

Trump Embraces GOP Tax-Cut Orthodoxy

Exclusive: Not even five months into his presidency, Donald Trump has retreated from key populist promises by moving to slash taxes on the rich and throw millions of Americans off health insurance, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Trump earned headlines – and worldwide condemnation – for his announcement June 1 that he was pulling the United States from the Paris climate accord, an agreement signed by 195 nations to fight runaway global warming.

Just a week later, however, Trump attracted almost no attention when he rejected another important Paris accord – this one to fight international tax avoidance by multinational corporations.

The landmark agreement, signed by more than 70 countries, including members of the European Union, India and China, sets certain minimum standards for tax treaties. In particular, it curbs the abusive practices of companies that manipulate the flow of their income between subsidiaries to take advantage of low tax rates in jurisdictions like Luxembourg, where secret tax rulings have helped hundreds of multinational firms drastically reduce their payments.

One such firm was Amazon, which candidate Donald Trump accused of “getting away with murder tax-wise,” before he abandoned his populist pretenses. This March, a U.S. tax court judge upheld as legal a \$1.5 billion tax dodge by the online retailer, which developed an initiative called Project Goldcrest to shift billions of dollars of profits into Luxembourg.

After the second Paris no-show, critics denounced the Trump administration for once again abdicating its responsibilities. “By retreating from the agreement at this point, the U.S. is forfeiting leadership in yet another forum,” said Clark Gascoigne, deputy director of the Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency Coalition.

But Gascoigne had it wrong. Trump *is* leading – in the opposite direction. In late April, he signed an executive order seeking to delay or suspend any significant tax regulations issued by the Obama administration in 2016 that “impose an undue financial burden on United States taxpayers.”

Experts pointed out that the chief targets of Trump’s order were rules imposed by President Obama to make it tougher for American companies to move headquarters abroad to pay lower U.S. taxes. These rules helped kill a merger last year between U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and an Irish company,

Allergan, which was driven by the prospect of saving tens of billions of dollars in U.S. taxes.

Even without its merger, Pfizer managed last year to keep \$194 billion in profits offshore, with the help of 181 subsidiaries in various tax havens, according to U.S. PIRG. Apple beat even that record, reportedly avoiding more than \$65 billion in U.S. taxes by parking \$215 billion in profits offshore. A 2014 study of 307 large American companies determined that they had collectively stashed two trillion dollars abroad.

Tax avoidance by multinational firms costs the United States Treasury roughly \$190 billion a year, according to new estimates published by the World Institute for Development Economics Research.

Rates of corporate tax avoidance are soaring. A 2014 study by Gabriel Zucman, an economist at the London School of Economics, estimated that a fifth of all U.S. corporate profits are now booked in offshore tax havens. That represented “a tenfold increase since the 1980s,” Zucman observed. “Over the last 15 years, the effective corporate tax rate of US companies has declined from 30 to 20 percent, and about two-thirds of this decline can be attributed to increased profit-shifting to low-tax jurisdictions.”

Individuals Evade Taxes, Too

Zucman also estimated—as a lower bound—that wealthy U.S. households had parked about \$1.2 *trillion* in cash, stocks, and bonds in foreign tax havens. Counting art, jewelry, gold, real estate and other real assets, would almost certainly multiply that number, he added.

These estimates are highly uncertain, of course, since owners generally don't disclose such holdings to the authorities, and “strikingly, more than 20 percent of the world's cross-border equities have no identifiable owner,” Zucman noted. But the notorious “Panama Papers” leak, as well as leaked documents from Luxembourg and Swiss banks, make Zucman and other researchers confident that tax avoidance and illegal evasion by the ultra-rich are flourishing as never before.

A great deal of tax evasion goes on simply through non-reporting of income, without the use of foreign banks or tax shelters. A reputable 2011 study of America's “underground economy” estimated that nearly a fifth of reportable income was not, in fact, disclosed to the IRS. The loss to the Treasury from such cheating amounts to a staggering \$500 billion annually, equal to all non-military discretionary federal spending combined.

Instead of combating such abuses, President Trump and Congressional Republicans are doing everything in their power to cut tax rates on the rich and undercut

enforcement of existing tax laws.

