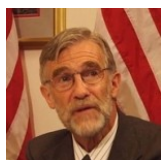


Still Waiting for Evidence of a Russian Hack

More than two years after the allegation of Russian hacking of the 2016 U.S. presidential election was first made, conclusive proof is still lacking and may never be produced, says Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern *Special to Consortium News*



If you are wondering why so little is heard these days of accusations that Russia hacked into the U.S. election in 2016, it could be because those charges could not withstand close scrutiny. It could also be because special counsel Robert Mueller appears to have never bothered to investigate what was once the central alleged crime in Russia-gate as no one associated with WikiLeaks has ever been questioned by his team.

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity – including two “alumni” who were former National Security Agency technical directors – have long since concluded that Julian Assange did not acquire what he called the “emails related to Hillary Clinton” via a “hack” by the Russians or anyone else. They found, rather, that he got them from someone with physical access to Democratic National Committee computers who copied the material onto an external storage device – probably a thumb drive. In December 2016 VIPS explained this in some detail in an open Memorandum to President Barack Obama.

On January 18, 2017 President Obama admitted that the “conclusions” of U.S. intelligence regarding how the alleged Russian hacking got to WikiLeaks were “inconclusive.” Even the vapid FBI/CIA/NSA “Intelligence Community Assessment of Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections” of January 6, 2017, which tried to blame Russian President Vladimir Putin for election interference, contained no direct evidence of Russian involvement. That did not prevent the “handpicked” authors of that poor excuse for intelligence analysis from expressing “high confidence” that Russian intelligence “relayed material it acquired from the Democratic National Committee ... to WikiLeaks.” Handpicked analysts, of course, say what they are handpicked to say.

Never mind. The FBI/CIA/NSA “assessment” became bible truth for partisans like Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, who was among the first off the blocks to blame Russia for interfering to help Trump. It simply could not have been that Hillary Clinton was quite capable of snatching defeat out of victory all by herself. No, it had to have been the Russians.

Five days into the Trump presidency, I had a chance to challenge Schiff personally on the gaping disconnect between the Russians and WikiLeaks. Schiff still “can’t share the evidence” with me ... or with anyone else, because it does not exist.

WikiLeaks

It was on June 12, 2016, just six weeks before the Democratic National Convention, that Assange announced the pending publication of “emails related to Hillary Clinton,” throwing the Clinton campaign into panic mode, since the emails would document strong bias in favor of Clinton and successful attempts to sabotage the campaign of Bernie Sanders. When the emails were published on July 22, just three days before the convention began, the campaign decided to create what I call a Magnificent Diversion, drawing attention away from the substance of the emails by blaming Russia for their release.

Clinton’s PR chief Jennifer Palmieri later admitted that she golf-carted around to various media outlets at the convention with instructions “to get the press to focus on something even we found difficult to process: the prospect that Russia had not only hacked and stolen emails from the DNC, but that it had done so to help Donald Trump and hurt Hillary Clinton.” The diversion worked like a charm. Mainstream media kept shouting “The Russians did it,” and gave little, if any, play to the DNC skullduggery revealed in the emails themselves. And like Brer’ Fox, Bernie didn’t say nothin’.

Meanwhile, highly sophisticated technical experts, were hard at work fabricating “forensic facts” to “prove” the Russians did it. Here’s how it played out:

June 12, 2016: Assange announces that WikiLeaks is about to publish “emails related to Hillary Clinton.”

June 14, 2016: DNC contractor CrowdStrike, (with a dubious professional record and multiple conflicts of interest) announces that malware has been found on the DNC server and claims there is evidence it was injected by Russians.

June 15, 2016: “Guccifer 2.0” affirms the DNC statement; claims responsibility for the “hack;” claims to be a WikiLeaks source; and posts a document that the forensics show was synthetically tainted with “Russian fingerprints.”

The June 12, 14, & 15 timing was hardly coincidence. Rather, it was the start of a pre-emptive move to associate Russia with anything WikiLeaks might have been about to publish and to “show” that it came from a Russian hack.

Enter Independent Investigators

A year ago independent cyber-investigators completed the kind of forensic work that, for reasons best known to then-FBI Director James Comey, neither he nor the “handpicked analysts” who wrote the Jan. 6, 2017 assessment bothered to do. The independent investigators found verifiable evidence from metadata found in the record of an alleged Russian hack of July 5, 2016 showing that the “hack” that day of the DNC by Guccifer 2.0 was not a hack, by Russia or anyone else.

Rather it originated with a copy (onto an external storage device – a thumb drive, for example) by an insider – the same *process* used by the DNC insider/leaker before June 12, 2016 for an altogether different purpose. (Once the metadata was found and the “fluid dynamics” principle of physics applied, this was not difficult to disprove the validity of the claim that Russia was responsible.)

One of these independent investigators publishing under the name of The Forensicator on May 31 published new evidence that the Guccifer 2.0 persona uploaded a document from the West Coast of the United States, and not from Russia.

In our July 24, 2017 Memorandum to President Donald Trump we stated, “We do not know who or what the murky Guccifer 2.0 is. You may wish to ask the FBI.”

Our July 24 Memorandum continued: “Mr. President, the disclosure described below may be related. Even if it is not, it is something we think you should be made aware of in this general connection. On March 7, 2017, WikiLeaks began to publish a trove of original CIA documents that WikiLeaks labeled ‘Vault 7.’ WikiLeaks said it got the trove from a current or former CIA contractor and described it as comparable in scale and significance to the information Edward Snowden gave to reporters in 2013.

