

Busting Upward the Military Budget

The Trump administration and Congress are in accord on one thing: the budget constraints on military spending must be busted to sustain overseas bases and to fund local pork projects, writes Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Although the Senate and House of Representatives have both passed the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2018 at the gargantuan sum of \$700 billion, most of the largesse has little to do with defending the United States and much to do with policing the informal American overseas empire. Thus, at least some trimming to the huge amount is possible.

Of the \$700 billion, about \$640 billion is the Pentagon's base budget and another \$60 billion dollars is allocated to fight simultaneous wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. This whopping amount exceeds last year's \$619 billion, thus flouting the "sequestration" spending caps in the 2011 Budget Control Act. Trump and the Republicans want to use budget savings from domestic spending to finance the defense spending increases. However, they will need Democratic votes to break the sequestration caps; the Democrats' price for doing so is a logrolling that would also require increases in domestic spending.

Yet the Budget Control Act has helped control federal spending, budget deficits, and debt accumulation and should be retained. Apparently, when conservatives tout slimming down government, they don't seem to think the Defense Department is part of the federal bureaucracy.

The idea is preposterous that a country which alone accounts for about half the world's defense budget needs more money to keep the readiness of its forces high and to rebuild a military that has been depleted by long, senseless wars in the Middle East and South Asia. The Defense Department is already slathered with over \$600 billion a year and just needs to reallocate some of its funds to improve readiness and conduct rebuilding.

Yet members of Congress always propose amendments adding extra weapons systems, such as ships and aircraft, to the budget that the Defense Department doesn't request. Not coincidentally, all this wasteful and unneeded pork spending just happens to be in these members' home states. Such pork is a regular occurrence in defense budgeting and explains why the Defense budget is so massive, yet force readiness and equipment depletion remain problems.

Other wasteful spending perennially occurs on stateside military bases that even

DoD would like to close, but members of Congress like to keep open because it subsidizes local economies they represent. The Pentagon offered a useful proposal that would have opened another round of base closures to save money. These savings could have been put toward readiness and rebuilding. Both the House and Senate rejected it for the aforementioned parochial reason.

Overseas Bases

To save even more money, the United States should close some overseas bases and decommission military units at those bases. Essentially, the military is like a fleet of expensive sports cars that is short on money for gas, repair, and maintenance. The overseas bases and forces need to be pruned so that the remaining forces at home have enough money for operations and support. With a \$20 trillion debt, the United States is overextended in the world; the U.S. half of global defense spending is paid for out less than a quarter of the world's GDP. Pruning the U.S. overseas footprint will help reduce the overextension.

Another way to save money would be to end unneeded and counterproductive wars in the Middle East and South Asia, which lead to increased blowback anti-U.S. terrorism. Sen. Rand Paul, R- Kentucky, laudably proposed repealing outdated congressional authorizations for the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, passed in 2001 and 2002. Congress was so scared of the proposal that it didn't even get a vote.

These two authorizations for the use of force should have been terminated. Going even further, one could question counterproductive (for the same reason as the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars), congressionally unapproved, and therefore unconstitutional air and drone wars in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. Lives and even more money could be saved if they were also ended.

Therefore, eliminating pork spending, unneeded and counterproductive wars overseas, and excessive bases and forces at home and around the world could free up more money for military readiness and any post-war rebuilding necessary without ending the sequestration limits on defense spending needed to control budget deficits and debt accumulation, which are dragging the U.S. economy and preventing higher economic growth rates.

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Trump's North Korea Delusions

Exclusive: A combination of ignorance and rashness is making President Trump a particularly dangerous leader as he crashes ahead with a possible preemptive war on North Korea, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Trump reportedly tells an average of nearly five lies a day. He is also renowned for what Republican pundit Michael Gerson calls "his nearly complete ignorance of policy and history."

So it would be tempting – but wrong – to shrug off yet another crackpot claim that Trump made on Fox News a few days ago. Wrong because, if Trump really believes what he said, it may signal his serious willingness to start a bloodbath with North Korea that could consume millions of lives. It gives new credence to Sen. Bob Corker's recent warning that Trump could set the United States "on the path to World War III."

In an interview with Sean Hannity on Oct. 11, Trump boasted that America's ballistic missile interceptors offer, for now at least, a reliable defense against a small-scale nuclear missile launch by North Korea.

"We have missiles that can knock out a missile in the air 97 percent of the time, and if you send two of them, it's going to get knocked down," Trump asserted.

In awarding Trump's claim a maximum false rating of "Four Pinocchios," *Washington Post* fact checker Glenn Kessler called the President "totally off base," but conceded that Trump hadn't made up the claim out of whole cloth.

A few years ago, the Pentagon's program manager for the \$40 billion boondoggle known as the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system assured Congress that "the probability will be well in the high-90s today of the GMD system being able to intercept [a missile] today." In the same spirit, the head of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency boasted this May that his anti-missile missiles could "defeat any threat" that North Korea "would throw at us . . . through 2020."

The GMD currently consists of 36 interceptor missiles based at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. With more on the drawing board, they represent a huge cash cow to military contractors like Boeing and Raytheon, but they've never been shown to work reliably.

'Overstated Confidence'

Former Massachusetts Rep. John Tierney, who led a subcommittee that oversaw the GMD program, recently complained that “During hearings, Pentagon officials repeatedly overstated confidence in the program, understated technical limitations and dismissed concerns from physicists and other experts. This false sense of security persists today.”

According to Kingston Reif, an expert at the Arms Control Association, “The flight test record of the system is 10 for 18 and these tests have occurred under scripted and controlled conditions – meaning the realism of the tests is limited.”

“The system has only been tested once against an ICBM class target,” Reif added. “Twenty of the 32 interceptors deployed in Alaska are armed with an older kill vehicle that has not had a successful test since 2008. The system has never been tested against ‘complex countermeasures’ that North Korea could develop to try to fool U.S. defenses.”

Another arms expert, Joseph Cirincione, quipped, “We have as much chance of intercepting a North Korean missile as the president does of scoring a hole in one.”

The Pentagon’s own chief weapons evaluator warned recently that the GMD has at best “a limited capability to defend the U.S. Homeland” and the Government Accountability Office last year reported that the Missile Defense Agency’s optimistic performance claims “have not been demonstrated.”

In a follow-up report this year, the GAO flatly declared that the Pentagon’s system “will not likely provide robust defense as planned.”

Perils of Overconfidence

What are the consequences of President Trump believing unfounded Pentagon claims about U.S. missile defense capabilities? He might well be tempted to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea – the much discussed “military option” – confident that the U.S. homeland will be protected against a retaliatory strike.

He might further feel tempted to launch such an attack sooner rather than later, before North Korea can build up its fleet of nuclear missiles to overwhelm the GMD’s alleged capabilities.

As I have previously discussed, influential Trump advisers like Sen. Lindsey Graham have been urging the President for months to unleash an all-out attack before North Korea can develop its nuclear missile capabilities.

As Graham put it, the consequences “would be terrible but the war would be over

(there), wouldn't be here. It would be bad for the Korean Peninsula. It would be bad for China. It would be bad for Japan, be bad for South Korea. It would be the end of North Korea. But what it would not do is hit America and the only way it could ever come to America is with a missile."

Many of Trump's other close advisers appear to agree with Graham's premise, rather than acknowledging that America's vast nuclear arsenal is more than sufficient to deter a North Korean attack.

National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster declared this summer that "we can no longer afford to procrastinate" while North Korea develops its nuclear forces, arguing that "classic deterrence theory" won't work with such a brutal government.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly said Thursday, "I think I speak for the administration, that [North Korea] can simply not have the ability to reach the [U.S.] homeland."

Trump himself declared in his speech to the United Nations in September, "It is time for North Korea to realize that the denuclearization is its only acceptable future." He later tweeted that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was "wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man."

As conservative foreign policy analyst Daniel Larson observed, "The danger here is that Trump has defined everything except North Korean denuclearization as unacceptable, and that implies that the U.S. won't tolerate North Korea's continued possession of nuclear weapons. That suggests that Trump could be contemplating launching an illegal preventive war, and such a war would likely escalate to a nuclear exchange that would claim the lives of millions at a minimum. That is the trap that Trump's irresponsible rhetoric is creating for the U.S."

Trump's misplaced faith in his missile defense system only heightens that risk. As arms expert Tom Collina observed in September, "If President Trump believes he can stop a missile attack, he is more likely to escalate a conflict. This is how nations stumble into unintended wars. We can just imagine the conversation where Defense Secretary Jim Mattis tries to explain to President Trump why he can't depend on his \$40 billion anti-missile system: 'If I have it, why can't I use it?'"

Mattis has a duty to explain to Trump that Pentagon claims for that system are hype aimed at winning more appropriations from Congress, not facts. He has a further duty to remind the President that the consequences of war with North Korea would be, as he once put it, "tragic on an unbelievable scale."

The Chance for Deterrence

Mattis should also point out that a preemptive war would be as unnecessary as it would be destructive. In senior leadership meetings, North Korea's Kim Jong Un recently described his small but growing nuclear arsenal not as an offensive force but as a "powerful deterrent firmly safeguarding the peace and security in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia" against the "protracted nuclear threats" from Washington.

In another setting, Kim added, "Our final goal is to establish the equilibrium of real force with the US and make the US rulers dare not talk about military option."

U.S. intelligence experts believe Kim means what he says about acquiring nuclear weapons for deterrence, not for war. "Waking up one morning and deciding he wants to nuke" Los Angeles is not something Kim Jong Un plans to do, the CIA's top Korea analyst recently said in public comments. "He wants to rule for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed."

So even if Trump buys the Pentagon's sale pitch about missile defense capabilities, he has no reason to launch a catastrophic war to block North Korea's nuclear missile program. But for all our sake, someone urgently needs to let Trump know that he can't count on the U.S. homeland remaining unscathed if he does choose to start a war with a nuclear-armed adversary.

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Trump's Generals Fatten the Pentagon

President Trump's troika of generals may ease public fears about his irascible unpredictability, but they also are busy padding the U.S. military budget and fattening up friendly arms manufacturers, JP Sottile writes.

By JP Sottile

Americans are really counting on President Trump's vaunted team of generals who are widely regarded as "the adults in the room." Chief of Staff John Kelly,

National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Defense James “Mad Dog” Mattis make up the much-touted troika that stands between Trump’s itchy Twitter finger and the big red nuclear button.

This ring of rationality around the President has become paramount as Donald “The Dotard” Trump has engaged in an ever-escalating missile-size contest with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un. Trump originally dubbed the unusually-coiffed leader “Rocket Man” before realizing that he’d better qualify the size of Kim’s projectile by rechristening him as “Little Rocket Man” ... perhaps out of fear that someone might confuse Trump’s campy criticism with rocket envy.