The Republican-sponsored American Health Care Act, for example, is a \$700 billion tax cut for the rich dressed up as an alternative to President Obama's Affordable Care Act. Forty percent of the tax savings would accrue to the top one percent of earners, according to a study by the Tax Policy Center.

Trump's proposal to scrap the estate tax would benefit only the very wealthiest individuals – about 5,500 per year – whose estates exceed the \$5.5 million federal exemption enough to be taxable. Many of the prospective beneficiaries, of course, are the same billionaires who lavish so much money on GOP candidates and political action committees.

"In a major jolt of support for President Trump, the powerful political network overseen by conservative billionaire Charles Koch is launching a multimillion-dollar campaign to drive Trump's tax plan through Congress," USA Today reported in May. The Kochs' network, which pools contributions from 550 super-rich donors, "plan(s) to spend \$300 million to \$400 million on policy and political campaigns ahead of the 2018 elections," the paper said.

More Tax Cuts

Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan also propose to slash tax rates on personal business income, from a top rate of 39.6 percent to as little as 15 percent. The plan, if passed, would cost the Treasury nearly \$2 trillion over the next decade, while a major share of the benefits would go to households with incomes of more than \$1 million a year (including Donald Trump), according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The plan would also encourage widespread tax avoidance by individuals who would try to reclassify their salaries as "business income" to pay lower rates.

The IRS, for its part, would be nearly powerless to stop such abuses. Over the past five years, the *New York Times* reports, "congressional Republicans have taken out their anti-tax wrath on the Internal Revenue Service, cutting its budget by nearly \$1 billion, reducing its staff by about 17,000, and even threatening to impeach its chief."

Their goal is not to reform the IRS but to cripple it so wealthy tax evaders have nothing to fear. The agency has lost 5,000 revenue agents and investigators since 2012, allowing numerous cases of suspected fraud to go unchecked and tens of billions of dollars in revenue to go uncollected.

"I'm appalled, that's all I can say," said Lawrence B. Gibbs, who served as IRS Commissioner under President Reagan from 1986 to 1989. In light of the nation's

challenges, he added, “the one thing people ought to agree on is that we should have a revenue system that works and works well.”

Most Americans do indeed agree, even if Republican legislators and President Trump do not. The latest Pew Research Center survey found that six in 10 Americans were bothered “a lot” by the failure of some corporations and wealthy people to pay their fair share of taxes. Reflecting that sentiment, 56 percent of respondents said the federal tax system is unfair, the highest recorded in two decades.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Americans also feel in general that they are not overtaxed. There’s a good reason for that: Americans have one of the lowest tax burdens of any developed country. Of 36 developed nations, only Korea, Chile, and Mexico tax a smaller share of their total national income.

We’ve come a long way in the two years since economist and columnist Paul Krugman, while harboring no illusions about candidate Trump, praised his professed “willingness to raise taxes on the rich” and his “positive words about universal health care.” Along with most of his other promises, Trump shelved those popular notions when he took office. Today, the billionaire tax dodger pursues only the most orthodox of all Republican agendas: make the rich richer, at the expense of everyone else.

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Europe Discovers a Volatile Populism

Exclusive: European politicians are finding it tricky to “play the populist card,” as U.K. Prime Minister May discovered when her Conservative Party stumbled over its support for more austerity, writes Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Last week’s elections in the United Kingdom were a fiasco for Prime Minister Theresa May, whose Conservative Party lost 12 seats in Parliament, weakening the government just ahead of crucial negotiations on the U.K.’s exit from the European Union. The elections had been called by May with the hope of an opposite outcome; the goal was to take advantage of the Tories’ strong lead in the polls to strengthen the Conservative majority and increase May’s power.

One factor in this evaluation was the hope that voters would see Labour Party

leader Jeremy Corbyn as a radical leftist, and in particular as a weak leader compared to the current Prime Minister. Yet Corbyn is the one who succeeded in exploiting the political situation in recent weeks, leading to a gain of 32 seats for Labour, and forcing May into a precarious situation where she must rely on votes from small Northern Ireland parties to obtain a majority in Parliament.

Theresa May came to power thanks to the Brexit vote held one year ago, when the people of the U.K. voted to leave the European Union (E.U.), leading to the resignation of then-Prime Minister David Cameron. The referendum had originally been called by Cameron as a way to beat back growing internal pressure from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage.