“No one has challenged the authenticity of the original documents of Vault 7, which disclosed a vast array of cyber warfare tools developed, probably with help from NSA, by CIA’s Engineering Development Group. That Group was part of the sprawling CIA Directorate of Digital Innovation – a growth industry established by John Brennan in 2015. [(VIPS warned President Obama of some of the dangers of that basic CIA reorganization at the time.)

Marbled



“Scarcely imaginable digital tools – that can take control of

your car and make it race over 100 mph, for example, or can enable remote spying through a TV – were described and duly reported in the *New York Times* and other media throughout March. But the Vault 7, part 3 release on March 31 that exposed the “Marble Framework” program apparently was judged too delicate to qualify as ‘news fit to print’ and was kept out of the *Times* at the time, and has never been mentioned since.

“The *Washington Post*’s Ellen Nakashima, it seems, ‘did not get the memo’ in time. Her March 31 article bore the catching (and accurate) headline: ‘WikiLeaks’ latest release of CIA cyber-tools could blow the cover on agency hacking operations.’

“The WikiLeaks release indicated that Marble was designed for flexible and easy-to-use ‘obfuscation,’ and that Marble source code includes a “de-obfuscator” to reverse CIA text obfuscation.

“More important, the CIA reportedly used Marble during 2016. In her *Washington Post* report, Nakashima left that out, but did include another significant point made by WikiLeaks; namely, that the obfuscation tool could be used to conduct a ‘forensic attribution double game’ or false-flag operation because it included test samples in Chinese, Russian, Korean, Arabic and Farsi.”

A few weeks later William Binney, a former NSA technical director, and I commented on Vault 7 Marble, and were able to get a shortened op-ed version published in *The Baltimore Sun*.

The CIA’s reaction to the WikiLeaks disclosure of the Marble Framework tool was neuralgic. Then Director Mike Pompeo lashed out two weeks later, calling Assange

and his associates “demons,” and insisting; “It’s time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is, a non-state hostile intelligence service, often abetted by state actors like Russia.”

Our July 24 Memorandum continued: “Mr. President, we do not know if CIA’s Marble Framework, or tools like it, played some kind of role in the campaign to blame Russia for hacking the DNC. Nor do we know how candid the denizens of CIA’s Digital Innovation Directorate have been with you and with Director Pompeo. These are areas that might profit from early White House review. [President Trump then directed Pompeo to invite Binney, one of the authors of the July 24, 2017 VIPS Memorandum to the President, to discuss all this. Binney and Pompeo spent an hour together at CIA Headquarters on October 24, 2017, during which Binney briefed Pompeo with his customary straightforwardness.]

“We also do not know if you have discussed cyber issues in any detail with President Putin. In his interview with NBC’s Megyn Kelly he seemed quite willing – perhaps even eager – to address issues related to the kind of cyber tools revealed in the Vault 7 disclosures, if only to indicate he has been briefed on them. Putin pointed out that today’s technology enables hacking to be ‘masked and camouflaged to an extent that no one can understand the origin’ [of the hack] ... And, vice versa, it is possible to set up any entity or any individual that everyone will think that they are the exact source of that attack.

“‘Hackers may be anywhere,’ he said. ‘There may be hackers, by the way, in the United States who very craftily and professionally passed the buck to Russia. Can’t you imagine such a scenario? ... I can.’

New attention has been drawn to these issues after I discussed them in a widely published 16-minute interview last Friday.

In view of the highly politicized environment surrounding these issues, I believe I must append here the same notice that VIPS felt compelled to add to our key Memorandum of July 24, 2017:

“Full Disclosure: Over recent decades the ethos of our intelligence profession has eroded in the public mind to the point that agenda-free analysis is deemed well nigh impossible. Thus, we add this disclaimer, which applies to everything we in VIPS say and do: We have no political agenda; our sole purpose is to spread truth around and, when necessary, hold to account our former intelligence colleagues.

“We speak and write without fear or favor. Consequently, any resemblance between what we say and what presidents, politicians and pundits say is purely coincidental.” The fact we find it is necessary to include that reminder speaks

volumes about these highly politicized times.

Ray McGovern works for Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Savior in inner-city Washington. He was an Army infantry/intelligence officer before serving as a CIA analyst for 27 years. His duties included preparing, and briefing one-on-one, the President's Daily Brief.

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Questioning the Conventional Wisdom of Russian Spy's Poisoning

The recent poisoning of a Russian spy has started a tit-for-tat of expelling diplomats between the US and Russia, an escalation of tensions that deserves serious questioning, explained former ambassador Craig Murray in an interview with Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico.

By Dennis J Bernstein and Randy Credico

Former UK Ambassador Craig Murray found out very quickly what happens when one contradicts the conventional wisdom regarding the recent poisoning of former Russian spy and double agent Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia, in the English city of Salisbury on March 4.

Ambassador Murray, who in the following interview raises compelling questions about who may be responsible for the attacks, other than the Russians, has been the butt of a full-scale cyber attack on his website over many days.

Meanwhile, the usual suspects in the US and Western corporate press continue to fan the flames of a new cold war with Russia. Indeed, Russia will expel 60 US diplomats and has ordered the shuttering of the US consulate in St. Petersburg, according to an announcement by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Lavrov, who made the announcement in Moscow on Thursday, March 29, summoned US ambassador Jon Huntsman to the Russian Foreign Ministry to confirm the action.

Dennis J. Bernstein and Randy Credico interviewed Ambassador Murray on March 26th, 2018.