These latest, nerve-wracking salvos came after Trump went to the United Nations General Assembly to drop some Bannon-armed bombs on the global gathering. After telling the world how great his presidency has already been and how wonderful a world of fervent nationalism could be if we only tried, Trump went on to warn to Kim Jung Un that the United States is prepared to “totally destroy North Korea.”

It was an unusual approach. It might even have violated the U.N. Charter. But he blew past all that when he weaponized his Twitter account to warn North Korea’s Foreign Minister that North Korea’s leadership “won’t be around much longer!”

That, and some macho goading of the North Koreans with flybys by U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers, led to North Korea’s Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho’s declaration at a U.N.-adjacent presser that the North Koreans regard Trump threats as a “declaration of war.” This “tit-for-tat” back and forth would be much funnier if the stakes weren’t so damn high and the road to a possible conflict wasn’t so damn low.

On the bright side, a well-known economist and head of Columbia University’s Earth Institute just tried to reassure us all that in spite of Trump’s “crude bravado” some real “progress is being made across the world and what is happening in the United States won’t stop that” from continuing. Writing for the Observer (U.K.), Jeffrey Sachs said he sees America losing its grip on the title of “indispensible” nation and also sees the world taking advantage of the space created by Trump’s histrionics. Some might even say that America seems to be “losing its grip” altogether.

Perhaps that’s why one of the “safe and sane” generals just issued a stark warning of his own. It got lost in the wild week of Trump’s temerity that ended up with the ultimate misdirection play when he blew his dog whistle on black athletes in the NBA and the NFL for protesting police shooting unarmed African-Americans. But make no mistake, one of the generals is keeping his eye on the ball. And sorry, Roger Goodell ... but there’s no doubt that this ball is filled with a lot of hot air.

Mad Dogs and Businessmen

According to Secretary of Defense Mattis, the land of the free and home of the brave is caught in a potentially deadly pincer action. Uncle Sam is trapped between a disastrous combo of crippling “defense caps” on Pentagon spending *and* a disorienting lack of “budgetary predictability.” This two-front war even has him “questioning whether or not America has the ability to survive.”

That’s right, folks ... Mad Dog believes Uncle Sam is staring down the barrel of an existential threat and it isn’t coming from a plump North Korean “Madman” or a group of Islamic freedom-haters or a Russian bear ambling around the world’s woods with a Cold War-Era grudge and an imperial eye on America’s God-given picnic basket. No, according to Mad Dog’s frothy assessment, taxpayers simply aren’t giving the military the money it needs to ensure America’s survival.

At least, that’s what he told the Air Force Association’s annual conference when he gave the keynote address just two days after the Senate passed a \$700 billion National Defense Authorization Act that delivered a fulsome 13 percent spike in defense spending over the previous year. They approved this world-dwarfing shopping spree by an overwhelming vote of 89-8. By the way, “world dwarfing” is not just a clever turn of phrase. This budget bonanza will exceed one-third of the world’s total spending on all things military.

And when the world does spend its relative pittance, it sure knows where to go ... because Uncle Sam also just logged a banner year as an international arms dealer with a “record setting” \$75.9 billion in sales thus far. That’s thanks, of course, to the “diplomatic” salespeople the State Department deploys around the world like so many Amway reps.

And then, just to put a cherry bomb on top of this year’s Beltway-busting sundae, the Senate’s big spenders gave the Pentagon two dozen more of Lockheed Martin’s profitable, if potentially useless, F-35 planes than the notoriously extortionate Pentagon requested in the first place. Ka-ching!

Cap And Spend

The one thing Congress didn’t do was nix the budget caps instituted under the Budgetary Control Act of 2011. At the time, the sweeping law resolved that year’s “debt ceiling crisis” and, in a passing nod to fiscal responsibility, it placed across-the-board limits on government spending.

And since the defense budget is, in fact, part of the government’s yearly transfer of wealth from taxpayers to the lavish troughs that circle the Beltway ... that meant the caps were even placed on the perennially sacrosanct defense budget. Last year, the so-called “sequestration” caps meant that defense

spending was “curtailed” to a paltry \$618 billion.

So, in President Obama’s final year, the United States “only” spent about \$20 billion more than China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, France, United Kingdom, Japan and Germany ... combined. And this world beating budget is the supposedly dire situation then-candidate Donald Trump kept harping on when he’d accused Obama of “depleting” America’s military might. Now, armed with Trump desire to “rebuild” the world’s biggest, most far-reaching military ... Congress is piling another \$80 billion on top of last year’s already gargantuan budget banquet.

But Trump was sort of “preemptively correct” about the depletion of the military. That’s because he significantly loosened rules of engagement governing bombing civilian targets. And that, in turn, has the Air Force crying poverty. Yup, while Congress was busy running up the budget, the military was busy running out of bombs, according to remarks given by Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson at the same Air Force Association confab. It’s the direct result of our new “non-interventionist” President opening the bomb-bay doors over the Muslim world and, as a result, filling graves with civilians at a record rate.

But civilian deaths don’t really cost anything. Bombs do. And through August, the U.S. dropped over 2,400 bombs on Afghanistan ... which blows away last year’s 1,337 bombs dropped. The U.S. is also “dropping about 100 precision weapons per day” on ISIS, according to Secretary Wilson. And during just the month of August alone, the U.S. poured 5,075 bombs on Iraq and Syria. Uncle Sam even added 100-plus strikes on the hunger-wracked, disease-ridden people of Yemen.

Mattis Gratis

Of course, it didn’t occur to Secretary Wilson or Mad Dog Mattis that the problem may have more to do with *too many targets* instead of *not enough bombs*. Then again, if you stop dropping all those bombs you’ll stop getting all that money. To wit, Trump’s much-discussed switcheroo on Afghanistan caused a nice bump in the stock prices of Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Boeing.

Trump’s Afghanistan speech also led to a “buy” recommendation for General Dynamics, which NASDAQ predicted would gain handsomely from Trump’s Afghanistan “surge.” Why? Because before Mattis joined the administration he pulled a tidy sum of \$594,369 for serving “as an ‘independent director’ of the multinational defense contracting behemoth.”

But Mattis’s old company isn’t the only Beltway business getting more bucks by selling bigger bangs. Trump’s long-stated willingness to spend like a drunken sailor made him a big hit with understandably bullish defense contractors. And some of those profitable patriots breezed through the revolving door from

Raytheon, Boeing and 13 other defense and defense-related companies ... right into the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security, according to the indefatigable Lee Fang of The Intercept.

In fact, this revving-up of the revolving door was another big problem Mattis cited in his remarks to the Air Force Association. But the problem isn't what you might think. It's not that the same people who worked for defense contractors are all-too often put in acquisition-related positions that could benefit their "former" employers. Instead, Mattis believes the problem is that the Pentagon and the defense industry are *too far apart*. Mattis thinks that the buyers and the sellers need "closer ties" and "more robust lines of communication," as InsideDefense.com so aptly put it. Go figure.

Revolving Doors

To be fair, Mad Dog is partially talking about innovation when he sounds the alarm about America's dangerous unwillingness to "invest" in, among other things, "global strike, close air support, global intelligence, global mobility, global surveillance and global command and control," according to a DefenseNews report on his speech. And he said he wants to speed up "innovation" and promised to move "aggressively and swiftly take advantage of the opportunities that we see developing around us in the private sector."

Still, it's still quite a statement when you consider the long, well-established history of the Pentagon's waste, the defense industry's ability to bank on taxpayers' largesse and the role the revolving door has played in that annual transfer of wealth since the start of the Cold War. And it's also a bit of a kicker when you start to calculate the cost of America's "Global War on Terror," which ranges from \$1.7 trillion for just the direct funding of specific conflicts to \$4.79 trillion on the high end, which is the total Brown University's "Cost of War Project" arrived at when it tabulated all War on Terror-related spending.

Either way, there is little doubt that one of the least of America's problems is Mattis's "uncertainty" in the budgeting process or a lack of funding. Nor is the problem an unwillingness to invest in snazzy new weapons systems. And for a nation straddled with \$1.4 trillion in student debt alone, it's hard to make the case that funding is a problem when, according to one assessment, just the \$80 billion increase over last year's titanic defense budget is enough make *all* public colleges and universities tuition-free for a full year.

And, despite his best efforts to single-handedly exhaust America's lethal larder, it's harder still to stomach Trump's brassy claims about a military that's somehow been "depleted" when the forever war has filled defense industry

coffers with trillions in taxpayer treasure. That's not even taking into account the \$1 trillion "upgrade" of the nuclear arsenal, which, of course, Trump touts as the super-duper result of his cunning plan to "beef up" America's biggest bombs when, in fact, it started under his predecessor. Not only is he committed to wiping Obama's name off of everything, but it's also that "size matters" thing, again ... right?

Sadly, that "size matters" thing is working like a charm for the defense industry. Trump's schoolyard posturing certainly helped push Lockheed's profitable THAAD missile defense system into South Korea. He's made sure the Persian Gulf remains a tony neighborhood filled with committed customers by probing ways to decertify the Iran Nuke Deal and by stoking Saudi Arabia's regional ambitions. And just like he promised, America is in fact pouring billions into "rebuilding" its "defenses."

And maybe that's the other reason why "The Generals" couldn't pass up an opportunity to "serve" in Trump's gold-plated administration. It's not just about making sure Trump doesn't unnecessarily fill a bunch of flag-draped coffins or start pushing buttons that do more than blow-up Twitter. Rather, the so-called "adults" may have also recognized that Trump's callow salesmanship offered a "can't miss" chance to go on a spending spree before emerging war-weariness and annual budgetary sequestration truly put a cap on their long-term budgetary ambitions. That's because "size matters" to them, too.

And it would also explain why Mad Dog is so rabid about getting those sequestration caps removed while Trump is busy throwing international hissy-fits and ginning-up the kind national insecurity the defense industry thrives on. But that doesn't mean America's survival is in jeopardy. Instead, it might mean that what's really in jeopardy is the Pentagon's long-term ability to convince taxpayers to give it and its "partners" on the other side of the revolving door anything they want ... and then some.

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Trump's Bonfire of Washington Politics

President Trump shocked the political world and his own "base" when he struck a budget deal with Democrats to get emergency funding for Hurricane Harvey victims, reports ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

Last week, President Trump threw a grenade into the U.S. political structure. Political fragments now lie scattered on the ground around Washington. The final outcome of this lightning act by Trump may take time to fully assess, but for sure, for the coming months (and probably until the U.S. mid-term elections are over), uncertainty will reign, and foreign policy will not find it easy to shoulder its way into anyone senior's attention.