The political élites lost that battle, as the British population sent a strong message not only to the E.U. institutions in Brussels and Frankfurt, but principally to its own political representatives, who were seen as pursuing their own interests, while ignoring those of large segments of the population.

Immigration was a major issue in the Brexit vote, leading many commentators to brand Leave voters as racists, as has happened with anti-establishment (or populist) movements across the Western world; the same line was used in the U.S. elections, in an attempt to downplay any legitimate reasons to vote for an outsider candidate.

There is no doubt that racism is present with regard to immigration, but academic research has shown that economic difficulties exacerbate racial attitudes, even changing people's visual perception of others. [See A. Krosch, and D. Amodio, Economic scarcity alters perceptions of race. PNAS, May 6, 2014.]

This aspect can feed into a larger mix that leads voters to support candidates who are critical of the current political institutions. Another widely circulated study in Europe has shown that economic crises lead to the rise of more extreme political parties. [See M. Funke, M. Schularick, C. Trebesch, The political aftermath of financial crises: Going to extremes, VoxEU.org, November 21, 2015]

Through an analysis of 20 advanced democracies from 1870 to date, the authors found that, in addition to the obvious case of the 1930s, which saw the advent of Nazism and Fascism, another period of heightened support for far-right parties was precisely that after the crisis that began in 2008.

Weak Recovery

The recovery since that time has been weak, and particularly unequal among socio-economic classes, so it is not surprising that the underlying economic

difficulties have fueled protest votes whenever the population is given the possibility to stick it to the politicians. The June 8 general election in the U.K. shows just how important it is to recognize these undercurrents, as opposed to seeking support on collateral issues that many voters may ultimately recognize as superficial.

Given the victory of Leave in the Brexit vote last year, Theresa May sought to capitalize. Facing resistance in the Parliament, the Prime Minister thought that an election campaign focused on strong leadership to lead the U.K. out of the E.U. would naturally find a great deal of support.

What May ignored, however, is the need to link the political argument to people's basic economic needs. She paid lip service to the issue, promising benefits for the British people by leaving the European common market, and announcing new initiatives to expand trade. The voters didn't buy it though, because at the same time, May found herself on the wrong side of the all-important issue of austerity, leaving a massive flank open to Corbyn and Labour.

May took two significant hits on economic issues during the short campaign. First of all, she came under fire for cuts to the police budget, in the aftermath of recent terror attacks. May was Home Secretary – responsible for national security, policing, immigration and citizenship – from May 2010 to July 2016, during which time total police numbers in England and Wales fell by almost 20 percent. May's response to the accusation of having weakened public safety capacity to stop terror attacks was to brand Corbyn as unprepared for office, and claim that he would be even worse. Sound familiar to American voters?

May also boasted about giving police increased powers to deal with terrorists. The image that stuck, however, was that of having cut the budget in a key area when resources are needed to guarantee security.

The second instance in which May was pummeled was the so-called "dementia tax." The Conservatives presented their social manifesto in April, with a plan to change the rules about how the elderly pay for home care. Corbyn immediately branded the scheme a "tax on dementia," as people who need long-term care at home would be forced to use more of their assets to pay for it: the state would be allowed to draw on a pensioner's home equity to pay the bill.

May's stumble on this point played into the larger narrative of the negative effects of the Conservatives' austerity policies in recent years. In fact the backlash regarding social spending cuts had already become manifest at the time of the Brexit vote. The week the Brits went to the polls a year ago, newspapers ran headlines on poverty increasing for the first time in a decade, clearly linked to the social welfare cuts presented as "necessary" to deal with the

economic crisis.

Fed Up with Austerity

Elsewhere in Europe, the U.K. has been presented as a success story, a country that has made the “tough choices” necessary to fix the budget and allow for growth again. It’s a common refrain, based on the monetarist ideology, which holds that austerity is the magic formula that will create confidence and thus kick-start economic activity.

The reality is usually the opposite. Cuts to social services and investment hurt the population’s standard of living, and inhibit growth; papering over this by pointing to the rebound after the fall has become a favorite pastime of neoliberal economists and politicians.

What we have seen throughout the Western world in the past year is that the population is no longer buying it. The hollowing out of the middle class in the name of promoting economic and financial globalization has led to a revolt of voters against the Establishment.

