This is a phenomenal accomplishment for a politician to have managed in his first 100 days in office.

Like Obama before him, Trump has ensured the continued solidification of an oppressive pro-war and pro-Wall Street establishment that runs at odds to the aspirations and interests of much of the U.S. public, to say nothing of the global public. By putting forward the criticism that Trump has "no major achievements," do alleged opponents of Trump pretend that they are helping prevent further damage by him?

Trump could be carrying out horrific policies but many media outlets would ignore the substance and focus on some dumb Trump comment, such as – stop the presses – the White House misidentified Steven Mnuchin as "commerce secretary" when he's actually treasury secretary. They should identify Mnuchin as a Goldman Sach insider, foreclosure king, or someone whose net financial worth – estimated at \$46 million – is only a fraction of that of Wilbur Ross, the actual commerce secretary, who has \$2.5 billion.

This non-criticism of Trump will actually empower him to do more damage. The problem here is quite similar to how George H. W. Bush was depicted early in his administration by liberals: "A wimp." The sensible media watch group FAIR even ran a piece scrutinizing the Bush administration's attempts to refashion his public image as a "rough rider." But this depiction of Bush as "a wimp" was even more consequential: it helped enable his use of military violence, with the invasion of Panama in 1989 and then the first attack on Iraq in 1990-91.

It's clear that when liberal commentator Van Jones calls Trump "presidential" because the President in an address to Congress exploited the widow of a Special Forces soldier who died in Trump's first hastily authorized military violence (a botched and bloody raid in Yemen), that the praise increased the likelihood of more violence. (Since then, Trump won widespread media praise for his hasty decision to blame Syria for the chemical-weapons incident at Khan Sheikhoun and – without United Nations or Congressional approval – rain 59 Tomahawk missiles down on Syria, reportedly killing nine civilians, including four children.)

As Trump racks up more "accomplishments" – as he and his cabal of corporate bosses cut deals with House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell – the liberal criticism of Trump "not accomplishing anything" will deserve an assist on every one of those "accomplishments." Mission accomplished?

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Comparing Tweeting Trump and Silent Cal

President Trump's tax-cut plan charts a bonanza for himself, his friends and his family, getting rid of taxes that bite the rich and leaving debts behind for future American generations to pay, say Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Republican Calvin Coolidge, who in 1923 ascended to the presidency following the death of the corrupt and dunderheaded Warren Harding, was a man of few words. But some of the most famous of the few were, "The chief business of the American people is business."

Donald Trump, on the other hand, is often a man of many words, but rarely do they fit together to make a coherent sentence or complete thought. And we know for sure that he, too, believes the chief business of America is business, especially when it's *his* business. Oh, and Jared and Ivanka's, whose junkets on Dad's behalf appear to be merchandising missions for The Trump Empire. And his two safari-loving sons still holding forth from the family palace in New York, putatively running Pop's business while protected by a moat of barriers and security guards – take that, you huddled masses.

Coolidge was known as "Silent Cal." When a dinner party hostess told him, "You

must talk to me, Mr. Coolidge. I made a bet today that I could get more than two words out of you," Coolidge replied, "You lose." The last thing our current president would be described as is silent. Trump can't stop tweeting and gibbering. And he doesn't like losers.

The taciturn Coolidge has been described as the most conservative president in American history. No one is quite certain what Trump is, as his opinions and moods shift depending on the last person to whom he has spoken or something he's just seen on *Fox & Friends* or heard from conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. They point rightward for sure, but as with so many conservative spokesmen these days, tinged with lunacy and utterly devoid of reason.

And yet there on the august pages of *The New York Times*, Charles R. Kesler, a senior fellow of the right-wing Claremont Institute, gushes:

"Mr. Trump remains the kind of conservative president whom one expects to say, proudly and often, 'the chief business of the American people is business.' Although Calvin Coolidge said it first, Mr. Trump shows increasing signs of thinking along broadly Coolidgean lines, and of redirecting Republican policies toward the pre-New Deal, pre-Cold War party of William McKinley and Coolidge, with its roots in the party of Abraham Lincoln."

Not Making Sense

Oh brother. Professor Kesler is projecting onto Trump a consistency of thought and belief that thus far seems unproven. Comparing him to McKinley is a stretch, and to Lincoln – well, absurd. Really now, does this remotely sound like Donald Trump?

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

On the one hand, Kesler's adoration of Trump makes sense, given that last September it was the Claremont Institute that published a pseudonymous and now-notorious essay titled "The Fight 93 Election," basically telling conservative Republicans that if they did not support Trump's presidential candidacy, their world was doomed.

Why? Because Republican opposition to Trump, the author warned, "is the mark of a party, a society, a country, a people, a civilization that wants to die. Trump, alone among candidates for high office in this or in the last seven (at

least) cycles, has stood up to say: I want to live. I want my party to live. I want my country to live. I want my people to live.”

Clunky pearls of wisdom from what passes today for conservatism. Where have you gone, George Will, now that they need you? Next thing we know, Ann Coulter will be running the Library of Congress.

Calvin Coolidge would never have gone for such histrionics. Yet it’s worth taking a moment to consider what did occur during his administration. His years in office were the height of “The Roaring ’20s” – a time of economic whoopee marked by wild financial speculation, extravagant bank loans and debt that contributed to the 1929 market crash and the Great Depression.