Dennis Bernstein: President Trump ordered the expulsion of 60 Russian officials from the United States and the closing of the Russian consulate in Seattle. The

move follows the alleged poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury on March 4. Joining us is someone who knows a great deal about the matter and has come under fire for taking an oppositional position, former UK ambassador, author and activist, Craig Murray. Mr. Murray, everyone says the Russians did it, no doubt about it, but you disagree.

Craig Murray: I'm not saying the Russians didn't do it, I am saying there are other possibilities. We are not supposed to assign responsibility for crime in this way, saying there is a bad guy in the neighborhood and therefore it must be him. So far, there has been no real evidence at all that it was the Russian state that did it.

I find it remarkable that the very day this happened the British government was announcing that it was the Russian state that was behind this. They couldn't possibly have had time to analyze any of the evidence. It is as though this is being used as a trigger to put prearranged anti-Russian measures into place and to "up" the Cold War rhetoric. You can't help get the feeling that they are rather pleased this has happened and were even expecting it to happen.

DB: This is coming out of the European Union today: "The European Union strongly condemns the attack that took place against Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, England on March 4 that also left a police officer seriously ill.

The lives of many citizens were threatened by this reckless and illegal action. The European Union takes extremely seriously the UK government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible."

CM: This phrase "highly likely" admits that they don't have the evidence to back this up. It's a speculation.

DB: They say that the poison is consistent with what the Russians have used in the past.

CM: The claim is that this is one of a group of nerve agents known as a Novichok. The Novichok program was being run in the 1980's by the Soviets. The idea was to develop chemical weapons which could be quickly put together from commercial pesticides and fertilizers. They came up with a number of theoretical designs for such weapons.

Until now, the official position of the British government and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was that there was doubt as to whether they actually produced any of these. As of now, they haven't been put on the banned list, precisely because the scientific community has doubted their existence. So the British government's ability on day-one to identify this was

quite remarkable.

Novichok is not a particular weapon but a class of weapon. Russia is by no means the only country capable of producing this kind of weapon. In 2016, the Iranians succeeded in producing several Novichok weapons and they reported their results to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Their motivation was that they were concerned that they themselves might be attacked by chemical weapons, possibly from Israel. There are at least a couple dozen countries who have the technical capability to create this type of nerve agent.

In order to take blood samples from the Skripals, who were both in a coma, doctors had to get court approval. And in giving evidence to the High Court, two scientists stated that the Skripals had been poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent or a "closely related agent." It looks to many people like this may just be a silly amateur mixture of different insecticides.

Other questions arise. The British government has been telling us that this is ten times more powerful than a standard nerve agent. Thankfully, so far, nobody has been killed. Why isn't this deadly agent more effective? Why is it that the doctor who administered first aid to Yulia Skripal was completely unaffected, even though he had extensive physical contact with her?

DB: But some people will say that the only country that would want to silence a former Russian spy would be Russia.

CM: Our foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, has gone on record as saying that the Russians have been secretly stockpiling this chemical weapon for a decade and have had a secret program of assassination techniques. But if you were Vladimir Putin and you had this secret nerve agent, why would you blow your cover by using it on this retired spy who you released from prison years ago? The whole scenario is utterly implausible.

Why would Russia wish to ruin its international reputation with this entirely gratuitous violence against an old spy? Skripal was exchanged as part of a spy swap. If people are going to swap spies and then kill them, there won't be any spy swaps in the future. A KGB person like Putin is the last person who is going to destroy the system of spy swaps.

Randy Credico: Mr. Murray, there has been a concerted effort to defame you and undermine your credibility. What effect has this had on you and your family?

CM: It has been really quite unpleasant. The mainstream media has permitted no doubt at all. All of them are just printing government propaganda. I went on social media to post my doubts about this story being too convenient and too easy. My first piece on this, "Russian to Judgment," had millions of viewers.

That brought upon me the wrath of the establishment. I became the recipient of hundreds of pieces of Twitter abuse in which I was called a nut and a conspiracy theorist.

RC: Who stands to benefit from this attack?

CM: It adds fuel to the new Cold War. The armaments industry are the primary people who benefit. This kind of thing is very good for defense budgets. It is very good news for the spies and security services. Here in the UK the industry employs over 100,000 people. In a country of 60 million, this is a strong and very highly paid interest group. All of these people are seeing a major ramping up of their budgets. When the people feeding-in the intelligence are the same people who are benefiting financially from that story, then you have to worry. And particularly for right-wing politicians this is a cheap way of getting support.

DB: Mr. Murray, I don't think that we can separate this from the so-called "Russiagate frenzy." Can you state unequivocally that there were substantial leaks from the DNC, as opposed to hacks?

CM: I can promise you that what came out of the DNC were leaks. They were from somebody who legally had access to the information. It was not an outside hack, not by the Russians, not by anyone.

DB: What if you were subpoenaed before Congress, would you take the fifth or would you tell that story?

CM: I've actually been in touch with them, saying I know what happened here and could perhaps save them a lot of time. But they haven't replied and I don't expect them to. If called, I would turn up and I would gladly tell them what I have told you: That I know for sure that this wasn't a Russian hack but a leak. I would not give any further details because that might compromise others.

The other thing about the Skripal case, of course, is the connection to Orbis Intelligence and Christopher Steele and Pablo Miller. The person who wrote the dossier on Donald Trump for the Clinton campaign was Christopher Steele of Orbis Intelligence. He was in MI6 in the Russian Embassy in Moscow at the time when Skripal was a key double agent. The guy who was responsible for handling Skripal on a day-to-day basis was Pablo Miller. Pablo Miller also worked for Orbis Intelligence. The MI6 has never had the close-up access to Putin that that dossier claims to have. Plainly, a great deal of it is fabrication.