Theresa May, who became Prime Minister thanks to last year’s first manifestation of this protest vote, approving the U.K.’s departure from the E.U., now risks becoming a victim of that same revolt.

May attempted to exploit nationalist support for Britain to strengthen her majority in Parliament, but she did so by focusing on issues that proved to be weaker than expected when not tied to the underlying discontent in the population, fueled by the reduction of living standards and the increase in economic insecurity.

Jeremy Corbyn, who campaigned unabashedly on a leftist, anti-austerity program, was able to intersect part of the same anti-establishment sentiment that fueled the Brexit vote, and turn it to his advantage. The results of the elections in the U.K. demonstrate once again that the “populist” revolt is not a one-way street.

The Conservatives are still the leading party in Parliament, but it is now clear that they need to review their own policies from recent years, and recognize that the protest vote will turn against whoever defends a status quo that is not working for a large part of the population.

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Trump and the American Decline

The fury over President Trump's behavior and the hysteria over Russia are concealing the more significant long-term erosion of U.S. global influence from endless wars in the Mideast, observes ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

President Trump's ignorant, oafish and crude foreign policy style rivets our attention, arouses our indignation. But the drama of the diplomatic mayhem he wreaks while traveling abroad also distracts from recognizing more serious underlying problems of U.S. policy – deep negative trends that predate Trump.

Focusing on Trump's latest crude pronouncements encourages the soothing belief that these current dilemmas are all his doing. In other words, if we didn't have Trump, the U.S. would be back in the comfortable saddle as world's acknowledged, respected, indispensable leader.

The sad fact is, we can vent our anger as we like, but the old days just aren't coming back. It would indeed be a huge relief to be able to attribute our current foreign policy mess to the incompetence of one individual.

President Obama posed the reverse problem: his intelligent, gracious, sophisticated and knowledgeable style lulled us into believing that all should be well on the foreign policy front with the right guy in charge. But in reality the gratifying nature of Obama's style too, concealed on numerous fronts the critical issues he failed to address or incorrectly addressed.

Trump's outrages are too numerous to deal with in one piece; here I'd like to focus specifically on the recent brouhaha over NATO and questions about Trump's alleged destruction of America's "reliability" as a partner in Europe. Let me suggest a few key, perhaps contrarian, propositions of my own, drawn from my perspective as a former "sovietologist," and student of Russian culture and affairs.

I write this too, with overwhelming concern for the unprecedented binge of American hysteria – there is no other word for it – over Putin and Russia's place in the world.

The words of Soviet expert on American foreign policy, Georgi Arbatov, to an American diplomat upon the collapse of the USSR, come back to haunt: "We are going to do a terrible thing to you, we are going to deprive you of your enemy." Indeed the U.S. has been thrashing around ever since.

So, Trump has bluntly called upon the E.U. to shoulder a greater share of the burden in NATO's upkeep. He is not wrong. Indeed, the E.U. very much should take far more responsibility on issues of global security – but not so much financially, but by determining, on its own for a change, what it perceives to be its own security problems and how to manage them.

Europe's View

In today's post-Soviet world the reality is that most of European political culture no longer instinctively shares the American perspective on global affairs. The U.S. is increasingly driven by a security- and military-dominated approach to handling international crises. This trend towards the militarization of American foreign policy has been growing by leaps and bounds, particularly since 9/11. America excels at "threat perception," it's what keeps U.S. think tanks and arms industries in business.

Let's take the proposition one step farther. Despite the many shrill voices in Washington, Russia simply cannot be taken as "the greatest threat to American security and welfare." Non-stop American wars and their consequences are the greatest threat.

Washington's choice of primarily military means to handle contemporary radical trends in Muslim societies has not only failed to solve them, but has demonstrably exacerbated them. We are fighting on more fronts against radicalized Muslims than ever before.

Yet these multiple simultaneous American wars bleed the budget, usurp funding for social infrastructure, maintain a culture of fear, and stimulate the growth of the security state. And yes, it's gotten worse under Trump.

Just look at the costs. The U.S. suffers from the most massive gap between rich and poor of any country in the developed world. This gap not only produces economic hardship, but corrodes social unity, stimulates anger, bitterness, divisiveness and feeds the paranoid attitudes that are directly responsible for electing Trump in the first place.