Coolidge himself was the epitome of frugality and respectability but like Donald Trump (who fancies himself “the king of debt,” by the way – a real conservative, no?) he favored enormous tax cuts, slashing spending, high tariffs on imports and cramming regulatory agencies with pro-business types.

Unlike Trump, he favored a low profile and as far as policy goes preferred inertia to action. Here’s what the noted columnist Walter Lippmann said at the time: “This active inactivity suits the mood and certain of the needs of the country admirably. It suits all the business interests which want to be let alone... And it suits all those who have become convinced that government in this country has become dangerously complicated and top-heavy...”

At that last part, you can just see all Trump’s plutocratic Cabinet members and advisors nodding their heads in vigorous agreement.

When he died, Calvin Coolidge’s net worth was less than a million in 2016 dollars and he left it all to his wife Grace. Trump, who says his net worth may be as much as \$10 billion (how can we hope to know if he won’t release his tax returns?), and his family are using the White House to make the family fortune multiply, as if the presidency were a perpetual goose laying golden eggs. Each news cycle brings more stories of conflicts of interest, and the tax cut plan announced on Wednesday is a sweeping bow to the rich.

“It is striking,” Neil Irwin at *The New York Times* noted, how much the proposal favors Trump and his kin: “He is a high-income earner. He receives income from 564 business entities, according to his financial disclosure form, and could take advantage of the low rate on ‘pass-through’ companies. According to his leaked 2005 tax return, he paid an extra \$31 million because of the alternative minimum tax that he seeks to eliminate. And his heirs could eventually enjoy his enormous assets tax-free.”

So conservatism under Trump and his cronies now running government has brought

back a revised version of the gold standard: How much gold you can mine from privatizing the mother lode of government is the mark of your success.

No wonder Trump admires Vladimir Putin so much: They are the Midas and Ali Baba of autocracy. But conservatives they are not, unless to conservatives greed has become the coin of the realm.

One more thing: President Trump doesn't sleep much at night, reportedly getting about five hours of shut-eye (obviously, the cause is not a guilty conscience). President Coolidge loved to sleep, as much as twelve hours at a time. When he awoke from a White House nap he often would ask his butler, "Is the country still there?"

He meant it as a joke. Today, the question isn't funny.

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<http://billmoyers.com/story/forget-andrew-jackson-the-right-thinks-trump-is-calvin-coolidge/>

What Russia-gate Has Wrought

Exclusive: For five months, there was a daily drumbeat on Russia-gate, the sprawling conspiracy theory that Russia had somehow put Donald Trump in the White House, but suddenly the "scandal" disappeared, notes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Democrats, liberals and some progressives might be feeling a little perplexed over what has happened to Russia-gate, the story that pounded Donald Trump every day since his election last November – until April 4, that is.

On April 4, Trump fully capitulated to the neoconservative bash-Russia narrative amid dubious claims about a chemical attack in Syria. On April 6, Trump fired off 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian airbase; he also restored the neocon demand for "regime change" in Syria; and he alleged that Russia was possibly complicit in the supposed chemical attack.

Since Trump took those actions – in accordance with the neocon desires for more "regime change" in the Middle East and a costly New Cold War with Russia –

Russia-gate has almost vanished from the news.

I did find a little story in the lower right-hand corner of page A12 of Saturday's New York Times about a still-eager Democratic congressman, Mike Quigley of Illinois, who spent a couple of days in Cyprus which attracted his interest because it is a known site for Russian money-laundering, but he seemed to leave more baffled than when he arrived.

"The more I learn, the more complex, layered and textured I see the Russia issue is – and that reinforces the need for professional full-time investigators," Quigley said, suggesting that the investigation's failure to strike oil is not that the holes are dry but that he needs better drill bits.

Yet, given all the hype and hullabaloo over Russia-gate, the folks who were led to believe that the vague and amorphous allegations were "bigger than Watergate" might now be feeling a little used. It appears they may have been sucked into a conspiracy frenzy in which the Establishment exploited their enthusiasm over the "scandal" in a clever maneuver to bludgeon an out-of-step new President back into line.

If that's indeed the case, perhaps the most significant success of the Russia-gate ploy was the ouster of Trump's original National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who was seen as a key proponent of a New Détente with Russia, and his replacement by General H.R. McMaster, a protégé of neocon favorite, retired Gen. David Petraeus.

McMaster was viewed as the key player in arranging the April 6 missile strike on Syria and in preparing a questionable "intelligence assessment" on April 11 to justify the rush to judgment. Although McMaster's four-page white paper has been accepted as gospel by the mainstream U.S. news media, its many weaknesses have been noted by actual experts, such as MIT national security and technology professor Theodore Postol.

How Washington Works

But the way Official Washington works is that Trump was made to look weak when he argued for a more cooperative and peaceful relationship with Russia. Hillary Clinton dubbed him Vladimir Putin's "puppet" and "Saturday Night Live" portrayed Trump as in thrall to a bare-chested Putin. More significantly, front-page stories every morning and cable news segments every night created the impression of a compromised U.S. President in Putin's pocket.

Conversely, Trump was made to look strong when he fired off missiles against a Syrian airbase and talked tough about Russian guilt. Neocon commentator Charles Krauthammer praised Trump's shift as demonstrating that "America is back."