I strongly suspect that Mr. Skripal was involved in the production of that dossier about Donald Trump. I admit that this is circumstantial, but that dossier was produced while Pablo Miller was working for Orbis Intelligence.

Like Mr. Steele, Pablo Miller was a former MI6 agent in Russia. And Pablo Miller was also living in Salisbury, within a short distance of Skripal. If you are going to produce a dossier which invents a lot of stuff about Donald Trump and his connections to the circle around Putin, you need a Russian source who can give you names and lend the dossier a degree of authenticity. I believe that that kind of detail is what Skripal provided to the Steele dossier.

This would seem a much more plausible lead in investigating this case. The idea that you kill someone for something that happened twelve years ago is frankly much less compelling than something that is happening now. Of course, there is a possibility that Skripal revealed something in the dossier which the Russians didn't want revealed, that they decided he was still a danger and should be eliminated.

The other possibility is that Mr. Skripal was a double agent who worked for money. He sold to the British names of Russian officers and agents serving abroad. So he is not the most principled of people. And once you've become a double agent, it's not hard to become a triple agent. And if Skripal knows that this dossier is full of lies, he might come out and confess to fabricating all of this in hopes of making financial gain.

DB: You feel that you are under attack for taking this position?

CM: Yes, and it is not just the nasty tweets and emails. My website has been under attack, at a rate of millions of hits per minute.

RC: Have any of the mainstream media in Britain reported anything other than the government line?

CM: Strangely enough, after I posted it, the BBC reported the fact that Skripal's handler in Russia was now working for Steele and that Skripal and Pablo Miller lived in the same town. But the BBC contacted Orbis and they said that wasn't true. That was the end of that.

RC: You have been attacked by foreign minister Boris Johnson.

CM: Interestingly, when talking to journalists, Boris Johnson and others have stated clearly that this poison must have come from Russia, but in their formal statements to Parliament and the United Nations Security Council, they write that it was "a weapon of a type developed by Russia." That is very different from saying that it is a Russian weapon.

RC: Are you concerned that this might be leading to nuclear war?

CM: I think that the Russians have the sense not to overreact. All they have

done so far is to match what is done rather than up the ante. So when we expelled 23 diplomats, the Russians expelled 23 diplomats. And it looks like this sort of tit for tat will result from the other expulsions.

But I strongly believe that this is happening because there are a lot of people—in the military, in the weapons industry—who miss the Cold War. They are seeing a threat to their budgets. We are entering a period where there is not going to be a lot of international cooperation and we are going to see a lot of militaristic posturing. Of course, there is always the prospect that something can go wrong.

DB: What do you think of John Bolton being appointed National Security Advisor? This is someone who has said that he would be happy if North Korea disappeared. He doesn't seem to be someone who would support the ongoing arrangement with Iran.

CM: I think it is very scary. Bolton obviously is the hawk of hawks and he bore a huge responsibility for the Iraq War. It is a very strange and irresponsible appointment. A couple days ago, I was reviewing Trump's term in office and I realized that one good thing is that he hasn't initiated a war till now. I'm not convinced Hillary wouldn't have gotten us into an armed conflict by this point. But then, now Trump appoints John Bolton, which leads me to suspect that war might not be far off.

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.

Iraq +15: Accumulated Evil of the Whole

Brushing aside warnings that he was about to unleash Armageddon in the Middle East, George W. Bush launched an unprovoked attack on Iraq on March 19-20, 2003, the ramifications of which we are still grappling with today, Nat Parry writes.

By Nat Parry

Robert Jackson, the Chief United States Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals, once denounced aggressive war as "the greatest menace of our time." With much of Europe laying in smoldering ruin, he said in 1945 that "to initiate a war of aggression ... is not only an international crime: it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it

contains within itself the accumulated evil of whole.”

When it comes to the U.S. invasion of Iraq 15 years ago today, the accumulated evil of the whole is difficult to fully comprehend. Estimates of the war’s costs vary, but commonly cited figures put the financial cost for U.S. taxpayers at upwards of a trillion dollars, the cost in Iraqi lives in the hundreds of thousands, and U.S. soldier deaths at nearly 5,000. Another 100,000 Americans have been wounded and four million Iraqis driven from their homes as refugees.

As staggering as those numbers may be, they don’t come close to describing the true cost of the war, or the magnitude of the crime that was committed by launching it on March 19-20, 2003. Besides the cost in blood and treasure, the cost to basic principles of international justice, long-term geopolitical stability, and the impacts on the U.S. political system are equally profound.

Lessons Learned and Forgotten

Although for a time, it seemed that the lessons of the war were widely understood and had tangible effects on American politics – with Democrats, for example, taking control of Congress in the midterm elections of 2006 based primarily on growing antiwar sentiment around the country and Barack Obama defeating Hillary Clinton in the 2008 primaries based largely on the two candidates’ opposing views on the Iraq War – the political establishment has, since then, effectively swept these lessons under the rug.

One of those lessons, of course, was that proclamations of the intelligence community should be treated with huge grain of salt. In the build-up to war with Iraq a decade and a half ago, there were those who pushed back on the politicized and “cherry-picked” intelligence that the Bush administration was using to convince the American people of the need to go to war, but for the most part, the media and political establishment parroted these claims without showing the due diligence of independently confirming the claims or even applying basic principles of logic.