There is no sign that the insatiable American embrace of non-stop war is slackening – on the contrary. New crises emerge everywhere; there is virtually no area of the world left that does not at some point require "urgent American leadership" to preserve American "vital interests."

But this perspective of what constitutes the "vital interests" of the West is no longer widely shared in Europe. And it is simply extraordinary that there is zero discussion anywhere in U.S. election campaigns or in the MSM to challenge the military budget.

Nor for most of Europe is Russia anywhere remotely the greatest challenge to their security and welfare. Massive refugee flows, immigration and their resulting domestic tensions, costs of refugee absorption, and even Muslim extremism are the true challenges.

Can we really believe that American military intervention in the Muslim world over the past few decades – resulting in the killing of at least *two million* Muslims – has not created profound ground for the ongoing backlash?

E.U. Priorities

Beyond security issues, the E.U. also urgently faces the need to reform its economic bureaucracy to more fairly and equitably address the economic and social problems of Europe. Here the E.U. places the highest priority on preserving domestic tranquility, even while the U.S. does not.

Starving Europe's social and economic budgets to support greater military expenditures is not productive. Europe knows that. Global security is better served by preserving Europe's own economic and social order than by spending money on arming itself up at U.S. behest for some putative Russian military threat.

Let's consider the Russian military threat. The U.S. military budget alone is greater than the combined budgets of the next eight military budgets combined (including Russia and China.) Russia is a poor country with a modest military budget. Numbers aren't everything of course, and U.S. think tanks work overtime forging creative scenarios about how Russia can still actually defeat the U.S. in a European conflict – justifying ever greater U.S. military budgets.

But what do we think Russia is actually going to do? Invade Europe? In reality Russia does not threaten the E.U. in any serious respect, as most balanced European observers will admit. It's interesting here to look at how many times Russia has actually invaded the West. Looks like twice in two centuries – and both times in direct response to *European invasions* of the Russian heartland.

The first occurred under the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s. Napoleon, as part of his campaigns to conquer most of Europe, foolishly invaded Russia in 1812. As the French were unable to get the strategically retreating Russian army to seriously engage militarily, even at the gates of Moscow, the Russians, aided by "General Winter" as Tolstoy puts it, chased Napoleon all the way back into Central Europe.

At that point the Russian army joined the grand European coalition against Napoleon in Europe. Indeed, Napoleon's disaster in Russia was a turning point for the European war against Napoleon. The Russian army soon thereafter went

back home.

The second Russian invasion of the West was in the late days of World War II. Here, as we know, Hitler fatally decided to invade Russia, where he spread destruction, starvation and death. The Soviet Union, at the staggering costs of upwards of 25 million Russians dead in the long war, eventually drove Hitler back into Germany.

Defeating the Nazis

Russia was more responsible than any other country for the devastation of Hitler's Wehrmacht. And Western allies gave maximum support to the Red Army's offensive against Hitler. Trouble was, after driving the Germans back to Germany, Soviet forces didn't go back home. Stalin occupied all of Eastern Europe (and Karelia) subjecting it to harsh Russian communist control and ideology for over 40 years.

These events represent the two extraordinary circumstances of Russian invasion of the West. These conditions are not readily replicated.

For sure, Russia has played its part over the past two centuries in numerous small military engagements around its periphery as part of the endless European Great Power struggles for spheres of influence. But the same has been true of every single major Western power fighting battles in its periphery over the years, including the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Austria, Turkey and others. It is never comfortable for a small state to live next to a great power anywhere.

Europe, by dint of proximity and experience, knows and understands Russia well. Germany above all is the one major power that will always bear the primary responsibility for handling the Russian account in Europe; Russia and Germany after all are the two major powers of Central and Eastern Europe. Here Germany remains knowledgeable and sober-minded.

Since the fall of the ideological empire of the Soviet Union large segments of German public opinion are uncomfortable with American policies designed to push NATO up to the very gates of Russia. Such acts are viewed as highly provocative intrusion into an area of traditional Russian sphere of influence.

Indeed, Germany's last Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier recently spoke out against what he saw as "provocative" NATO exercises near the Russian border in the Baltics.