Trump further enhanced his image for toughness when his military dropped the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (MOAB), nicknamed the “mother of all bombs,” on some caves in Afghanistan. While the number of casualties inflicted by the blast was unclear, Trump benefited from the admiring TV and op-ed commentaries about him finally acting “presidential.”

But the real test of political courage is to go against the grain in a way that may be unpopular in the short term but is in the best interests of the United States and the world community in the longer term.

In that sense, Trump seeking peaceful cooperation with Russia – even amid the intense anti-Russian propaganda of the past several years – required actual courage, while launching missiles and dropping bombs might win praise but actually make the U.S. position in the world weaker.

Trump, however, saw his fledgling presidency crumbling under the daily barrage of Russia-gate, even though there was no evidence that his campaign colluded with Russia to interfere with the U.S. election and there wasn't even clear evidence that Russia was behind the disclosure of Democratic emails, via WikiLeaks, during the campaign.

Still, the combined assault from the Democrats, the neocons and the mainstream media forced Trump to surrender his campaign goal of achieving a more positive relationship with Russia and greater big-power collaboration in the fight against terrorism.

For Trump, the incessant chatter about Russia-gate was like a dripping water torture. The thin-skinned Trump fumed at his staff and twittered messages aimed at changing the narrative, such as accusing President Obama of “wiretapping” Trump Tower. But nothing worked.

However, once Trump waved the white flag by placing his foreign policy under the preferred banner of the neoconservatives, the Russia-gate pressure stopped. The op-ed pages suddenly were hailing his “decisiveness.” If you were a neocon, you might say about Russia-gate: Mission accomplished!

Russia-gate's Achievements

Besides whipping Trump into becoming a more compliant politician, Russia-gate could claim some other notable achievements. For instance, it spared the national Democrats from having to confront their own failures in Campaign 2016 by diverting responsibility for the calamity of Trump's election.

Instead of Democratic leaders taking responsibility for picking a dreadful candidate, ignoring the nation's anti-establishment mood, and failing to offer

any kind of inspiring message, the national Democrats could palm off the blame on “Russia! Russia! Russia!”

Thus, rather than looking in the mirror and trying to figure out how to correct their deep-seated problems, the national Democrats could instead focus on a quixotic tilting at Trump’s impeachment.

Many on the Left joined in this fantasy because they have been so long without a Movement that the huge post-inaugural “pussy hat” marches were a temptation that they couldn’t resist. Russia-gate became the fuel to keep the “Movement” bandwagon rolling. #Resistance!

It didn’t matter that the “scandal” – the belief that Russia somehow conspired with Trump to rig the U.S. presidential election – amounted to a bunch of informational dots that didn’t connect.

Russia-gate also taught the American “left” to learn to love McCarthyism since “proof” of guilt pretty much amounted to having had contact with a Russian – and anyone who questioned the dubious factual basis of the “scandal” was dismissed as a “Russian propagandist” or a “Moscow stooge” or a purveyor of “fake news.”

Another Russia-gate winner was the mainstream news media which got a lot of mileage – and loads of new subscription money – by pushing the convoluted conspiracy. The New York Times positioned itself as the great protector of “truth” and The Washington Post adopted a melodramatic new slogan: “Democracy Dies in Darkness.”

On Thanksgiving Day, the Post ran a front-page article touting an anonymous Internet group called PropOrNot that identified some 200 Internet news sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other major sources of independent journalism, as guilty of “Russian propaganda.” Facts weren’t needed; the accused had no chance for rebuttal; the accusers even got to hide in the shadows; the smear was the thing.

The Post and the Times also conflated news outlets that dared to express skepticism toward claims from the U.S. State Department with some entrepreneurial sites that trafficked in intentionally made-up stories or “fake news” to make money.

To the Post and Times, there appeared to be no difference between questioning the official U.S. narrative on, say, the Ukraine crisis and knowingly fabricating pretend news articles to get lots of clicks. Behind the smokescreen of Russia-gate, the mainstream U.S. news media took the position that there was only one side to a story, what Official Washington chose to believe.

While it's likely that there will be some revival of Russia-gate to avoid the appearance of a completely manufactured scandal, the conspiracy theory's more significant near-term consequence could be that it has taught Donald Trump a dangerous lesson.

If he finds himself in a tight spot, [the way out is to start bombing](#) some "enemy" halfway around the world. The next time, however, the target might not be so willing to turn the other cheek. If, say, Trump launches a preemptive strike against North Korea, the result could be a retaliatory nuclear attack against South Korea or Japan.

Or, if the neocons push ahead with their ultimate "regime change" strategy of staging a ["color revolution" in Moscow](#) to overthrow Putin, the outcome might be – not the pliable new leader that the neocons would want – but an unstable Russian nationalist who might see a nuclear attack on the U.S. as the only way to protect the honor of Mother Russia.

For all his faults, Trump did offer a more temperate approach toward U.S.-Russian relations, which also could have tamped down spending for nuclear and other strategic weapons and freed up some of that money for infrastructure and other needs at home. But that was before Russia-gate.

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](#)).