For example, even as United Nations weapons inspectors, led by Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, were coming up empty-handed when acting on tips from the U.S. intelligence community, few within the mainstream media were willing to draw the logical conclusion that the intelligence was wrong (or that the Bush administration was lying). Instead, they assumed that the UN inspectors were simply incompetent or that Saddam Hussein was just really good at hiding his weapons of mass destruction.

Yet, despite being misled so thoroughly back in 2002 and 2003, today Americans show the same credulousness to the intelligence community when it claims that

“Russia hacked the 2016 election,” without offering proof. Liberals, in particular, have hitched their wagons to the investigation being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is widely hailed as a paragon of virtue, while the truth is, as FBI Director during the Bush administration, he was a key enabler of the WMD narrative used to launch an illegal war.

Mueller testified to Congress that “Iraq has moved to the top of my list” of threats to the domestic security of the United States. “As we previously briefed this Committee,” Mueller said on February 11, 2003, “Iraq’s WMD program poses a clear threat to our national security.” He warned that Baghdad might provide WMDs to al-Qaeda to carry out a catastrophic attack in the United States.

Mueller drew criticism at the time, including from FBI whistleblower Coleen Rowley, for conflating Iraq and al-Qaeda, with demands that the FBI produce whatever evidence it had on this supposed connection.

Today, of course, Mueller is celebrated by Democrats as the best hope for bringing down the presidency of Donald Trump. George W. Bush has also enjoyed a revival of his image thanks largely to his public criticisms of Trump, with a majority of Democrats now viewing the 43rd president favorably. Many Democrats have also embraced aggressive war – often couched in the rhetoric of “humanitarian interventionism” – as their preferred option to deal with foreign policy challenges such as the Syrian conflict.

When the Democratic Party chose Clinton as its nominee in 2016, it appeared that Democrats had also embraced her willingness to use military force to achieve “regime change” in countries that are seen as a threat to U.S. interests – whether Iraq, Iran or Syria.

As a senator from New York during the build-up for military action against Iraq, Clinton not only voted to authorize the U.S. invasion, but fervently supported the war – which she backed with or without UN Security Council authorization. Her speech on the floor of the Senate on Oct. 10, 2002 arguing for military action promoted the same falsehoods that were being used by the Bush administration to build support for the war, claiming for example that Saddam Hussein had “given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members.”

“If left unchecked,” she said, “Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons. Should he succeed in that endeavor, he could alter the political and security landscape of the Middle East, which as we know all too well affects American security.”

Clinton maintained support for the war even as it became obvious that Iraq in fact had no weapons of mass destruction – the primary casus belli for the war – only cooling her enthusiasm in 2006 when it became clear that the Democratic base had turned decisively against the war and her hawkish position endangered her chances for the 2008 presidential nomination. But eight years later, the Democrats had apparently moved on, and her support for the war was no longer considered a disqualification for the presidency.

One of the lessons that should be recalled today, especially as the U.S. gears up today for possible confrontations with countries including North Korea and Russia, is how easy it was in 2002-2003 for the Bush administration to convince Americans that they were under threat from the regime of Saddam Hussein some 7,000 miles away. The claims about Iraq's WMDs were untrue, with many saying so in real time – including by the newly formed group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which was regularly issuing memoranda to the president and to the American people debunking the falsehoods that were being promoted by the U.S. intelligence community.

But even if the claims about Iraq's alleged stockpiles were true, there was still no reason to assume that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of launching a surprise attack against the United States. Indeed, while Americans were all but convinced that Iraq threatened their safety and security, it was actually the U.S. government that was threatening Iraqis.

Far from posing an imminent threat to the United States, in 2003, Iraq was a country that had already been devastated by a U.S.-led war a decade earlier and crippling economic sanctions that caused the deaths of 1.5 million Iraqis (leading to the resignation of two UN humanitarian coordinators who called the sanctions genocidal).

Threats and Bluster

Although the invasion didn't officially begin until March 20, 2003 (still the 19th in Washington), the United States had been explicitly threatening to attack the country as early as January 2003, with the Pentagon publicizing plans for a so-called "shock and awe" bombing campaign.

"If the Pentagon sticks to its current war plan," CBS News reported on January 24, "one day in March the Air Force and Navy will launch between 300 and 400 cruise missiles at targets in Iraq. ... [T]his is more than the number that were launched during the entire 40 days of the first Gulf War. On the second day, the plan calls for launching another 300 to 400 cruise missiles."

A Pentagon official warned: "There will not be a safe place in Baghdad."

These public threats appeared to be a form of intimidation and psychological warfare, and were almost certainly in violation of the UN Charter, which states: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”

The Pentagon’s vaunted “shock and awe” attack began with limited bombing on March 19-20, as U.S. forces unsuccessfully attempted to kill Hussein. Attacks continued against a small number of targets until March 21, when the main bombing campaign began. U.S.-led forces launched approximately 1,700 air sorties, with 504 using cruise missiles.

During the invasion, the U.S. also dropped some 10,800 cluster bombs on Iraq despite claiming that only a fraction of that number had been used.

“The Pentagon presented a misleading picture during the war of the extent to which cluster weapons were being used and of the civilian casualties they were causing,” reported USA Today in late 2003. Despite claims that only 1,500 cluster weapons had been used resulting in just one civilian casualty, “in fact, the United States used 10,782 cluster weapons,” including many that were fired into urban areas from late March to early April 2003.

The cluster bombs killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians and left behind thousands of unexploded bomblets that continued to kill and injure civilians weeks after the fighting stopped.