One Democratic source described the lightning-like flash of events in the Oval Office: "The sequence was GOP pushing for 18-month debt [limit increase], then 12, then 6, then Trump cutting them off and agreeing with us on 3 ... The Oval Office spins fast in Trump's White House."

Of course, the key question is: was this "a seat of the pants whimsical punt," or is there a wider strategy in play here? Just to be clear, what Trump did – in a trice – was this:

First, Trump supported providing \$8 billion in emergency funding for Hurricane Harvey relief, *without* acceding to the conservative Republican demand that it be linked directly to offsetting spending cuts.

Second, he agreed to combine the Harvey relief with raising the debt ceiling, and thus cut across the Republican Freedom Caucus – the Tea Party constituency which contributed so directly to Trump's election, and who had insisted that the two issues be voted separately.

Third, Trump sided with the congressional Democratic leadership over the Republican leadership, by conceding that the debt ceiling increase only be for three months.

Fourth, Trump apparently agreed to a three-month continuing resolution. (In the event that Congress fails to pass legislation to fund the government before a new fiscal year begins on Oct. 1, the House can pass legislation to keep certain specified federal operations functioning at current spending levels. That legislation is called a *Continuing Resolution* (CR). This is what Democratic leaders, Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California and Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, wanted, and got – without the GOP receiving a jot in return.

Finally, Trump later speculated that it might be possible to do away with the debt ceiling completely.

Mounting Debt

Why the debt ceiling is so crucial is that when an annual U.S. budget is set, it is not a simple exercise of matching expenditure and revenue because most Federal expenditure is automatic expenditure, deriving from past legislation

(some, dating back decades), and which increases inexorably from its built-in automaticity. Without a debt ceiling, total U.S. debt levels effectively are uncontrolled, and their momentum is inexorably upwards – and upwards today at an accelerating pace.

Automaticity in the U.S. budget already amounts to \$10 trillion to \$12 trillion of new debt through 2027. That – unchecked – could mean a \$35 trillion public debt by 2027 (140 percent of GDP).

Well, the establishment Republican leaders were incensed by Trump's deal with the Democrats. One GOP insider conceded to *Axios*: "We can't overstate the level of despair among Republicans."

And, furthermore, virtually all of the Freedom Caucus (core Trump supporters) voted against the Trump-Schumer-Pelosi "kick-the-can" ploy, as did 90 of the 150 members of the larger Republican Study Group. In short, neither the GOP leadership nor the "base" is happy – albeit viewing the situation from very differing ends of the GOP spectrum.

But from another perspective, while the Republican anguish is understandable – as well as their justified complaints at having lost their negotiating "cards" to the Democrats in the coming debt ceiling and budget negotiations – the raw truth is that the Republican leadership has proved incapable of *any* legislative action – mired, as they are in factional fights and schisms.

In other words, the two-party system in the U.S. has reached a point at which it is incapacitated. It just cannot legislate effectively – or, equally – deal with the ballooning fiscal deficit, in any meaningful way. This constitutes a major impediment for any President hoping to jump-start change. Perhaps it was in this light that President Trump decided to opt for sudden bipartisanship with the Democrats?

But will the grenade tossed into his own party's midst achieve his agenda – radical, reflationary tax legislation? David Stockman has long argued that there is no possible GOP majority for a FY 2018 budget resolution that adds trillions of dollars to Trump's defense, border control, veterans, and infrastructure build-ups, plus unfunded tax cuts. And which comes *in addition to* the \$10 trillion to \$12 trillion of *new* debt that is already built in to government expenditure through to 2027.

Stockman is likely right. And he is likely right too, that the bottom line is that the only tax bill which can pass by year-end is one that would be dictated by Democrats – Schumer and Pelosi – in return for the next kick-the-can extension of the debt ceiling and CR (continuing resolution) for the current

fiscal year. Republicans therefore will likely be entering the mid-term elections naked – with nothing of any substance to show voters. Thus, the GOP fears a blood-letting.

Trump's 'Bubble' Warnings

So what is going on? Trump seems almost to be inviting a debt crisis, and possibly, a substantial market sell-off too. This paradox brings us face-to-face with the biggest lacuna in understanding Trump: He has been absolutely consistent since 2000 in warning of a coming U.S. financial crisis (“whomsoever be the U.S. President”). During the presidential election campaign, he spoke of “big ugly bubbles”; he warned that the coming financial crisis would be worse – much worse – than the Great Financial Crisis of 2008.

He has, in short, been uncharacteristically consistent. But in the campaign, as candidate, while repeatedly warning of financial crisis, he said *nothing* about how he would deal with it. In one rally, he repeated this stark warning of imminent crisis, adding however that voters should not worry: We will manage it. We will “balance it out.”

More than being merely insouciant about throwing around grenades that will make his FY 2018 budget virtually impossible to achieve (so far, the full House has so far failed to even debate a FY 2018 budget resolution), Trump seems rather, to relish his guerrilla action. More than that, in managing an economy heading toward crisis (in his own estimation), Trump has deliberately surrounded himself with Goldman Sachs financial advisers – which seems somewhat akin to asking a pastry chef to advise on how to lose weight.

Is Trump thinking of using the financial crisis – which he himself has prophesied – as a form of economic catharsis? As shock therapy – in the Naomi Klein vein? That is one possibility. Although Trump has never suggested it, Steve Bannon has been quite clear (before joining Trump's team) that his main political target – for dismantling – was the Republican Party itself. The Democrats were to be defeated – certainly – but the Republicans were the main enemy, in bed with corporate oligarchs, Bannon complained.

Is Trump's strategy then, lavishly to promise his base, and then blame the Congressional “establishment” for failing to make the promises materialize – and then use the ensuing crisis, as shock therapy for re-constituting the Republican Party?

Bannon's Role

Just a month or so, after apparently being ousted from his post at the White House, the *Washington Post* writes Steve Bannon is back on the warpath:

“Recent reports revealed that the former Trump whisperer and ultranationalist ideologue is spearheading an effort to support a slate of primary challenges against sitting Republicans seemingly opposed to his agenda.

“‘The anti-incumbent effort could dramatically reshape the 2018 primary landscape if it materializes,’ noted Politico. ‘It would pit a group of pro-Trump primary challengers against sitting lawmakers, who are perceived as more mainstream.’

“Then, in an interview with CBS’s *60 Minutes* on Sunday evening, Bannon railed against the party leadership, which he thinks has stymied Trump’s campaign promises and failed to push through key legislation, including the repeal of Obamacare, that the White House seeks.

“‘The Republican establishment is trying to nullify the 2016 election,’ said Bannon from his Washington townhouse, which doubles as an office for the far-right Breitbart website. ‘They do not want Donald Trump’s populist, economic nationalist agenda to be implemented. ... It’s as obvious as night follows day. ...’

“Bannon, who once described Trump as ‘a blunt instrument’ for his agenda, sees a very different political future for the United States. ‘The only question before us: Is it going to be a left-wing populism or a right-wing populism,’ he told CBS. ‘And that is the question that will be answered in 2020.’”

So, is it inside-out politics that is taking place here? Has Trump put his closest lieutenants on *the outside*, while bringing the establishment generals (who made him eat his hat on Afghanistan), and the Goldmanite icons of Wall Street “sharper” on *the inside*, so that they will carry the blame, and become the sacrifice to the shock therapy “gods” when the time comes to remake the Republican Party in the Trump image? Perhaps François Macron’s rout of the French conventional political parties, and the making of a “virtual” third party – recruited over the internet – has had its influence here?

Or, maybe, Trump just acted on a whim, and views debt as “a good thing”: plentiful and cheap debt, after all, is what floated him to billionairehood. He was before becoming President, a liberal New York businessman, with all the flexibility that that implies – if the Republicans cannot “deliver,” you do a deal with the Democrats.

As with all things, it is good to know when to stop (where the boundaries are) – and trying to trade the *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* program, for a Mexican “wall” – *in name only* – may prove to have been a deal “too far.”

Breitbart, Steve Bannon’s political “weapon,” immediately went to war, and in a

scathing headline, christened Trump as “Amnesty Don”:

“Staunch conservative allies of President Trump have erupted in anger and incredulity after Democrats late Wednesday announced that the president had agreed to pursue a legislative deal that would protect thousands of young undocumented immigrants from deportation but not secure Trump’s signature campaign promise: building a massive wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

“Nearing midnight and into Thursday, social media accounts came alive as elected officials and activists on the right dashed off tweets and posts to share their shock.

“And in between those posts, there was a flurry of fuming calls and text messages – a blaring political fire alarm among Trump’s die-hard supporters.

“Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), one of the GOP’s biggest immigration hawks, issued a dramatic warning to the president after he scrolled through news reports.

“‘If AP is correct, Trump base is blown up, destroyed, irreparable, and disillusioned beyond repair,’ King tweeted, referencing an Associated Press story on the bipartisan agreement.

He added, ‘No promise is credible’...

“Conservative polemicist Ann Coulter, who wrote a book titled ‘In Trump We Trust’, did not buy the president’s explanation.

“‘At this point, who DOESN’T want Trump impeached?’ Coulter tweeted on Thursday morning.”

Political Bonfire

What is coming, it seems, is not the promised tax bill, mid-wifed into existence by the Democrats, but the political conflagration that Bannon precisely forecasts: between the populist right and the populist left. Both sides to this conflict are determined to seize America for themselves, but may end by despoiling America (and its economy) in the process. What the DACA episode shows is the latent, angry radicalism to Trump’s base. The gloves seem to be coming off.

What does this mean for foreign policy? It means no overall direction to anything: sometimes contradictory policies will continue on autopilot – some on autopilot settings punched in during the last administration, as well as others conceived but not gestated by the (already conflicted) Trump administration. Foreign policy largely will be ignored (apart from North Korea), as Americans become immersed in the coming internal conflict – until some foreign policy

event blows up, and lands on the Washington door-step.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum. (Copyright Conflicts Forum - not to be reprinted, reproduced or re-circulated without prior permission. Please contact CF with any queries.)

How the Deep State Ties Down Trump

America's Deep State players have tied down President Trump on Russian sanctions and other foreign and economic policies but that doesn't mean the struggle is over, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

President Trump has had his foreign policy hands and feet tied by the Russia (and Iran) Sanctions Act. He now has been rendered "helpless": in respect to détente with Russia – gulliverized, spitefully, by his own party, working with the Democrats, to empty Trump's constitutional prerogatives in foreign policy – and to seize them for Congress.