How to Ease North Korea's Fears

North Korea fears that it might end up like Iraq or Libya if it surrenders its nuclear program. China has offered an idea to calm those fears but President Trump says no, reports Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

During his campaign, Donald J. Trump proposed to deal with the problem of North Korea by pressuring China to convince its ally to give up nuclear weapons and the missiles designed to carry them. Yet after North Korea's recent test firing of several missiles, China proposed a solution to the problem, which the Trump administration summarily rejected.

China proposed that North Korea suspend its nuclear program in exchange for the United States and South Korea suspending their joint military exercises on the Korean peninsula, which triggered the North Korean missile tests. Although the Trump administration quickly nixed China's idea, in consideration of its prior campaign rhetoric, the Chinese proposition should be reconsidered.

Also during the road to the White House, Trump suggested that the United States should be less active in wars overseas and thus let its allies assume more of the defense burden. China's proposal would actually help the administration work toward that goal while making a start at getting North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program – or at least freezing it so that the North stops obtaining more weapons.

Of course, at stake is not only the North's nuclear weapons program but the American Empire of one-sided alliances around the world; the United States, to be the big man on campus, provides security for wealthy allies but gets little back economically from full opening of their markets to American products and services.

In fact, over the decades, those allies have become rich in part by using the money they save in reduced defense spending to compete with American companies around the world. The South Korean "economic miracle" was based on physical protection by the U.S. military and trade protection against American goods and services.

Currently, this economic miracle has given South Korea the twelfth largest economy in the world, which is more than 35 times the GDP of its starving, communist North Korean enemy. Little doubt exists that South Korea could not only do more for its own defense, as Trump suggested, but defend itself without American help.

Therefore, South Korea could begin spending more on defense to build up its military forces, while joint U.S.-South Korea military exercise are suspended. These joint exercises would be unneeded when, after a few years, South Korea was weaned away from needing U.S. protection.

Easing Paranoia

Without a U.S.-South Korea alliance on its border, North Korea might be less paranoid and therefore more susceptible to Chinese pressure over its nuclear weapons program. In addition, the Chinese would be more inclined to apply such pressure. China is not fond of having an unstable nuclear weapons state on its border.

Yet at the current time, the Chinese have been reluctant to apply too much

pressure on North Korea for fear the regime will collapse, create a surge of refugees into China, and ultimately lead to a unified Korea on its border protected by the powerful U.S. military (similar to the inclusion of a unified Germany into the expanded NATO alliance in Europe after the Cold War ended).

Historically, China has been sensitive to other great powers' military activity near its borders. For example, it fought a border war with the Soviet Union in 1969, flooded troops into North Korea during the Korean War in the early 1950s when U.S. forces there got too close to the Chinese border, and helped North Vietnam against the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Furthermore, legitimate Chinese aspirations to be a regional power would be given a safety valve if the United States removed the Cold War-era alliances ringing and containing China, including the one with South Korea.

In the 1800s, Britain allowed its then-adversary United States to rise as a great power, because a vast ocean between them mitigated the threat. Today, an even bigger ocean separates China and the United States.

If the United States wants China to police and constrain its allies – that is, North Korea – it must be willing to give up something in return. That is, if saving money by gradually ending the protection of a rich, ungrateful South Korean ally is really giving anything up.

Ivan Eland is Senior Fellow and Director of the [Center on Peace & Liberty](#) at the Independent Institute. [This article first appeared as a blog post at [HuffingtonPost](#).]

The Riches on the Right

A surprise from the financial disclosure forms of the Trump White House was how many of the players got rich from working in the right-wing world of anti-government activism, says Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Some of the latest hoey uttered by White House press secretary Sean Spicer – the man from whom a seemingly bottomless wellspring of hoey flows – was his pronouncement the other day that having so many fabulously wealthy men and women working in the White House is a good and wondrous thing.

“The President has brought a lot of people into this administration, and this

White House in particular, who have been very blessed and very successful by this country, and have given up a lot to come into government by setting aside a lot of assets," Spicer said.

"People are often told they have to sell an asset or get rid of something to come serve in the government. And there's a lot of people that have done a lot to come into this administration to give back, that have been inspired by the President's victory and the President's agenda to move the country forward."

You bet, Sean. In a world of haughty ideals and self-professed high purpose, some would call this notion *noblesse oblige* – that with wealth and power comes social responsibility; to whom much is given, much is expected, etc. And so it should be.

But in Donald Trump's world, snagging a White House job doubtless will be a solid gold vehicle for using wealth and power to generate more wealth and power for yourself and others, taking optimal advantage of an opportunity handed you by the rich guy who, thanks to the deficiencies of the Electoral College, has landed in the most lucrative pot of jam ever.

And while the new hires may have to hew closer to the conflict-of-interest rules than the boss – did you see the latest about how Trump can keep siphoning profits from his businesses even though he's supposed to be hands off? – there will be plenty of opportunities to take advantage.

In other words, high-ranking White House employee, those assets that you may or may not have set aside for the duration are likely to be worth a lot more when you and this president are done, even though you will have left behind quite a trail of broken dreams and shattered lives among the less favored of us.

The financial disclosure forms from about 180 staffers that begrudgingly were released by the White House late last week – a Friday night news dump designed to be as cumbersome for the press as possible – revealed, as *The Washington Post* reported, that Trump, "who campaigned as a champion of the working class, has surrounded himself with a circle of wealthy advisers.