Yet Washington seems hard-wired to deprive Russia of its sphere of influence anywhere it can, all the while finding it unacceptable that any power should

challenge, anywhere, the American sphere of interest. Indeed, the U.S. has been obsessed with Russia for over two centuries, especially on the religious, cultural and ideological level. (See the NYT book review of a deeply insightful book *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire'* by David S. Foglesong.)

Holding Down Russia

Thus Washington persists in its own strategic view in which there can be no win-win with Russia. (Trump actually spoke of trying to improve relations, only to unleash the full wrath of the U.S. security establishment upon his head. Trump's own unorthodox approach has not helped.)

Maintenance of overwhelming U.S. power and strategic global reach – “full-spectrum dominance” in Pentagonese – is the American strategic goal. But that is not the European goal or the European perception of a future world order.

Europe is far more readily willing to deal seriously, for example with Cuba, Iran, Palestine, China and Russia, among others. And Europe has been severely damaged by U.S.-sponsored regime change wars in the Middle East – witness Muslim terrorism and refugees.

Europe is also well aware of how the balance of world influence has gradually been shifting against the U.S. (although certainly not in military terms). Europeans do not applaud this change as such, but understand that the rise of other world powers represents future geopolitical reality.

Thus, Europe, from its own perspective, is ironically in a much healthier position if it now does assume primary responsibility for its own security in managing the European political, economic, and social relationship with Russia.

Once the Cold War was over NATO essentially had become Washington's chief instrument for exerting dominant control over European security policy. That situation increasingly tallies less with European strategic perceptions.

Trump's crudeness thus finally provided the tipping point for new and long overdue E.U. thinking about the European-Russian relationship under the new world realities. NATO officials of course will never see it that way. But this European reality will not likely be reversed by any U.S. president.

And Europe is acutely aware that Putin's policies in Europe will directly reflect U.S. policy steps against him. Russia is Russia; neocon fantasies about “solving the problem” by getting rid of Putin is bereft of any geostrategic or historical understanding of reality. In a similar vein Europe does not wish to buy into a confrontational position with China in Asia.

This is not to say that there will not be occasions for some kind of joint Western military presence to possibly bolster unstable situations in different parts of the world down the road. But if Europe is to be enlisted into military operations elsewhere in the world, Europe will have to decide independently where and how its interests dictate.

America's genius has always lain in its soft power, a commodity that sadly seems in increasingly short supply.

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) [This article first appeared at www.grahamefuller.com at <http://grahamefuller.com/trump-blundering-into-european-truths/>.]

The Silent Slaughter of the US Air War

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

By Nicolas J S Davies

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

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

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

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

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

The Pentagon recently revised its own facetious estimate of the number of civilians it has killed in Iraq and Syria since 2014 to 352. That is less than a quarter of the 1,446 victims whom Airwars has positively identified by name.

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

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

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

Shock, Awe ... and Silence

To put the 79,000 bombs and missiles with which the U.S. and its allies have bombarded Iraq and Syria since 2014 in perspective, it is worth reflecting back to the “more innocent” days of “Shock and Awe” in March 2003. As NPR reporter

Sandy Tolan reported in 2003, one of the architects of that campaign predicted that dropping 29,200 bombs and missiles on Iraq would have, “the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on Japan.”

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

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

There is almost no political debate in the U.S. over the rights and wrongs of the U.S. bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Never mind that bombing Syria without authorization from its internationally recognized government is a crime of aggression and a violation of the U.N. Charter. The freedom of the United States to violate the U.N. Charter at will has already been politically (not legally!) normalized by 17 years of serial aggression, from the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

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

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

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

How many of the thousands of civilians the U.S. has killed in Mosul in the past few months played any such role in the September 11th terrorist attacks? Every

person reading this knows the answer to that question: probably not one of them. If one of them was involved, it would be by sheer coincidence.

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

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

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

Caught in a Web of War Propaganda

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There is one difference,” Gilbert insisted, “In a democracy, the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Pope and Gorbachev

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

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

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

with other countries.

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

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

As Mikhail Gorbachev lamented in a speech in Berlin on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014, “the West, and particularly the United States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia’s weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination of the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here.”

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

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

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

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Playing Games with America’s Health Care

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

By Michael Winship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not only would the AHCA eliminate health insurance coverage for millions of Americans, the legislation would, in many cases, eliminate the ban against charging those with underlying medical conditions vastly more for their coverage.”