And in a further humiliation, Trump has been "rolled" by his military minders (Generals James Mattis, H.R. McMaster and John Kelly) on his Afghan policy: he has relinquished civilian oversight of this military expedition in Afghanistan to McMaster and Mattis – the former being the presumed author of the "new" Afghan policy. The President was "rolled" on his foreign military prerogatives too – as Commander in Chief – by his triumvirate of military minders in the White House. The "civilian" leadership has given place to the "military."

The question is whether these humiliating concessions will appease his opponents sufficiently to allow the President to "live on," albeit as an incapacitated President, or is this just the *hors d'oeuvre*? It seems that the *entrée* may be being planned as the complete discrediting of Trump's base – ordinary Republicans being lashed to the Trump "Titanic" – to be sunk along with its captain – as "white-supremacists, white bigots and Nazis."

Professor Walter Russell Mead – and he should know – tells us that "President Trump's highest officials remain committed, one way or another, to defending the global order the U.S. has been building since the Truman era. That includes [Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Mattis, Kelly and McMaster]: These

men share a disdain for the Obama administration's retrenchment and retreat. ... They want to check the ambitions of America's rivals, while restoring the foundations, both military and economic, of U.S. world power."

Ok – that is clear: they want to “grasp” America *as world order*. They have been trying that for some time now, but have not yet succeeded in seizing “her.” With all “her” allure and riches, their quarry remains frustratingly elusive, and her very unattainability seems to madden “ego” even more – so that which cannot be “had,” must be despoiled.

What else accounts for the new Afghan plan? Almost nobody (outside of the U.S. élites) believes it will do other than prolong an unwinnable war (or worse, push Pakistan and India into confrontation). Yet the further despoliation of Afghanistan must go on, for the sake of the myth of *this* America – of Trump's “highest officials” – that America is always victorious, if only it *wills* it sufficiently, and is persistent – “defeat” as heresy.

It is a familiar story of inflated ego. But the sense of power and wanting to “grasp at something unattainable” is so compelling, that the U.S. élites desire both to crush the “infuriating” Trump, and his “deplorables” – to thrust them down into the irrecoverable depths – while weakening any external rival that might hinder the way to their “having” America, *as world order*.

A Frenzied Deep State

It seems that the American deep state is so frenzied in this way that its inhabitants can no longer see straight: they are ready to risk despoiling not just the “recalcitrant” abroad, but America herself. And the way they are going about trying to “have her,” may well ruin the deep state too, as collateral damage.

The *Russia Sanctions Act* may have been conceived both to paralyze President Trump, and to validate the “Putin-stole-the-Election” narrative, but it precisely removes any chance of Messrs Mattis, McMaster, Kelly and Tillerson to succeed with seizing America *as world proconsul*.

Russia, China and Iran, now linked by again being threatened by sanctions, are now firmly embedded into a strategic coalition – and they are determined to resist.

Incredibly, as one commentator put it: “During the ramp up to new UN sanctions on North Korea, the Trump administration threatened to sanction China if it did not commit to further pressure [on N. Korea] ... Trump himself implied that he was willing for a *quid pro quo*: ‘If China helps us, I feel a lot differently toward trade, a lot differently toward trade’, [Trump] told reporters ...

"A deal was made, and the UN Resolution 2371 passed ... China did its part of the deal: It helped pass the UN resolution against North Korea – and it immediately implemented it, even though that caused a significant loss for Chinese companies which trade with North Korea. [But ...]

"Now Trump is back at sanctioning Chinese (and Russian) companies: The Trump administration on Tuesday imposed sanctions on 16 mainly Chinese and Russian companies and people for assisting North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and helping the North make money to support those programs ...

"Among those sanctioned are six Chinese companies, including three coal companies; two Singapore-based companies that sell oil to North Korea and three Russians that work with them; a Russian company that deals in North Korean metals and its Russian director; a construction company based in Namibia; a second Namibia-based company, and its North Korean director, that supplies North Korean workers to build statues overseas to generate income for the North.

"These are 'secondary sanctions' which block financial transactions and make it nearly impossible for those companies and people to run an international business. Moreover – China had already banned all coal imports from North Korea. It had sent back North Korean coal ships, and instead bought coal from the United States. [And] now, Chinese companies are getting sanctioned over North Korean coal that they no longer buy? Furthermore, selling fuel oil to North Korea is explicitly allowed under the new UN sanctions..."

The alliance of these three states and their "partner forces" no longer believe that America is capable of serious diplomacy, or that it enjoys any real capacity to "seize" the world. On the contrary, they see Europe drifting away from the U.S., the Gulf Cooperation Council in disarray, and even Israel is despairing of its Washington ally. They do remain concerned about North Korea, but the fear of U.S. pre-emptive military action against North Korea is tempered by the knowledge that North Korea effectively holds 30,000 U.S. servicemen hostage in the de-militarized zone.

The primary focus is now shifting to how these states might protect themselves, if the two sides in the U.S. internal conflict succeed in each despoiling one another, and thereby throw the world into financial turmoil (hence the flurry of activity in arranging local currency contracts and currency swaps):

"When Steve Bannon was ejected from the White House, last week," the *New Yorker* quotes Bannon as citing "his frustrations with the coming tax bill, as one of the reasons he believed that the Trump nationalist agenda had been hijacked by the so-called globalists, such as Cohn and the other members of the Big Six."

Yes, Trump has been “rolled” in the economic sphere, too: The “big six” consist of four members of Congress (including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Paul Ryan), plus economic adviser Gary Cohn and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin – both of Goldman Sachs.

“They’re not populists, they’re not nationalists, they had no interest in his [i.e. Trump’s] program – Zero”, Bannon told the *Weekly Standard*, “On what element of Trump’s program, besides tax cuts – which is going to be the standard marginal tax cut – where have they rallied to Trump’s cause? They haven’t.”

The Power of Cohn

“In the Bannon-era, factionalized Trump White House, Cohn was not just the head of the National Economic Council but the leader of the group of officials whom Bannon derided as ‘New York.’ (Breitbart stories called Cohn and his companions at the N.E.C. ‘Globalist Swampsters’)", notes the *New Yorker*.

Cohn, who is 56, was brought into the Administration by Jared Kushner, the President’s son-in-law, who once interned for Cohn at Goldman Sachs. Cohn is a long-time donor to Democratic candidates.

So, Trump’s “reflation trade” is being “normalized” by the “big six” – more of the usual D.C. politics.

But, why be concerned if the U.S. stock market is hitting new highs every day? Indeed, the “market” has ridden an “ascending curve for 101 months since March 2009, during which the S&P 500 rose by 270% and rarely dropped by more than 2-4%, without [its members] coming to believe that nothing mattered except hitting the bid [button] during the more than 50 intervals when the stock market momentarily faltered. Virtually without exception, each shallow dip was accompanied by easy money ‘buy’ signals from the central banks, or selective ‘green shoots’ [releases] among the in-coming data.”

As David Stockman writes: “After 101 months of dip buying ... the headline reading algos [robot computer traders] have become programmed in a completely asymmetrical manner. They are triggered to ‘buy’ on economic/policy good news (because it implies more profits); but also to ‘buy’ *on bad news* (because it means more [liquidity] accommodation, and market-support/price keeping actions by the Fed and other central banks.

“But this beneficent arrangement also encourages even prudent gamblers to minimize the amount of downside hedging insurance they purchase to protect their often heavily leveraged (through options and derivatives) book of longs.”

Stockman is warning that markets already are trading at historic highs, and that

no one is paying attention to these extreme valuations or the economic or political fundamentals – simply because the latter has become utterly irrelevant, if every small market dip, is immediately followed by the unbroken elevation of all asset classes (thanks to Central Bank interventions).

“That is, the gamblers and robo-machines have become so hard-wired to the expectation that the central banking and fiscal branches of the state will do ‘whatever it takes’ to keep the stock averages rising, that it has become irrational to waste time and resources on parsing ‘whatever is going on,’” Instead, writes Stockman, “it’s all about the chart points, money flows, next in rotation sectors, ETF buying power, momentum trades and technical arbitrages, such as embodied in the currently massive risk parity trades.”

In short, all sensibility to risk (political or credit or any other) has been expunged by the determination of the Central Banks to keep asset prices inflating higher. The financial system precisely is looking the other way – intent on making money “when the going is easy” – and consequently, any crisis now will create a disproportionate impact on those levered asset values, magnified by the trades today being all one-way.

A Zombiefied Trump

Here is the point: Will the political zombiefication of President Trump satisfy the two party Establishments? Are they mollified enough, to come together to agree on a budget and a new “clean” debt ceiling (the “ceiling” arrives on Sept. 29)? And, even if achieved, will so-called “normalization” of Trump policies really take the U.S. back to the nirvana of “how things used to be”?

Ostensibly, “normalization” of Trump’s economic policy should be manageable: Ryan and McConnell would need only to line up a modest number of Democratic votes (together with Republican foot-soldiers), to enact a debt ceiling increase. But it may be more complicated – much more complicated than that: Should the Democrats cooperate (and they will *want to appear* that they are co-operating in order to avoid blame for any subsequent Federal shut-down), it will be only on the basis of “an onerous quid pro quo that requires Trump to give up the Mexican Wall; tax cuts for the wealthy; his proposed deep domestic spending cuts, and also to fund the insurance company bailouts that are needed to forestall drastic premium increases and coverage cancellations during the 2018 insurance (and election) year.”

Certainly, the Democrats will present a public face of co-operation, but such is the angry temper of Washington today (with both sides looking for a fight), that almost certainly they will require their revenge pound of flesh cut from Trump’s side. The *Freedom Caucus* group of Republicans (which is linked to Bannon) might

then jump ship, leaving the Big Six with either “no ceiling deal” or a “Democratic”-shaped budget.

Trump tweeted: “I requested that Mitch M & Paul R tie the Debt Ceiling legislation into the popular V.A. Bill (which just passed) for easy approval. They didn’t do it so now we have a big deal with Dems holding them up (as usual) on Debt Ceiling approval. Could have been so easy-now a mess!”

Axios reports that “top White House and GOP leadership officials tell us [Axios], the chances of a market-rattling government shutdown are rising by the day – and were [such] even before Trump threatened at his raucous Phoenix rally on Tuesday night, to use a shutdown as leverage to get funding for the [Mexican] border wall.”

Quoting a “top Republican source” who puts the chance as high as 75 percent, *Axios* adds that “the peculiar part is that almost everyone I talk to on the Hill, agrees that it is more likely than not.”