"The disclosures showed that Trump's top aides have generated millions of dollars from Wall Street, Hollywood, real estate and the media, holding a slew of investments that intensify the administration's challenge in navigating potential intersections between officials' personal finances and their policymaking roles."

Amassed Fortunes

Just 27 of these folks have a combined worth of \$2.3 billion, and that is a

sum, according to a different *Washington Post* article, greater than what all the households in each of 80 percent of America's counties make in a year – 86 percent when it comes to the counties that voted for Trump. Per the *Post*, in a classic bit of understatement, “This reinforces the disconnect between the Trump team and the voters Trump likes to highlight.”

That would include such team players as chief economic adviser and Goldman Sachs alum Gary Cohn, worth between \$253 million and \$611 million; Reed Cordish, the Maryland real estate guy now in charge of technology initiatives, worth at least \$197 million; and of course, Ivanka Trump and her husband, Jared Kushner, the person known around these parts as The Son-in-Law Also Rises.

Ivanka and Jared, a man whose burgeoning portfolio of responsibilities now covers everything from the opioid epidemic and peace in the Middle East to possibly, I pray, throwing himself between his father-in-law and the nuclear football, are worth as much as \$740 million.

Eric Lipton and Jesse Drucker at *The New York Times* write: “Mr. Kushner did resign from more than 200 positions in the partnerships and limited liability companies that make up the family-run multibillion-dollar real estate business. But the financial disclosure report shows that Mr. Kushner will remain a beneficiary of most of those same entities.”

And that's a big problem, “perilous legal and ethical ground,” according to experts interviewed by the *Times*. As real estate investors, the Kushner family attracts money from China, Russia, the Middle East and other places where American foreign policy has an interest.

What's more, the banks with which the Kushners deal are regulated by governments here and abroad and stand to gain from Trump pledges to roll back the Dodd-Frank reforms, among others. Some, such as Israel's Bank Hapoalim, are under federal investigation. The tax code reform that Trump claims to be a high priority will impact the Kushners and their financial interests, too.

One other thing. Looking at the disclosure forms, what's also striking is how many of the fortunate now staking their claims at the executive mansion made much of their money not via inheritance or banks or industry but in the world of political consulting, a field that has exploded with the infusion of millions now made possible by *Citizens United* and other court decisions. Those rulings have helped open a fire hose of dark money, much of it from the Right – especially the Koch brothers and the Mercers, father and daughter – and it floods the electoral landscape with a deluge of cant and propaganda.

Presidential adviser and mouthpiece Kellyanne Conway, a pollster and consultant,

has assets valued at between \$11 million and more than \$44 million. Last year she made \$842,614 from a reported 75 sources of income, including Tea Party Patriots and the Judicial Crisis Network, which has been bankrolling a big media campaign in support of Supreme Court pick Neil Gorsuch.

And while Steve Bannon made his initial fortune in international investment banking (including Goldman Sachs), an irony given his current anti-globalist nationalism and economic populism, in recent years he has made a lot of his cash from ventures in right-wing publishing (*Breitbart*), filmmaking, analysis and consulting. His assets are now listed as between \$13 million and \$56 million.

At *AlterNet*, Steven Rosenfeld writes: “While most press reports have focused on the potential for financial conflicts of interest posed by the multibillions in holdings by numerous White House officials, the personal financial statements show how key political advisers became rich via their extreme anti-government activism.”

The profit opportunities are rife, deeply tempting and not just for Trump’s nearest and dearest. This wealthiest administration in American history is going to make for its selected few a bundle of a size unimaginable to the rest of us – yet we’re the ones who will be paying the bill.

And when this gang leaves their government jobs, they’ll be making even more, spinning through the revolving door back into the private sector, their worth enhanced by the time they’ve spent working for this mudslide of a president. Welcome to the plutocracy.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. Follow him on Twitter at @MichaelWinship. [This story first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/rich-line-white-house-atm/>]

Duping Americans on Healthcare and War

Exclusive: The American people have been sold a deadly bill of goods both for their lousy healthcare system and for their perpetual war machine – and there’s no end in sight, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

President Trump and his wealthy friends have just discovered how complicated healthcare is in this country – for the rest of us that is. They will soon find

out that U.S. militarism is just as complicated, and for many of the same reasons.

Healthcare is uniquely complicated in the United States because the U.S. is the only wealthy country in the world where for-profit corporate interests have carved out such a dominant role in the sickness and health of its people. The lucrative role of for-profit insurance companies is unique in the entire world; prescription drugs cost many times more than in other countries; and for-profit corporations have taken over 21 percent of U.S. hospitals since 1965.

Every other wealthy country provides universal healthcare to its people mainly through its public sector, with smaller roles for private, usually non-profit entities. Drug prices are contained by the negotiating power of these large public healthcare systems.

These systems all face challenges as they try to maintain the quality of patient care amid the rising costs of new medicines and medical technology, but the basic structure of the healthcare system in each country is well-established and stable.

If people in other wealthy countries pay attention to the U.S. healthcare crisis at all, it must seem that we're making a meal of this for peculiar cultural reasons. We must enjoy having these huge debates over healthcare every few years for the same reasons that we eat in our cars or play different sports than they do. Outside the U.S., it's inconceivable that a rich country would really allow tens of thousands of people to die prematurely every year for lack of access to healthcare, or that the public lacks the political power to prevent this from happening.