(Because of the indiscriminate effect of these weapons, their use is banned by the international Convention on Cluster Munitions, which the United States has refused to sign.)

Attempting to kill Hussein, Bush ordered the bombing of an Iraqi residential restaurant on April 7. A single B-1B bomber dropped four precision-guided 2,000-pound bombs. The four bunker-penetrating bombs destroyed the target building, the al Saa restaurant block and several surrounding structures, leaving a 60-foot crater and unknown casualties.

Diners, including children, were ripped apart by the bombs. One mother found her daughter’s torso and then her severed head. U.S. intelligence later confirmed that Hussein wasn’t there.

Resistance and Torture

It was evident within weeks of the initial invasion that the Bush administration had misjudged the critical question of whether Iraqis would fight. They put up

stiffer than expected resistance even in southern Iraqi cities such as Umm Qasr, Basra and Nasiriya where Hussein's support was considered weak, and soon after the fall of the regime on April 9, when the Bush administration decided to disband the Iraqi army, it helped spark an anti-U.S. insurgency led by many former Iraqi military figures.

Despite Bush's triumphant May 1 landing on an aircraft carrier and his speech in front of a giant "Mission Accomplished" banner, it looked as though the collapse of the Baathist government had been just the first stage in what would become a long-running war of attrition. After the Iraqi conventional forces had been disbanded, the U.S. military began to notice in May 2003 a steadily increasing flurry of attacks on U.S. occupiers in various regions of the so-called "Sunni Triangle."

These included groups of insurgents firing assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades at U.S. occupation troops, as well as increasing use of improvised explosive devices on U.S. convoys.

Possibly anticipating a long, drawn-out occupation and counter-insurgency campaign, in a March 2003 memorandum Bush administration lawyers devised legal doctrines to justify certain torture techniques, offering legal rationales "that could render specific conduct, otherwise criminal, not unlawful."

They argued that the president or anyone acting on the president's orders were not bound by U.S. laws or international treaties prohibiting torture, asserting that the need for "obtaining intelligence vital to the protection of untold thousands of American citizens" superseded any obligations the administration had under domestic or international law.

"In order to respect the President's inherent constitutional authority to manage a military campaign," the memo stated, U.S. prohibitions against torture "must be construed as inapplicable to interrogations undertaken pursuant to his Commander-in-Chief authority."

Over the course of the next year, disclosures emerged that torture had been used extensively in Iraq for "intelligence gathering." Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh disclosed in The New Yorker in May 2004 that a 53-page classified Army report written by Gen. Antonio Taguba concluded that Abu Ghraib prison's military police were urged on by intelligence officers seeking to break down the Iraqis before interrogation.

"Numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees," wrote Taguba.

These actions, authorized at the highest levels, constituted serious breaches of

international and domestic law, including the Convention Against Torture, the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners of War, as well as the U.S. War Crimes Act and the Torture Statute.

They also may have played a role in the rise of the ISIS terror group, the origins of which were subsequently traced to an American prison in Iraq dubbed Camp Bucca. This camp was the site of rampant abuse of prisoners, one of whom, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, later became the leader of ISIS. Al-Baghdadi spent four years as a prisoner at Bucca, where he started recruiting others to his cause.

America's Weapons of Mass Destruction

Besides torture and the use of cluster bombs, the crimes against the Iraqi people over the years included wholesale massacres, long-term poisoning and the destruction of cities.

There was the 2004 assault on Fallujah in which white phosphorus – banned under international law – was used against civilians. There was the 2005 Haditha massacre, in which 24 unarmed civilians were systematically murdered by U.S. marines. There was the 2007 "Collateral Murder" massacre revealed by WikiLeaks in 2010, depicting the indiscriminate killing of more than a dozen civilians in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad – including two Reuters news staff.

There is also the tragic legacy of cancer and birth defects caused by the U.S. military's extensive use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus. In Fallujah the use of depleted uranium led to birth defects in infants 14 times higher than in the Japanese cities targeted by U.S. atomic bombs at close of World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Noting the birth defects in Fallujah, Al Jazeera journalist Dahr Jamail told Democracy Now in 2013:

"And going on to Fallujah, because I wrote about this a year ago, and then I returned to the city again this trip, we are seeing an absolute crisis of congenital malformations of newborn. ... I mean, these are extremely hard to look at. They're extremely hard to bear witness to. But it's something that we all need to pay attention to, because of the amount of depleted uranium used by the U.S. military during both of their brutal attacks on the city of 2004, as well as other toxic munitions like white phosphorus, among other things."

A report sent to the UN General Assembly by Dr. Nawal Majeed Al-Sammarai, Iraq's Minister of Women's Affairs, stated that in September 2009, Fallujah General Hospital had 170 babies born, 75 percent of whom were deformed. A quarter of them died within their first week of life.

The military's use of depleted uranium also caused a sharp increase in Leukemia and birth defects in the city of Najaf, which saw one of the most severe

military actions during the 2003 invasion, with cancer becoming more common than the flu according to local doctors.

By the end of the war, a number of Iraq's major cities, including Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul, had been reduced to rubble and by 2014, a former CIA director conceded that the nation of Iraq had basically been destroyed.

"I think Iraq has pretty much ceased to exist," said Michael Hayden, noting that it was fragmented into multiple parts which he didn't see "getting back together." In other words, the United States, using its own extensive arsenal of actual weapons of mass destruction, had completely destroyed a sovereign nation.