The Democrats seem determined to remove any provision for “the wall,” and Trump seems to be spoiling for a fight with the Democrats (and Ryan and McConnell) on this issue. He has had to acquiesce to being “rolled” in foreign and defense policy – might he turn, and dig in his heels? He is already channeling the blame onto the Republican Establishment leadership.

If so, what price the continuation of a market historic “high” and brimming with complacency?

Russia and China are right to be thinking “worst case” and how to minimize their exposure to any American cataclysmic descent into political turmoil – and possible violence.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

America’s ‘Global Policeman’ Role

America’s influential neocons and their liberal-hawk sidekicks want U.S. interventions pretty much everywhere, but other powers are chafing against this U.S. “global policeman,” as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

Global disorder is on the rise. What can the U.S. do about it? There are two fundamentally different approaches one can take – it all depends on your philosophy of how the world works.

The first school thinks primarily in terms of law, order and authority: it accepts the need for a global policeman. The second school is more willing to let regional nations take the initiative to eventually work things out among themselves. Both schools possess advantages and disadvantages. Something called Balance of Power politics lies halfway between the two.

Global policemen nominate themselves from among the ranks of the most powerful – and ambitious – states of the world. Over the last half century the U.S. has assumed this role – but a significant shift is already under way. In Washington this school argues that growing American disinclination to assert order is a key reason for a more chaotic world. From the end of World War II to the fall of the USSR in 1991 Washington had shared, reluctantly, that role with the Soviet Union – rivals but both unwilling to let the world spin out of control into chaos and nuclear war. Then, after the fall of the USSR, the U.S. triumphantly assumed the role of “the world’s sole superpower.” In an earlier century the British Empire played the same role, although contested by Germany, France and others.

In Washington right now, neoconservatives and liberal interventionists (export democracy, by gunpoint if necessary) lead the charge against what they see as U.S. abandonment of its moral duty, leaving the world in the lurch. Their list of American failed duties is long: if only we had moved earlier to remove the Kim dynasty in North Korea, or Assad in Syria, or blocked the referendum that reincorporated Crimea into Russia, or brought about regime change in Iran, or backed Saudi Arabia against Qatar to keep the Gulf from splitting, or employed sufficient force to put an end to civil conflict in Afghanistan, or backed Ukraine to the hilt against Russia, pressed more vigorously in Venezuela, established firmer lines in the China Sea, warned Philippine leader Duterte off from his murderous anti-drug policies, and intervened to prevent looming Ethiopian-Somali-Eritrean war in the strategic Horn of Africa, etc. The list of U.S. duties, neglected in the eyes of this school of “benign” intervention, is endless.

Troubling Questions

Yet this perspective raises troubling questions:

–Is the U.S. willing to perpetually expend its blood and treasure around the world in military and covert interventions to remove undemocratic leaders – or simply leaders we don’t like? Simply to maintain U.S. pre-eminence? What is the overall gain in a cost-benefit analysis?

–How acceptable are the opportunity costs of such interventions – as opposed to better use of U.S. taxpayer money domestically?

–How much can the U.S. really prevent the rise of other powers with their increasing sense of their own interests and entitlements? Small powers are willing to sacrifice quite a lot when it involves interests on their doorstep – compared to limited American enthusiasm for intervention across an ocean for dubious gain.

–How do we respond to rising weapons technology abroad which increasingly circumscribes U.S. freedom of action? Nuclear weapons employ technology from the mid-Twentieth Century. And by now many powers are developing a meaningful cyber capability against rivals and opponents. To a cyber-warrior the world is a candy store of targets. Ditto for drones – simple technology spreading fast, capable of inflicting potentially great damage.

The counter-perspective to the global policeman accepts the reality of new powers arising all around us. There is little we can do to prevent them. We increasingly face major alternative power centers out there. China, a non-player for the last hundred years or more (unlike in much earlier centuries), is formidably back on the scene and asserting political, economic and cultural power. China even assumes a new degree of global leadership functions, some of which contain positive features.

Europe, after over a century of murderous and suicidal wars, is finally back on its feet representing perhaps the most progressive political grouping in the world. With a lot of soft and hard power Europe feels increasingly independent.

Russia has a global vision stemming from centuries of exercising power widely across Eurasia, and in the Cold War, as a “global super-power.” Its diplomatic and military power far overshadows its poor economy, but it is willing to pay the cost to be part of the global game. As with China, Russia is not entirely a negative factor on the world scene either, except to those U.S. hawks reluctant to compromise with any alternative power.

Additionally the world is witnessing more and more medium powers asserting their interests in their own regions than the U.S. or the Soviet Union would ever have “permitted” during the Cold War. Today that list includes states like India, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Iran, Canada, and South Korea with strong perceptions of their own interests.

Many Flashpoints

Any world policeman today faces a growing number of flashpoints beyond its capabilities. Many are ugly and may cost lives of millions of people.

Humanitarian crises will continue to abound (like Palestine, Yemen, South Sudan, the Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, Afghanistan, global refugees.)

Global warming and environmental degradation create powerful refugee mills that produce millions of hungry and angry have-nots. U.S. intervention is not designed to cope with these issues.

And then routine intervention by a world policeman also creates another major negative: the continued political infantilization of so many countries in the world. Routine U.S. intervention invariably leads to warring parties who prefer in the end to deal with Washington rather than with their own rivals for power. We see this repeatedly, most recently in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere where factions prefer to manipulate Washington to get what they want rather than face local realities. The Gulf States today are similarly playing Washington against Iran rather than communicating.

So a difficult and deeper issue arises: should most countries and peoples be “allowed” to stew in their own juices? To settle their own issues? Should they not take local responsibility? Doesn’t political maturity arise from being compelled to deal with rivals within a country, or a region? Remember, everybody in the world is eager to enlist the U.S. to fight on its side. Didn’t it take two hideous World Wars (preceded by many uglier centuries before then) before war-like Europeans finally figured out that enough was enough, and created alternative mechanisms for dealing with each other? Yet now it is an article of faith in European politics that war in Europe must be *unthinkable*.

Do problems have to “ripen” (to use that ugly political science term) before warring factions decide it is simply too damaging, dangerous, costly – even immoral – to press the conflict forward?

In a thoughtful and skillfully-argued recent essay, long-time journalist and conservative geopolitical observer and thinker Robert Kaplan shows himself to be in the first camp: the indispensable need for imposed law and order.

He argues that only continuing American commitment to its deepest international ideals is what makes the U.S. what it is; that if we fail to uphold our ideals we are left with no organizing national principle – and thus no national purpose. (Never mind that these “ideals” are upheld on a highly selective, transient, cherry-picked basis.)

Dubious Neocon Logic?

But do we really believe that the U.S. will atrophy as a society in the absence of “maintaining global values?” It would be sad to think that U.S. greatness depends on constant intervention and war in the name of the global order.

How long can the U.S. go on “generously,” supplying international order? Perhaps we are indeed doomed to watch an increasingly Darwinian world out there, operating without Big Brother. But the handwriting is on the wall: few in the world still support American policing of the world – or perhaps policing by any single state.

If policing is required (and there may be an occasional role for it), it will ever more likely involve a consortium of major international players – at a bare minimum the European Union, China, and Russia. The United Nations Security Council, when it can agree, also plays an important role. Indeed, these three powers are determined to deny the U.S. any further monopoly of international power. And that was true before Trump.

In the end, how do we think about history? A process of gradual advancement? Or anarchy kept at bay only by great powers? Does history have any “meaning,” any trajectory? Or, as an earlier British statesman debunked the whole notion: “history is just one damn thing after another.”

If we believe that permanent conflict is simply a fundamental element of the human condition, then the argument for a policeman gains weight. But from now on international policing is going to be shared – like it or not. And however “inefficient” it may be.

After all, there aren’t many “benign” hegemonies around any more to do the job – if they ever existed.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American’s crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle) grahamefuller.com

Steve Bannon’s Apocalyptic ‘Unravelling’

From the Archive: Ousted White House strategist Steve Bannon was a perplexing mix of populist, operative and opportunist, but his political theories crossed into the apocalyptic and bizarre, as Alastair Crooke described last March.

By Alastair Crooke (First published on March 9, 2017)

Steve Bannon is accustomed to start many of his talks to activists and Tea Party gatherings in the following way: “At 11 o’clock on 18 September 2008, Hank Paulson and Ben Bernanke told the U.S. President that they had already stove-

piped \$500 billions of liquidity into the financial system during the previous 24 hours – but needed a further one Trillion dollars, *that same day*.

“The pair said that if they did not get it immediately, the U.S. financial system would implode within 72 hours; the world’s financial system, within three weeks; and that social unrest and political chaos could ensue within the month.” (In the end, Bannon notes, it was more like \$5 trillion that was required, though no one really knows how much, as there has been no accounting for all these trillions).

“We (the U.S.) have”, he continues, “in the wake of the bailouts that ensued, liabilities of \$200 trillions, but net assets – including everything – of some \$50-60 trillion.” (Recall that Bannon is himself a former Goldman Sachs banker).

“We are upside down; the industrial democracies today have a problem we have never had before; we are over-leveraged (we have to go through a massive de-leveraging); and we have built a welfare state which is completely and totally unsupportable.

“And why this is a crisis ... the problem ... is that the numbers have become so esoteric that even the guys on Wall Street, at Goldman Sachs, the guys I work with, and the Treasury guys ... It’s so tough to get this together ... Trillion dollar deficits ... etcetera.”

But, Bannon says – in spite of all these esoteric, unimaginable numbers wafting about – the Tea Party women (and it is mainly led by women, he points out) get it. They *know* a different reality: they know what groceries now cost, they know their kids have \$50,000 in college debt, are still living at home, and see no jobs in prospect: “The reason I called the film *Generation Zero* is because this generation, the guys in their 20s and 30s: We’ve wiped them out.”

And it’s not just Bannon. A decade earlier, in 2000, Donald Trump was writing in a very similar vein in a pamphlet that marked his first toying with the prospect of becoming a Presidential candidate: “My third reason for wanting to speak out is that I see not only incredible prosperity ... but also the possibility of economic and social upheaval ... Look towards the future, and if you are like me, you will see storm clouds brewing. Big Trouble. I hope I am wrong, but I think we may be facing an economic crash like we’ve never seen before.”

And before the recent presidential election, Donald Trump kept to this same narrative: the stock market was dangerously inflated. In an interview on CNBC, he said, “I hope I’m wrong, but I think we’re in a big, fat, juicy bubble,” adding that conditions were so perilous that the country was headed for a “very massive recession” and that “if you raise interest rates even a little bit,

(everything's) going to come crashing down."