Race to the Bottom

For the past generation, the U.S. has led a "race to the bottom" among developed countries to ensure that the rewards of advanced technology and increased productivity are allocated to wealthy investors and corporate executives, instead of to the working people actually developing, operating and maintaining these new technologies, in the U.S. and around the world.

A central element in this neoliberal counter-revolution is the expansion of the corporate for-profit sector into areas of life otherwise rooted in the public sector, like health, education, utilities, transportation and criminal justice.

Despite huge imbalances in market power between ordinary people and large corporations, the quasi-religious belief in "markets" as the most efficient mechanism for managing all aspects of society requires that even public services like healthcare and education be privatized and submitted to the "magic of the

market.” U.S. political and business leaders are determined to prove that privatized healthcare can work, and then to export it to the rest of the world as part of the relentless expansion of U.S.-based capitalism.

But if public services like healthcare and education cannot be successfully abandoned to the vagaries of “the market,” even in the United States, then the public sector will have proven to be more essential than the architects of neoliberalism have claimed.

When the U.S. finally admits that its brutal experiment in privatized healthcare has failed and it is forced to hand the reins of this critical part of American life over to the public sector, it will be a powerful signal that the neoliberal project has passed its high point – and that the political pendulum has begun to swing back toward a more rational and democratic future.

Deterrence or Aggression?

Like the privatized U.S. healthcare system, U.S. militarism is also uniquely complicated, in ways that the world is barely coming to grips with after 18 years of U.S.-led wars that have killed about two million people and left half a dozen countries in ruins.

It is hardly a coincidence that our healthcare and warfare crises have some disturbing things in common, since they are products of the same unique political and economic system.

Our dysfunctional medical industry and our murderous war machine are by far the most expensive “healthcare” and “defense” systems in the world. Both are hugely profitable, but neither provides value for money in the form of a healthier or a safer society, the stated missions that justify their existence and their endlessly-expanding demands on our resources.

These are also the two areas of public policy in which bad policy predictably and inevitably leads to massive losses of human life. In terms of keeping people safe from disease and war respectively, U.S. “healthcare” and U.S. “defense” both fail catastrophically despite their ever-growing price tags. In fact, the huge amounts of money involved contribute to their failures by corrupting and distorting the non-commercial purposes they are both supposed to serve.

The Even-Worse War Machine

But U.S. militarism involves complications that dwarf even the ravages of the privatized U.S. healthcare system. While U.S. “news” media provide 24-hour “talking heads” coverage of the CIA and the Democratic Party’s accusations of Russian meddling in the U.S. election, American bombs are killing thousands of

Iraqi civilians in Mosul, as they have been doing across Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and other Muslim countries since 2001.

In contrast to our endless healthcare debate, the contradictions of U.S. militarism have barely been debated at all. Politicians only discuss the purposes of the U.S. military in euphemistic terms, and any objective or honest appraisal of the death, violence and chaos we have unleashed in country after country for the past 18 years is strictly taboo across the political spectrum.

There is an inherent contradiction in trying to use weapons of war to keep the peace. I remember asking my father, a British navy doctor, how he resolved this contradiction, which was more glaring in his case as a doctor committed to "first do no harm." He told me that he believed a strong defense was the most effective deterrent to aggression.

Apart from one day in June 1954, when his ship's 6-inch guns "bombarded terrorist positions" on Kedah Peak in Malaya, my father spent his entire career in a shrinking peacetime navy as the sun set on the British Empire. The U.K. stayed out of Vietnam, aside from some covert operations, and no other country attacked the U.K., so my Dad's view of his naval career as a deterrent to aggression survived largely unscathed.

Even President Trump subscribes to the view that the legitimate role of military power is as a deterrent to aggression by others. On Feb. 27, he declared his intention to add \$54 billion per year to the Obama administration's military budget, which already set a post-WWII record. But in a speech a few days earlier, Trump couched his promise to build a bigger, more expensive war machine strictly in terms of deterrence, as he did regularly throughout his election campaign.

"And, hopefully, we'll never have to use it, but nobody is going to mess with us," he said. "Nobody. It will be one of the greatest military build-ups in American history."

Big-Stick Bullying

My father and our new president were both echoing Teddy Roosevelt's warning to "speak softly and carry a big stick." But there is an obvious distinction between carrying a big stick to let others know that you are prepared to defend yourself, and actually threatening and attacking other people with it.

Many Americans keep guns in their homes to protect themselves against crime, but long-standing statistics show that guns in the home are about 20 times more

likely to end up injuring or killing someone in a suicide attempt, domestic violence or an accident than in self-defense against a criminal intruder. (My wife and I were once almost shot in our own home when we returned home late at night and startled a house guest who hadn't even warned us she was armed.) Could we be making a similar mistake on an international scale in our desire to maintain a "strong defense"?

The idea that U.S. diplomacy should be backed up by threats of force has become central to post-Cold War U.S. policy, but it is not long since this was seen as a risky strategy, even in official circles. After catastrophic wars in Korea and Vietnam, U.S. leaders were wary of war, and therefore avoided making threats that would drag the U.S. into new wars.