Predictable Consequences

The effects of these policies included the predictable growth of Islamic extremism, with a National Intelligence Estimate – representing the consensus view of the 16 spy services inside the U.S. government – warning in 2006 that a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was being spawned by the U.S. occupation of Iraq. According to one American intelligence official, the consensus was that "the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse."

The assessment noted that several underlying factors were "fueling the spread of the jihadist movement," including "entrenched grievances, such as corruption, injustice, and fear of Western domination, leading to anger, humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness," and "pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment among most Muslims all of which jihadists exploit."

But rather than leading to substantive changes or reversals in U.S. policies, the strategy agreed upon in Washington seemed to be to double down on the failed policies that had given rise to radical jihadist groups. In fact, instead of withdrawing from Iraq, the U.S. decided to send a surge of 20,000 troops in 2007. This is despite the fact that public opinion was decidedly against the war.

A Newsweek poll in early 2007 found that 68 percent of Americans opposed the surge, and in another poll conducted just after Bush's 2007 State of the Union Address, 64 percent said Congress was not being assertive enough in challenging the Bush administration over its conduct of the war.

An estimated half-million people marched on Washington on Jan. 27, 2007, with messages for the newly sworn in 110th Congress to "Stand up to Bush," urging Congress to cut the war funding with the slogan, "Not one more dollar, not one more death." A growing combativeness was also on display in the antiwar movement with this demonstration marked by hundreds of protesters breaking through police lines and charging Capitol Hill.

Although there were additional large-scale protests a couple months later to mark the sixth anniversary of the invasion, including a march on the Pentagon led by Iraq War veterans, over the next year the antiwar movement's activities steadily declined. While fatigue might explain some of the waning support for mass mobilizations, much of the decline can also surely be explained by the rise of Barack Obama's candidacy. Millions of people channeled their energies into his campaign, including many motivated by a hope that he represented real change from the Bush years.

One of Obama's advantages over Clinton in the Democratic primary was that he had been an early opponent of the Iraq War while she had been one of its most vocal supporters. This led many American voters to believe in 2008 that they had elected someone who might rein in some of the U.S. military adventurism and quickly end U.S. involvement in Iraq. But this wasn't to be the case. The combat mission dragged on well into President Obama's first term.

War, War and More War

After its well-publicized failures in Iraq, the U.S. turned its attention to Libya, overthrowing the government of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 utilizing armed militias implicated in war crimes and backed with NATO air power. Following Gaddafi's ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The Obama administration also took a keen interest in destabilizing the Syrian government and to do so began providing arms that often fell into the hands of extremists.

The CIA trained and armed so-called "moderate" rebel units in Syria, only to watch these groups switch sides by joining forces with Islamist brigades such as ISIS and Al Qaeda's affiliate the Nusra Front. Others surrendered to Sunni extremist groups with the U.S.-provided weapons presumably ending up in the arsenals of jihadists or sometimes just quit or went missing altogether.

Beyond Syria and Libya, Obama also expanded U.S. military engagements in countries including Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and sent a surge of troops to Afghanistan in 2009. And despite belatedly withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq, with the last U.S. troops finally leaving on December 18, 2011, Obama also presided over a major increase in the use of drone strikes and conventional air wars.

In his first term, Obama dropped 20,000 bombs and missiles, a number that shot up to over 100,000 bombs and missiles dropped in his second term. In 2016, the final year of Obama's presidency, the U.S. dropped nearly three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day.

Obama also had the distinction of becoming the fourth U.S. president in a row to bomb the nation of Iraq. Under criticism for allowing the rise of ISIS in the country, Obama decided to reverse his earlier decision to disengage with Iraq, and in 2014 started bombing the country again. Addressing the American people on Sept. 10, 2014, President Obama said that "ISIL poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East including American citizens, personnel and facilities."

"If left unchecked," he continued, "these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States. While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies."

Of course, this is precisely the result that many voices of caution had warned about back in 2002 and 2003, when millions of Americans were taking to the streets in protest of the looming invasion of Iraq. And, to be clear, it wasn't just the antiwar left urging restraint – establishment figures and paleoconservatives were also voicing concern.

Retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, for example, who served as a Middle East envoy for George W. Bush, warned in October 2002 that by invading Iraq, "we are about to do something that will ignite a fuse in this region that we will rue the day we ever started." Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser in the first Bush administration, said a strike on Iraq "could unleash an Armageddon in the Middle East."

No matter, Bush was a gut player who had made up his mind, so those warnings were brushed aside and the invasion proceeded.

Campaign 2016

When presidential candidate Donald Trump began slamming Bush for the Iraq War during the Republican primary campaign in 2015 and 2016, calling the decision to invade Iraq a "big fat mistake," he not only won over some of the antiwar libertarian vote, but also helped solidify his image as a political outsider who "tells it like it is."

And after Hillary Clinton emerged as the Democratic nominee, with her track record as an enthusiastic backer of virtually all U.S. interventions and an advocate of deeper involvement in countries such as Syria, voters could have been forgiven for getting the impression that the Republican Party was now the antiwar party and the Democrats were the hawks.

As the late Robert Parry observed in June 2016, "Amid the celebrations about picking the first woman as a major party's presumptive nominee, Democrats appear

to have given little thought to the fact that they have abandoned a near half-century standing as the party more skeptical about the use of military force. Clinton is an unabashed war hawk who has shown no inclination to rethink her pro-war attitudes.”

The antiwar faction within the Democratic Party was further marginalized during the Democratic National Convention when chants of “No More War” broke out during former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta’s speech. The Democratic establishment responded with chants of “USA!” to drown out the voices for peace and they even turned the lights out on the antiwar section of the crowd. The message was clear: there is no room for the antiwar movement inside the Democratic Party.