The Paradox

And here, precisely, is the paradox: Why – if Trump and Bannon view the economy as already over-leveraged, excess-bubbled, and far too fragile to accommodate even a small interest rate rise – has Trump (in Mike Whitney's words) "promised ... more treats and less rules for Wall Street ... tax cuts, massive government spending, and fewer regulations ... \$1 trillion in fiscal stimulus to rev up consumer spending and beef up corporate profits ... to slash corporate tax rates and fatten the bottom line for America's biggest businesses. And he's going to gut Dodd-Frank, the 'onerous' regulations that were put in place following the 2008 financial implosion, to prevent another economy-decimating cataclysm."

Does President Trump see the world differently, now that he is President? Or has he parted company with Bannon's vision?

Though Bannon is often credited – though most often, by a hostile press, aiming to present Trump (falsely) as the "accidental President" who never really expected to win – as the intellectual force behind President Trump. In fact, Trump's current main domestic and foreign policies were all presaged, and entirely present, in Trump's 2000 pamphlet.

In 2000, Bannon was less political, screenwriter Julia Jones, a long-time Bannon collaborator, notes. "But the Sept. 11 attacks," Ms. Jones says, "changed him" and their Hollywood collaboration did not survive his growing engagement with politics.

Bannon himself pins his political radicalization to his experience of the 2008 Great Financial Crisis. He detested how his Goldman colleagues mocked the Tea Party's "forgotten" ones. As Ms. Jones sees it, a more reliable key to Bannon's worldview lies in his military service.

"He has a respect for duty," she said in early February. "The word he has used a lot is 'dharma.'" Mr. Bannon found the concept of dharma in the Bhagavad Gita, she recalls. It can describe one's path in life or one's place in the universe.

There is no evidence, however, that President Trump either has changed his economic views or that he has diverged in his understanding of the nature of the crisis facing America (and Europe).

Tests Ahead

Both men are very smart. Trump understands business, and Bannon finance. They surely know the headwinds they face: the looming prospect of a wrangle to

increase the American \$20 trillion “debt ceiling” (which begins to bite on March 15), amid a factious Republican Party, the improbability of the President’s tax or fiscal proposals being enacted quickly, and the likelihood that the Federal Reserve will hike interest rates, “until something breaks.” If they are so smart, what then is going on?

What Bannon has brought to the partnership however, is a clear articulation of the nature of this “crisis” in his Generation Zero film, which explicitly is built around the framework of a book called *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*, written in 1997 by Neil Howe and William Strauss.

In the words of one of the co-authors, the analysis “rejects the deep premise of modern Western historians that social time is either linear (continuous progress or decline) or chaotic (too complex to reveal any direction). Instead we adopt the insight of nearly all traditional societies: that social time is a recurring cycle in which events become meaningful only to the extent that they are what philosopher Mircea Eliade calls ‘reenactments.’ In cyclical space, once you strip away the extraneous accidents and technology, you are left with only a limited number of social moods, which tend to recur in a fixed order.”

Howe and Strauss write: “The cycle begins with the First Turning, a ‘High’ which comes after a crisis era. In a High, institutions are strong and individualism is weak. Society is confident about where it wants to go collectively, even if many feel stifled by the prevailing conformity.

“The Second Turning is an ‘Awakening,’ when institutions are attacked in the name of higher principles and deeper values. Just when society is hitting its high tide of public progress, people suddenly tire of all the social discipline and want to recapture a sense of personal authenticity.

“The Third Turning is an ‘Unravelling,’ in many ways the opposite of the High. Institutions are weak and distrusted, while individualism is strong and flourishing.

“Finally, the Fourth Turning is a ‘Crisis’ period. This is when our institutional life is reconstructed from the ground up, always in response to a perceived threat to the nation’s very survival. If history does not produce such an urgent threat, Fourth Turning leaders will invariably find one – and may even fabricate one – to mobilize collective action. Civic authority revives, and people and groups begin to pitch in as participants in a larger community. As these Promethean bursts of civic effort reach their resolution, Fourth Turnings refresh and redefine our national identity.” (Emphasis added).

Woodstock Generation

Bannon's film focuses principally on the causes of the 2008 financial crisis, and on the "ideas" that arose amongst the "Woodstock generation" (the Woodstock musical festival occurred in 1969), that permeated, in one way or another, throughout American and European society.

The narrator calls the Woodstock generation the "Children of Plenty." It was a point of inflection: a second turning "Awakening"; a discontinuity in culture and values. The older generation (that is, anyone over 30) was viewed as having nothing to say, nor any experience to contribute. It was the elevation of the "pleasure principle" (as a "new" phenomenon, as "their" discovery), over the puritan ethic; It celebrated doing one's own thing; it was about "Self" and narcissism.

The "Unravelling" followed in the form of government and institutional weakness: the "system" lacked the courage to take difficult decisions. The easy choices invariably were taken: the élites absorbed the self-centered, spoilt-child, ethos of the "me" generation. The 1980s and 1990s become the era of "casino capitalism" and the "Davos man."

The lavish taxpayer bailouts of the U.S. banks after the Mexican, Russian, Asian and Argentinian defaults and crises washed away the bankers' costly mistakes. The 2004 Bear Stearns exemption which allowed the big five banks to leverage their lending above 12:1 – and, which quickly extended to become 25:1, 30:1 and even 40:1 – permitted the irresponsible risk-taking and the billions in profit-making. The "Dot Com" bubble was accommodated by monetary policy – and then the massive 2008 bailouts accommodated the banks, yet again.

The "Unravelling" was essentially a cultural failure: a failure of responsibility, of courage to face hard choices – it was, in short, the film suggests, an era of spoilt institutions, compromised politicians and irresponsible Wall Streeters – the incumbent class – *indulging themselves, and "abdicating responsibility."*

Now we have entered the "Fourth Turning": "All the easy choices are back of us." The "system" still lacks courage. Bannon says this period will be the "nastiest, ugliest in history." It will be brutal, and "we" (by which he means the Trump Tea Party activists) will be "vilified." This phase may last 15 – 20 years, he predicts.

Greek Tragedy

The key to this Fourth Turning is "character." It is about values. What Bannon means by "our crisis" is perhaps best expressed when the narrator says: "the essence of Greek tragedy is that it is not like a traffic accident, where

somebody dies [i.e. the great financial crises didn't just arise by mischance].

The Greek sense is that tragedy is where something happens because it has to happen, because of the nature of the participants. Because the people involved, make it happen. And they have no choice to make it happen, because that's their nature."

This is the deeper implication of what transpired from Woodstock: the nature of people changed. The "pleasure principle," the narcissism, had displaced the "higher" values that had made America what it was. The generation that believed that there was "no risk, no mountain they could not climb" brought this crisis upon themselves. They wiped out 200 years of financial responsibility in about 20 years. This, it appears, captures the essence of Bannon's thinking.

That is where we *are*, Bannon asserts: Stark winter inevitably follows, after a warm, lazy summer. It becomes a time of testing, of adversity. Each season in nature has its vital function. Fourth turnings are necessary: they a part of the cycle of renewal.

Bannon's film concludes with author Howe declaring: "history is seasonal and winter is coming,"

And, what is the immediate political message? It is simple, the narrator of Bannon's film says: "STOP": stop doing what you were doing. Stop spending like before. Stop taking on spending commitments that cannot be afforded. Stop mortgaging your children's future with debt. Stop trying to manipulate the banking system. It is a time for tough thinking, for saying "no" to bailouts, for changing the culture, and re-constructing institutional life.

Cultural Legacy

And how do you re-construct civic life? You look to those who still possess a sense of duty and responsibility – who have retained a cultural legacy of values. It is noticeable that when Bannon addresses the activists, almost the first thing he does is to salute the veterans and serving officers, and praise their qualities, their sense of duty.

It is no surprise then that President Trump wants to increase both the veterans' and the military's budget. It is not so much a portent of U.S. military belligerence, but more that he sees them as warriors for the coming "winter" of testing and adversity. Then, and only then does Bannon speak to the "thin blue line" of activists who still have strength of character, a sense of responsibility, of duty. He tells them that the future rests in their hands, alone.

Does this sound like men – Bannon and Trump – who want to ramp up a fresh financial bubble, to indulge the Wall Street casino (in their words)? No? So, what is going on?

They know “the crisis” is coming. Let us recall what Neil Howe wrote in the *Washington Post* concerning the “Fourth Turning”:

“This is when our institutional life is reconstructed from the ground up, always in response to a perceived threat to the nation’s very survival. If history does not produce such an urgent threat, Fourth Turning leaders will invariably find one – and may even fabricate one – to mobilize collective action. Civic authority revives, and people and groups begin to pitch in as participants in a larger community. As these Promethean bursts of civic effort reach their resolution, Fourth Turnings refresh and redefine our national identity.”

Trump has no need to “fabricate” a financial crisis. It will happen “because it has to happen, because of the nature of the participants (in the current ‘system’). Because the people involved, make it happen. And they have no choice to make it happen, because that’s their nature.”

It is not even President Obama’s or Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson’s *fault*, per se. They are just who they are.

Trump and Bannon therefore are *not* likely trying to ignite the “animal spirits” of the players in the financial “casino” (as many in the financial sphere seem to assume). If Bannon’s film and Trump’s articulation of crisis mean anything, it is that their aim is to ignite the “animal spirits” of “the working-class casualties and those forgotten Americans” of the Midwest, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

At that point, they hope that the “thin blue line” of activists will “pitch in” with a Promethean burst of civic effort which will reconstruct America’s institutional and economic life.

If this is so, the Trump/Bannon vision both is audacious – and quite an extraordinary gamble ...

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Can Trump Find the 'Great' Path?

Exclusive: After a half year in office, President Trump is stumbling toward a “reality TV” irrelevance or worse, but a narrow path remains to make a historically important contribution to the nation, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

On June 29, when CNN’s Wolf Blitzer asked John Podesta, the chairman of Hillary Clinton’s failed presidential campaign, how they had lost to Donald Trump, I expected the usual excuse – “Russia! Russia! Russia!” – but was surprised when Podesta spoke truthfully:

“Even though 20 percent of his voters believed he was unfit to be president, they wanted radical change, they wanted to blow the system up. And that’s what he’s given them, I guess.”

For those millions of Americans who had watched their jobs vanish and their communities decay, it was a bit like prisoners being loaded onto a truck for transport to a killing field. As dangerous and deadly as a desperate uprising might be, what did they have to lose?

In 2008, some of those same Americans had voted for an unlikely candidate, first-term Sen. Barack Obama, hoping for his promised “change you can believe in,” but then saw Obama sucked into Official Washington’s Establishment with its benign – if not malign – neglect for the average Joe and Jane.