They did not renounce the use of force altogether, but waged it through proxy forces supported by small deployments of U.S. special forces in Central America and by the CIA in Angola and Afghanistan. These "disguised, quiet, media-free" military operations, as senior officers have called them, were shielded from public scrutiny by layers of secrecy and propaganda, yet they still met with resistance from a war-wary U.S. public and Congress.

The Credible Threat Problem

In heated debates within the Reagan administration, Secretary of State George Schultz argued that U.S. diplomacy should be backed up by the threat of force, while Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger warned against threats or uses of force that could lead to another disaster like the war in Vietnam. Weinberger's view was shared by U.S. military leaders, many of whom had fought as junior officers in Vietnam.

After the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983, Secretary Weinberger publicly laid out a doctrine of limited war in 1984, in which he accepted the thrust of Schultz's argument, but defined strict limits and conditions on U.S. threats and uses of force. The Weinberger Doctrine declared that the U.S. should threaten or use proportionate force only for clearly defined and achievable objectives, only when "vital" national or allied interests were at stake, and only with the support of the American public and Congress.

But the notion of a credible threat to support diplomacy is a dangerously seductive idea, and the Weinberger Doctrine became "the camel's nose inside the tent" that was soon followed by the rest of the camel.

As U.S. leaders looked for ways to exploit the post-Cold War "power dividend," hawkish officials and pundits suggested that General Manuel Noriega in Panama

and President Saddam Hussein in Iraq had failed to surrender under threat of U.S. attack because they did not believe that the U.S. would follow through on its threats. The hawks insisted that, if the U.S. would only threaten and use force more readily and consistently, its threats would be “credible” and its enemies would give up without a fight.

The Deceitful Colin Powell

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Colin Powell was a former protégé of Weinberger but has made a career of covering up crimes and selling dangerous policies to the public, from his roles in Vietnam, Iran Contra and the First Gulf War to his misleading and treacherous performance at the UN Security Council in 2003. Powell embraced and promoted the “credible threat” theory in a *Foreign Affairs* article in October 1992, writing that, “threats of military force will work only when U.S. leaders have decided that they are prepared to use force... The president can only persuade an opponent of his seriousness when, indeed, he is serious.”

At about the same time, in what one of his acolytes dubbed the “Ledeem Doctrine,” military-industrial propagandist Michael Ledeen put the “credible threat” theory more bluntly in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute, “Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business.”

Obviously, it is not a legitimate purpose of diplomacy for powerful countries to bully or destroy weaker ones as Ledeen described. In fact it is illegal under the U.N. Charter, which was formulated expressly to try to prevent this kind of international behavior.

Twenty-five years later, we can see clearly that threats of force by the U.S. and its allies, however credible, have not persuaded any of our country’s adversaries to back down, and have served only as pretexts for catastrophic wars, or escalations of them, in country after country: Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and so on.

Dooming Diplomacy

This is not because U.S. threats lack credibility, nor because our war machine is under-funded, as President Trump seems to believe. It is because threats undermine diplomacy by locking both sides into hostile positions that would be politically humiliating to back down from. When the side making the threats is a powerful, heavily armed country like the U.S., this effect is even more pronounced, not less, as the political pressure on both sides is even greater.

To his credit, President Obama stepped back from the brink after threatening a devastating attack on Syria in 2013, because U.S. intelligence agencies doubted that the Syrian government was responsible for the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, the American public overwhelmingly told Obama and Congress that it was opposed to war, and Russia negotiated a diplomatic resolution. But Obama's retreat from the brink was so exceptional that he is still loudly condemned for it by hawkish U.S. officials and pundits.

U.S. leaders still claim that U.S. sanctions and threats "brought Iran to the table" over its nuclear program. But this does not bear serious scrutiny. In fact, during Obama's first term, his "dual track" approach to Iran, conducting negotiations in parallel with sanctions and threats, was an abysmal failure. This policy only succeeded in spurring Iran to build 20,000 centrifuges to produce its own nuclear material, while sanctions punished the people of Iran for asserting their right to a civilian nuclear program under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

All the while, as a senior State Department official (and former U.S. Embassy hostage) explained to author Trita Parsi, it was the U.S. that refused to "take 'Yes'" for an answer, not Iran. The dispute was only resolved after John Kerry took over from Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State and began serious negotiations that were not undermined by new threats or sanctions.

The failure of U.S. post-Cold War diplomacy based on the threat and use of force would not surprise the American diplomats who drafted the U.N. Charter and witnessed its signing in San Francisco in 1945. Article 2:3 of the Charter reads, "All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered." In the very next clause, they backed this up with a prohibition, not only against the "use of force," but against "the *threat or* use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

After the two most deadly and destructive wars in human history, American diplomats of that generation needed no prompting to recognize that the threat of force more often than not sets the stage for the use of force, and that a world order based on the overriding necessity for peace must nip the danger of war in the bud by prohibiting the threat as well as the use of force.

Big Stick or Suicide Vest?

I hope this brief retracing of recent history illustrates what should be obvious, that there is a gaping chasm between the kind of "strong defense" most Americans believe in as a deterrent to war and the aggression of current U.S. war policy. In political rhetoric, there may seem to be a fine line between

carrying a “big stick” to deter aggression and building a huge war machine to threaten and attack other countries, but, in practice, the difference is obvious.