Tax Cut for the Rich

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

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

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

I remembered that old poem, *After Blenheim*, in which Robert Southey recounts the 1704 battle in which Britain’s Duke of Marlborough (ancestor of Winston

Churchill) defeated the forces of France's Louis XIV. The poem concludes:

"And everybody praised the Duke

Who this great fight did win.

'But what good came of it at last?'

Quoth little Peterkin.

'Why that I cannot tell,' said he,

'But 'twas a famous victory.'"

Never confuse motion for action, Republicans. And your "famous" victory may be Pyrrhic. Fortunately, this horrible health care legislation has a long way to go through the Senate before Donald Trump gets the chance to affix his EKG-like signature. As South Carolina Sen. [Lindsey Graham](#) tweeted on Friday, "A bill – finalized yesterday, has not been scored, amendments not allowed, and 3 hours final debate – should be viewed with caution."

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

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

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

How Trump Fixes Facts Around Policy

President Trump's disdain for inconvenient truth has led to the deletion of

climate science from the EPA's web site and other moves to fix the facts around his policies, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

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

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

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

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

Reading Trump

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

Some lessons can indeed be drawn from the first 100 days, but with Trump the lessons are less a matter of either doctrine or accomplishment than of whether the habits, and the character and ability or lack thereof, that Trump exhibited

during the campaign and in his earlier business career are continuing while he is office.

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

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

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

Reasons to Worry

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

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

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

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

Ignoring Climate Science

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

Specifically, a section of the site that had existed for 20 years and provided detailed data and scientific information on climate change has been removed. The deleted site, according to climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University, included "important summaries of climate science and indicators that clearly and unmistakably explain and document the impacts we are having on our planet."

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

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

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

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

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Risk of Baiting Trump on His 100 Days

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

By Sam Hussein

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Comparing Tweeting Trump and Silent Cal

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

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

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

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

Coolidge was known as “Silent Cal.” When a dinner party hostess told him, “You must talk to me, Mr. Coolidge. I made a bet today that I could get more than two words out of you,” Coolidge replied, “You lose.” The last thing our current president would be described as is silent. Trump can’t stop tweeting and gibbering. And he doesn’t like losers.

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

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

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

Not Making Sense

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

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may

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

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

Why? Because Republican opposition to Trump, the author warned, “is the mark of a party, a society, a country, a people, a civilization that wants to die. Trump, alone among candidates for high office in this or in the last seven (at least) cycles, has stood up to say: I want to live. I want my party to live. I want my country to live. I want my people to live.”

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

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

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

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

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

When he died, Calvin Coolidge’s net worth was less than a million in 2016 dollars and he left it all to his wife Grace. Trump, who says his net worth may

be as much as \$10 billion (how can we hope to know if he won't release his tax returns?), and his family are using the White House to make the family fortune multiply, as if the presidency were a perpetual goose laying golden eggs. Each news cycle brings more stories of conflicts of interest, and the tax cut plan announced on Wednesday is a sweeping bow to the rich.

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

So conservatism under Trump and his cronies now running government has brought back a revised version of the gold standard: How much gold you can mine from privatizing the mother lode of government is the mark of your success.

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

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

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

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

What Russia-gate Has Wrought

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

By Robert Parry

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

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

Since Trump took those actions – in accordance with the neocon desires for more “regime change” in the Middle East and a costly New Cold War with Russia – Russia-gate has almost vanished from the news.

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

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

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

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

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

professor Theodore Postol.

How Washington Works

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Russia-gate’s Achievements

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

Instead of Democratic leaders taking responsibility for picking a dreadful candidate, ignoring the nation’s anti-establishment mood, and failing to offer any kind of inspiring message, the national Democrats could palm off the blame on “Russia! Russia! Russia!”

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

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

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

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

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

On Thanksgiving Day, the Post ran a front-page article touting an anonymous Internet group called PropOrNot that identified some 200 Internet news sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other major sources of independent journalism, as guilty of “Russian propaganda.” Facts weren’t needed; the accused had no

chance for rebuttal; the accusers even got to hide in the shadows; the smear was the thing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).

How to Ease North Korea's Fears

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

By Ivan Eland

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

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

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

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

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

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

American help.

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

Easing Paranoia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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