In 2016, the Democratic Party brushed aside the left-wing populist Sen. Bernie Sanders, who might have retained the support of many blue-collar Americans. The party instead delivered the Democratic nomination to the quintessential insider candidate – former First Lady, former Senator and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Though coming from a modest background, Clinton had grabbed onto the privileges of power with both hands. She haughtily set up a private email server for her official State Department business; she joined with neocons and liberal interventionists in pushing for “regime change” wars fought primarily by young working-class men and women; and after leaving government, she greedily took millions of dollars in speaking fees from Wall Street and other special interests.

Clinton’s contempt for many American commoners spilled out when she labeled half of Trump’s supporters “deplorables,” though she later lowered her percentage estimate.

So, enough blue-collar voters in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania rebelled against the prospect of more of the same and took a risk on the disruptive real-estate mogul and reality-TV star Donald Trump, a guy who knew little about government and boasted of his crude sexual practices.

Hobbling Trump

However, after Trump's shocking victory last November, two new problems emerged. First, Hillary Clinton and the national Democrats – unwilling to recognize their own culpability for Trump's victory – blamed their fiasco on Russia, touching off a New Cold War hysteria and using that frenzy to hobble, if not destroy, Trump's presidency.

Second, Trump lacked any coherent governing philosophy or a clear-eyed understanding of global conflicts. On foreign policy, most prospective Republican advisers came from a poisoned well contaminated by neocon groupthinks about war and "regime change."

Looking for alternatives, Trump turned to some fellow neophytes, such as his son-in-law Jared Kushner and alt-right guru Steve Bannon, as well as to a few Washington outsiders, such as former Defense Intelligence Agency director Michael Flynn and Exxon-Mobil chief executive officer Rex Tillerson. But all had serious limitations.

For instance, Kushner fancied himself the genius who could achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace by applying the so-called "outside/in strategy," i.e., getting the Saudis and Gulf States to put their boots on the necks of the Palestinians until they agreed to whatever land-grabbing terms Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dictated.

Flynn, who served briefly as Trump's National Security Adviser, had led the DIA when it correctly warned President Obama about the jihadist risks posed by supporting the "regime change" project in Syria, even predicting the rise of the Islamic State.

But Flynn, like many on the Right, bought into Official Washington's false groupthink that Iran was the principal sponsor of terrorism and needed to be bomb-bomb-bombed, not dealt with diplomatically as Obama did in negotiating tight constraints on Iran's nuclear program. The bomb-bomb-bomb approach fit with the desires of the Israeli and Saudi governments, which viewed Iran as a rival and wanted the American military to do the dirty work in shattering the so-called "Shiite crescent."

So, because of Kushner's views on Israel-Palestine and because of the Flynn/Right-Wing hostility toward Iran, Trump fell in line with much of the

neocon consensus on the Middle East, demonstrated by Trump's choice of Saudi Arabia and Israel for his first high-profile foreign trip.

But obedience to Israel and Saudi Arabia – and inside Washington to the neocons – is what created the catastrophe that has devastated U.S. foreign policy and has wasted trillions of dollars that otherwise could have been invested in the decaying American infrastructure and in making the U.S. economy more competitive.

In other words, if Trump had any hope of “making America great again,” he needed to break with the Israeli/Saudi/neocon/liberal-hawk groupthink, rather than bow to them. Yet, Trump now finds himself hemmed in by Official Washington's Russia-gate obsession, including near-unanimous congressional demands for more sanctions against Moscow over the still-unproven charges that Russia interfered with the U.S. election to help Trump and hurt Clinton. (The White House has indicated that Trump will consent to his own handcuffing on Russia.)

A Daunting Task

Even if Trump had the knowledge and experience to understand what it would take to resist the powerful foreign-policy establishment, he would face a hard battle that could only be fought and won with savvy and skill.

A narrow path toward a transformational presidency still remains for Trump, but he would have to travel in some very different directions than he has chosen during his first six months.

For one, Trump would have to go against type and become an unlikely champion for truth by correcting much of the recent historical record about current global hot spots.

On Syria, for instance, Trump could open up the CIA's books on key events, including the truth about Obama's “regime change” scheme and the alleged sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. Though the Obama administration blamed the Assad government, other evidence pointed to a provocation by radical jihadists trying to trick the U.S. military into intervening on their side.

Similarly, on the Ukraine crisis, Trump could order the CIA to reveal the truth about the U.S. role in fomenting the violent coup that ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich and touched off a bloody civil war, which saw the U.S.-backed regime in Kiev dispatch neo-Nazi militias to kill ethnic Russians in the east.

In other words, facts could be deployed to counter the propaganda theme of a “Russian invasion” of Ukraine, another one of Official Washington's beloved groupthink that has become the foundation for a dangerous New Cold War.

As part of the truth-telling, Trump could disclose the CIA's full knowledge about who shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, an atrocity killing 298 people that was pinned on the Russians although other evidence points to a rogue element of the Ukrainian military. [See [here](#) and [here](#).]

Further going against type, Trump also might admit that he [rushed to judgment](#) following the April 4, 2017, chemical-weapons incident in Khan Sheikhoun, Syria, by ordering a retaliatory missile strike against the Syrian military on April 6 when the whodunit evidence was unclear.

By sharing knowledge with the American people – rather than keeping them in the dark and feeding them a steady diet of propaganda – Trump could enlist popular support for pragmatic shifts in U.S. foreign policy.

Those changes could include a historic break from the Israeli-Saudi stranglehold on U.S. policy in the Middle East – and could make way for cooperation with Russia and Iran in stabilizing and rebuilding Syria so millions of displaced Syrians could return to their homes and reduce social pressures that the refugees have created in Europe.

A Populist Party

On the domestic front, if Trump really wants to replace Obama's Affordable Care Act with something better, he could propose the one logical alternative that would both help his blue-collar supporters and make American companies more competitive – a single-payer system that uses higher taxes on the rich and some more broad-based taxes to finance health-care for all.

That way U.S. corporations would no longer be burdened with high costs for health insurance and could raise wages for workers and/or lower prices for American products on the global market. Trump could do something similar regarding universal college education, which would further boost American productivity.

By taking this unorthodox approach, Trump could reorient American politics for a generation, with Republicans emerging as a populist party focused on the needs of the country's forgotten citizens, on rebuilding the nation's physical and economic infrastructure, and on genuine U.S. security requirements abroad, not the desires of "allies" with powerful lobbies in Washington.

To follow such a course would, of course, put Trump at odds with much of the Republican Party's establishment and its longstanding priorities of "tax cuts for the rich" and more militarism abroad.

A populist strategy also would leave the national Democrats with a stark choice, either continue sidling up to Official Washington's neoconservatives on foreign policy and to Wall Street's wheelers and dealers on the economy – or return to the party's roots as the political voice for the common man and woman.

But do I think any of this will happen? Not really. Far more likely, the Trump presidency will remain mired in its “reality-TV” squabbles with the sort of coarse language that would normally be bleeped out of network TV; the Democrats will continue substituting the Russia-gate blame-game for any serious soul-searching; the Republicans will press on with more tax cuts for the rich; and the Great American Experiment with Democracy will continue to flounder into chaos.

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](#)).

House GOP Seeks to Curb Yemen War

As national Democrats claim the mantle as the more hawkish party – and President Trump panders to the Saudi-Israeli tandem – House Republicans moved to curb U.S. support for the Saudi-led war on Yemen, Dennis J Bernstein notes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Republicans are taking the lead in blocking U.S. participation in the Saudi slaughter in Yemen, which has plunged that country to the brink of starvation and sparked a cholera epidemic. Surprising to many, there was a vote by the Republican-led House of Representatives to block U.S. participation in the Saudi-led war.

The key amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act – prohibiting U.S. military support for the Saudi-led coalition's bombing of Yemen – was sponsored by Rep. Warren Davidson, R-Ohio. Though the amendment gained bipartisan support – and another restrictive amendment was sponsored by Rep. Dick Nolan, D-Minnesota – the Republican leadership on this issue reflects the changing places in which Democrats have become the more hawkish party in Congress.



I spoke to Kate Gould, Legislative Representative for Middle East Policy for the Friends Committee on National Legislation about this pressing issue of life and death in Yemen. We spoke on July 17.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, this is a terrible situation and getting worse by the day. Could you please remind everyone what it looks like in Yemen on the ground?

Kate Gould: It is a catastrophic situation. According to the United Nations, it is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world right now. And despite the fact that this humanitarian crisis has been a direct result of the Saudi/United Arab Emirate-led war in Yemen, backed by the United States, most Americans have no idea that we are so deeply involved in this war.

A conservative estimate is that seven million people are on the verge of starvation, half a million being children. The people in Yemen are experiencing the world's largest cholera outbreak. A child under the age of five is dying every ten minutes of preventable causes. Every 35 seconds a child is infected.

This is all preventable with access to clean water and basic sanitation. This war has destroyed the civilian infrastructure in Yemen. We're talking about air strikes that have targeted warehouses of food, sanitation systems, water infiltration systems. The World Health Organization points out that cholera is not difficult to prevent. The problem is that so many Yemenis lack access to clean water as a result of the infrastructure being in ruins.

DB: What about the medical infrastructure, what about the ability to deal with this kind of epidemic, or is it just going to get worse?

KG: Well, unless we do something to change the situation, it is definitely going to get worse. In Yemen, 90% of food is imported and the Saudis have made this much more difficult. They imposed more restraints on one of the major ports and

have refused to allow Yemen to repair the damage caused by air strikes. Often it is difficult for ships to get permission to berth. All these complications have driven up the price of food so that even when food manages to be imported it is too expensive, even for those earning decent incomes. So what we are seeing is a de facto blockade as well as a war.

DB: Could you say a few words about the campaign of the Saudi military and what kind of weaponry they are using? Later I would like to discuss US support for all of this.

KG: The Saudi-led war began about two and a half years ago in March, 2015. At that time they asked for US support and got it from the Obama administration. The air campaign has resulted in the carpet bombing of Yemen. It is the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates who have been driving this massive bombardment. There has been an all-out assault on civilians and civilian infrastructure.

And, of course, as Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) has pointed out, the Saudis would not have been able to carry out this bombing without full US support. Their planes cannot fly without US refueling capacity. In fact, since October the US has actually doubled the amount of fuel it provides to Saudi and Emirati bombers. Last October is significant because at that time there was a major bombing of mourners coming out of a funeral hall which killed about 140 civilians and wounded another six hundred. Since that atrocity, the US has doubled its refueling support.

DB: How does the US justify its support for the Saudis, from a human rights perspective?