Our dangerous post-Cold War strategy of “credible threats” is finally, and predictably, bringing us into confrontation with countries that can defend themselves more effectively than the relatively defenseless countries we have attacked and destroyed since 1999. The U.S. and our allies have failed to decisively defeat lightly armed resistance forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Pakistan, Syria, Palestine or Ukraine. Are we now “credibly threatening” to attack North Korea? Iran? Russia? China?

Like a gun in the home, the credibility of our threats has proved to be a double-edged sword that is ultimately as dangerous to us as to our enemies. We have twisted, “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” into something more like, “Threaten everybody and wear a suicide vest.”

It is time to take off the suicide vest, turn our backs on brinkmanship and war, and return to legitimate diplomacy that is not based on threats, credible or otherwise. The problem with our threats is not that other countries don't think we really mean them. The more serious problem is that we do, and that this is a prescription for war, not a way to keep the peace.

I deliberately write “war,” not “endless war,” because every war does end, one way or another, and this one will too. But the escalating global war we have unleashed cannot possibly end well for our country or the world unless our leaders make a decisive choice to end it peacefully and diplomatically.

This would be a fundamental paradigm shift in U.S. policy, on a par with providing universal healthcare to all Americans. But the alternative should be unthinkable.

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Trump’s Incoherent Foreign Policy

President Trump’s foreign policy is sinking into incoherence from the Middle East to the Far East, with his promise of less interventionism and budget savings disappearing from view, as Ivan Eland reports.

By Ivan Eland

The recent North Korean missile tests raise questions about contradictions in President Donald Trump's national security policies. During his campaign Trump implied that the United States should fight fewer wars overseas and demanded that U.S. dependents, Japan and South Korea, do more for their own defense, perhaps even getting nuclear weapons.

Yet a recent article written by David Sanger, a national security reporter for the New York Times, noted that Trump had tweeted that North Korean acquisition of a long-range missile "won't happen" and that his administration was considering preemptive military strikes on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs or reintroducing U.S. tactical (short-range) nuclear missiles into South Korea, which were removed 25 years ago.

So which is it – demanding U.S. allies do more or ramping up America's efforts to make them even more reliant on American power? And this is not the only Trump policy contradiction.

If Trump is demanding that wealthy allies – both East Asian and European – put out more of an effort for their own security and if Trump wants to fight fewer wars overseas, then why does the defense budget need to be increased by a whopping 10 percent? That proposed increase is roughly equivalent to the entire Russian annual defense budget. In fact, couldn't U.S. defense spending be cut to help ameliorate the already humongous \$20-trillion-dollar national debt?

Moreover, the Department of Defense is the worst run agency in the federal government, as demonstrated by its being the only department to repeatedly fail to pass an audit? thus not being able to pinpoint where many trillions of dollars over many years have been spent. In 2001, the department's comptroller admitted to me that the department's broken accounting system would not be able to pass such an audit for a long time to come. Sixteen years later it still can't.

How does the American taxpayer know that the already almost \$600 billion defense budget each year is spent wisely or even not stolen outright? Despite this niggling elephant in the room, the Congress regularly gives the department, and the military services within it, almost a free pass, because of "patriotism," political pressure from defense industries, and the aura of secrecy surrounding this bureaucracy.

Because the nation's founders were almost universally suspicious of large standing militaries – in the late 1770s, European monarchs used them for external conquest and plunder and internal repression of their own peoples –

militarism covered by the veneer of “patriotism” is as inauthentic and vile as it is prevalent in Twenty-first Century America.

Also, much of the shroud of secrecy surrounding the military is overdone; many employees of the security bureaucracies admit that much information is over-classified. That includes threat information, which the department has a conflict of interest in hyping, because it justifies more spending on research, weapons, operations, maintenance, and all other things military.

The Terrorist Hype

Trump is also hyping terrorist threats to justify stanching foreign travel and immigration to the United States, as well as indirectly his higher defense budgets. Yet leaked documents from his own Department of Homeland Security say that discrimination by national background is a poor way of identifying potential terrorists and that most people who have committed recent terrorist acts in the United States were radicalized long after coming here.

Despite all the media hype, terrorism is still a rare phenomenon, and North America has always had fewer foreign terrorists than most other places, because it is a long way away from the world’s centers of conflict – for example, the Middle East. So much for the value of “extreme vetting” of arriving individuals from selected Muslim countries and increasing defense spending to combat terrorism.

Pressure by the military-industrial-complex (MIC) is another major driver of excessive defense spending. MIC lobbying has led to monumental wasting of taxpayer dollars over the years. For example, according to David Sanger, efforts to develop and field a limited national missile defense system to protect against the likes of relatively primitive North Korean missiles has cost taxpayers about \$300 billion since the days of Eisenhower but has given them a system that, even under perfect conditions, can only hit an incoming missile 44 percent of the time. And most analysts say real world conditions will rarely be perfect. This effort should have been abandoned long ago, but the MIC uses “the legacy of Ronald Reagan” to win conservative support in seeming perpetuity, no matter the poor results of the program.

There are countless other weapons programs in the Department of Defense that are underperforming, vastly exceeding original cost estimates, and are way behind schedule. Thus, taxpayers and their members of Congress need to cast a jaundiced eye on Trump’s desired military spending increase.

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