KG: We've heard very little discussion of the human rights angle from the Trump administration. The Obama administration claimed to be pressuring the Saudis to take precautions to prevent civilian casualties, that this is why the US has provided precision-guided smart bombs, to limit civilian casualties. There has never been an official US response to the fact that the Saudis and Emiratis are deliberately pushing millions to the verge of starvation. They are using hunger as a political tool to get better leverage on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. This is really what is driving the humanitarian nightmare.

DB: We know that Trump was just in Saudi Arabia and signed a massive weapons contract. Will this weaponry contribute to the coming famine and cholera epidemic?

KG: Certainly. It is providing the Saudis a blank check for this devastating war in which direct casualties from airstrikes are conservatively estimated at around 10,000 and millions of people have been displaced. It sends the message

that the United States is willing to support the Saudis despite massive human rights violations.

DB: There is no way the US or the Saudis can deny the tragedy. This has been thoroughly documented by US and international rights groups.

KG: But what they will often say is that a lot of the fault lies with the Houthi rebel groups. And it is certainly true that the Houthi rebels have committed massive human rights violations. But as far as the mass devastation of public infrastructure is concerned, which is leading to the humanitarian crisis, the majority of the blame can be assigned to the Saudi-led war and the US backing.

Repeatedly, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, responding to the scene of unlawful airstrikes against civilian targets, have found either unexploded US-made bombs or identifiable fragments of US bombs. This was the case with the bombing of the funeral procession last October. Still, the US government claims that it is trying to limit civilian casualties.

DB: It is interesting that the Republican-led House has voted to block US participation in the war in Yemen. It seems somewhat counter-intuitive.

KG: It is definitely surprising. Although I've been working around the clock on this recently, even I was surprised. What happened is that last week [week of July 9] the House of Representatives voted on the major military policy bill for fiscal year 2018. This is a major piece of national security legislation which authorizes funding for the Pentagon. It has to get passed every year and it provides an opportunity for members to vote on amendments that have to do with national security.

Two of these amendments were particularly consequential for Yemen. One was introduced by a Republican, Warren Davidson of Ohio, and the other by Rick Nolan, a Democrat from Minnesota. They added language that would require the Trump administration to stop providing refueling for Saudi and Emirati bombers, as well as to stop intelligence sharing and other forms of military support. It wouldn't stop the weapons sales, which is another process, but it would stop military support for this indiscriminate war.

The Davidson amendment would prohibit US military action in Yemen that is not authorized by the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. Given that US participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen is not targeting Al-Qaeda, it is not authorized by the 2001 AUMF and is prohibited by this amendment. The Nolan amendment prohibits the deployment of US troops for any participation in Yemen's civil war.

This means that the House just voted to end US funding of our military for the

Saudi-led war in Yemen. This is really unprecedented and it builds on the wave of congressional momentum that we saw last month when 47 senators voted against sending more of what we call “weapons of mass starvation” to Yemen. So we have clear signals from both the House and the Senate that there is no support for Trump’s blank check to Saudi Arabia for this devastating war.

DB: So now this goes to the Senate?

KG: Yes, and there we are going to face a more difficult fight. We’re preparing for that now. We definitely will see some important Yemen votes in the Senate. It could come up right after a health care vote in early August or it might not be voted on until the fall. But we will see votes on Yemen. It is unclear whether a Senate member will offer amendments similar to the Davidson or Nolan amendments.

After the Senate votes on the various amendments, they will both have versions of this and they will have to come back and conference a final version to send to the president. This is definitely a time to push our senators to follow suit with the House and oppose US involvement in this devastating war in Yemen.

DB: Finally, who are some of these Republican Congressional members who stood up in this effort to restrain this oncoming famine? Who were some of the surprise votes?

KG: Actually, this was added in a whole block of legislation so we can’t point to exactly who supported and who opposed it. It was good to see Warren Davidson taking a leadership role on this issue. He is relatively new in the Senate, having taken [Former House Speaker John] Boehner’s seat. It is noteworthy also that the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Mac Thornberry from Texas, allowed this amendment to go forward. Just that the House Republican leadership allowed this to move forward is really interesting in itself.

DB: Yes, it is. It seems to me that the Democrats have really become out-of-control Cold Warriors, either lost in Russia-gate or dropping the ball on this very important foreign policy issue. We thank you, Kate Gould, Legislative Representative for Middle East Policy with the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

KG: And I just want to say that we can win on this one and we need everybody to get involved. You can go to our website, fcnl.org, to get more information. Again, 47 Senators voted last month to block these bomb sales and we only need 51 votes. And with Trump’s massive arms deal with Saudi Arabia, I’m sure we will have more votes on this. But it is really important to stay engaged and we need everybody to get involved and contact your members of Congress.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Pitching the ‘Forever War’ in Afghanistan

Exclusive: Rather than rethink U.S. policy in the Mideast, particularly the entangling alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia, Official Washington pushes schemes to perpetuate the “forever war” in Afghanistan, writes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

In May, the founder of the mercenary-for-hire group Blackwater (now since remained Academi), Erik Prince took to the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to propose that the Pentagon employ “private military units” and appoint a “viceroy” to oversee the war in Afghanistan.

According to Prince, who has been actively lobbying for what he calls an “East India Company approach” as the solution to America’s longest war (16 years, \$117 billion and counting), “In Afghanistan, the viceroy approach would reduce rampant fraud by focusing spending on initiatives that further the central strategy, rather than handing cash to every outstretched hand from a U.S. system bereft of institutional memory.” (Prince naturally failed to say if his were among those “outstretched hands”)

On July 10, *The New York Times* reported that Prince and the owner of the military contractor Dyn Corporation, Stephen Feinberg, have, at the request of Stephen K. Bannon and Jared Kushner, been pushing a plan to, in effect, privatize the war effort in Afghanistan. (In recent weeks both The Nation and The American Conservative have published deep-dive investigative pieces into the behind the scenes machinations of would-be Viceroys Prince and Feinberg).

According to the *Times* report “The strategy has been called ‘the Laos option,’ after America’s shadowy involvement in Laos during the war in neighboring Vietnam.”

If so, then “the Laos option” is an unfortunate moniker for their strategy given the fact that the during America’s war over Laos (1964-73) the U.S. dropped 2.5 million tons of munitions on that country as part of the failed effort in Vietnam, which finally ended when the U.S. embassy in Saigon was evacuated in

1975.

It is worth mentioning, since we so often overlook the “collateral damage” caused by our overseas adventures, that in the 40-plus years since the cessation of operations in Laos that 20,000 Laotians have been killed by unexploded ordinance dropped that had been dropped during that illegal nine-year campaign.

And while Prince and Feinberg have (so far anyway) gotten the cold shoulder from National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Pentagon Chief James Mattis, momentum is picking up for once again ramping up American involvement in Afghanistan among some of the (allegedly) more sophisticated members of the foreign policy establishment.

More Armchair Warmongering

On July 11, former Deputy Defense Secretary Michele Flournoy and think tank functionary Richard Fontaine published a piece for the purportedly realist *National Interest* magazine that attempted to assure readers that “The Afghan War Is Not Lost.” Why not? Because even though there are roughly 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, “*More troops* can help achieve American objectives in Afghanistan, but only if they are part of a larger and more effective strategy.” [Emphasis mine].

The stress on more troops (if not to say, thousands upon thousands of unaccountable mercenaries in the pay of Feinberg and Prince) is deeply concerning because if anyone can be said to be a reliable barometer of prevailing opinion inside the Beltway it is Flournoy.

Readers may recall that Flournoy co-chaired the Obama administration’s Afghanistan policy review, which led to the President’s ill-fated December 2009 decision to send 33,000 American troops (plus a contingent of 7,000 from NATO) to prop up the Karzai regime in Afghanistan. The following year, 2010, would end up as the bloodiest one yet for coalition forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, nearly three-fourth of all American casualties in that war took place in the years following Obama’s decision to “surge” in Afghanistan.

But give Flournoy (who was at the top of Hillary Clinton’s short list to be Defense Secretary) credit: she persists. Today Flournoy and her frequent co-author Fontaine (both are executives of the hawkish think tank Center for a New American Security) say that American should commit to Afghanistan “indefinitely”:

“The centerpiece of the administration’s Afghanistan strategy must therefore be a clear and sustained American commitment to Afghanistan. By forswearing deadlines and making clear that the United States will support the Afghan

government and security forces indefinitely and until they are able to hold their own, Washington can telegraph to the Taliban that it will not succeed in retaking the country.”

Worryingly, some members of Congress seem to be on board. In early July, a bipartisan delegation including Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Elizabeth Warren toured Pakistan and Afghanistan and called for greater military involvement in the region. Speaking on behalf of the delegation, McCain noted, “none of us would say that we’re on course to a success here in Afghanistan.”

The Forever War

Driving the push to send more troops is the fact that, as Flournoy and Fontaine point out, the “Taliban today controls more territory than at any time since 9/11. Faced with corruption and exclusionary politics, popular opposition to the government in Kabul is rising, while the Taliban makes inroads in rural areas and, increasingly, near the cities.” This is no doubt the case.

And proponents of the forever war in Afghanistan are correct when they say, as they inevitably do, that the Taliban provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in the lead up to 9/11. But these same proponents usually neglect to note that bin Laden and Al Qaeda were motivated by the U.S.-Israeli special relationship and, according to the 9/11 Report, “grievances against the United States” that were “widely shared in the Muslim world.” Bin Laden “inveighed against the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia ... and against other U.S. policies in the Middle East.”

But, in the intervening years between 2001 and now, Al Qaeda’s leadership has been decimated, and according to a Brown University study, “the United States has spent or taken on obligations to spend more than \$3.6 trillion in current dollars on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria and on the Department of Homeland Security” in the years following 9/11.

Meanwhile other alternative strategies (such as the “offshore balancing strategy” advocated by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt) have never been tried. As I wrote at Consortiumnews in June, “there *are* alternatives (there always are). It’s just that these tend not to have the institutional backing of Washington’s policy/think tank community which, because it is deeply compromised by its defense industry funders, rarely given them voice or consideration.”

If the U.S. is to successfully combat terrorism emanating out of the Middle East a wholesale re-evaluation of U.S. policy is in order, particularly with regard to Israel and Saudi Arabia. To gloss over this is to miss the point.

And proponents of expanding and privatizing the war in Afghanistan miss it entirely.

James W Carden is a contributing writer for The Nation and editor of The American Committee for East-West Accord's eastwestaccord.com. He previously served as an advisor on Russia to the Special Representative for Global Inter-governmental Affairs at the US State Department.