While there were numerous factors that played a role in Trump’s stunning victory over Clinton in November 2016, it is no stretch of the imagination to speculate that one of those factors was lingering antiwar sentiment from the Iraq debacle and other engagements of the U.S. military. Many of those fed up with U.S. military adventurism may have fallen for Trump’s quasi-anti-interventionist rhetoric while others may have opted to vote for an alternative party such as the Libertarians or the Greens, both of which took strong stances against U.S. interventionism.

But despite Trump’s occasional statements questioning the wisdom of committing the military to far-off lands such as Iraq or Afghanistan, he was also an advocate for war crimes such as “taking out [the] families” of suspected terrorists. He urged that the U.S. stop being “politically correct” in its waging of war.

So, ultimately, Americans were confronted with choosing between an unreconstructed regime-changing neoconservative Democratic hawk, and a reluctant interventionist who nevertheless wanted to teach terrorists a lesson by killing their children. Although ultimately the neocon won the popular vote, the war crimes advocate carried the Electoral College.

Following the election it turned out that Trump was a man of his word when it came to killing children. In one of his first military actions as president, Trump ordered an attack on a village in Yemen on Jan. 29, 2017, which claimed the lives of as many as 23 civilians, including a newborn baby and an eight-year-old girl, Nawar al-Awlaki.

Nawar was the daughter of the al-Qaeda propagandist and American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a September 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen.

Normalized Aggression

2017, Trump’s first year in office, turned out to be the deadliest year for

civilians in Iraq and Syria since U.S. airstrikes began on the two countries in 2014. The U.S. killed between 3,923 and 6,102 civilians during the year, according to a tally by the monitoring group Airwars. "Non-combatant deaths from Coalition air and artillery strikes rose by more than 200 per cent compared to 2016," Airwars noted.

While this spike in civilian deaths did make some headlines, including in the Washington Post, for the most part, the thousands of innocents killed by U.S. airstrikes are dismissed as "collateral damage." The ongoing carnage is considered perfectly normal, barely even eliciting a comment from the pundit class.

This is arguably one of the most enduring legacies of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – an act of military aggression that was based on false pretenses, which brushed aside warnings of caution, and blatantly violated international law. With no one in the media or the Bush administration ever held accountable for promoting this war or for launching it, what we have seen is the normalization of military aggression to a level that would have been unimaginable 20 years ago.

Indeed, I remember well the bombing of Iraq that took place in 1998 as part of Bill Clinton's Operation Desert Fox. Although this was a very limited bombing campaign, lasting only four days, there were sizable protests in opposition to the military action. I joined a picket of a couple hundred people in front of the White House holding a hand-made sign reading "IMPEACH HIM FOR WAR CRIMES" – a reference to the fact that Congress was at the time impeaching him for lying about a blowjob.

Compare that to what we see today – or, more accurately what we don't see today – in regards to antiwar advocacy. Despite the fact that the U.S. is now engaged in at least seven military conflicts, there is little in the way of peace activism or even much of a national debate over the wisdom, legality or morality of waging war. Few even raise objections to its significant financial cost to U.S. taxpayers, for example the fact that one day of spending on these wars amounts to about \$200 million.

Fifteen years ago, one of the arguments of the antiwar movement was that the war on terror was morphing into a perpetual war without boundaries, without rules, and without any end game. The U.S., in other words, was in danger of finding itself in a state of endless war.

We are now clearly embroiled in that endless war, which is a reality that even Senate war hawk Lindsey Graham acknowledged last year when four U.S. troops were killed in Niger. Claiming that he didn't know that the U.S. had a military presence in Niger, Graham – who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on State, Foreign

Operations, and Related Programs – stated that “this is an endless war without boundaries, no limitation on time or geography.”

Although it wasn't clear whether he was lamenting or celebrating this endless and borderless war, his words should be taken as a warning of where the U.S. stands on this 15th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq – in a war without end, without boundaries, without limits on time or geography.

Intel Committee Rejects Basic Underpinning of Russiagate

The assumption underpinning Russiagate – that Vladimir Putin preferred Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton – is not supported by the facts, according to “Initial Findings” of the House Intelligence Committee, as Ray McGovern reports.

By Ray McGovern

Let's try to make this simple: The basic rationale behind charges that Russian President Vladimir Putin interfered in the 2016 U.S. election to help candidate Donald Trump rests, of course, on the assumption that Moscow preferred Trump to Hillary Clinton. But that is wrong to assume, says the House Intelligence Committee, which has announced that it does not concur with “Putin's supposed preference for candidate Trump.”

So, the House Intelligence Committee Republican majority, which has been pouring over the same evidence used by the “handpicked analysts” from just the CIA, FBI, and NSA to prepare the rump Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) of Jan. 6, 2017, finds the major premise of the ICA unpersuasive. The committee's “Initial Findings” released on Monday specifically reject the assumption that Putin favored Trump.

This puts the committee directly at odds with handpicked analysts from only the FBI, CIA, and NSA, who assessed that Putin favored Trump – using this as their major premise and then straining to prove it by cobbling together unconvincing facts and theories.

Those of us with experience in intelligence analysis strongly criticized the evidence-impoverished ICA as soon as it was released, but it went on to achieve Gospel-like respect, with penance assigned to anyone who might claim it was not divinely inspired.

Until now.

Rep. K. Michael Conway (R-Texas), who led the House Committee investigation, has told the media that the committee is preparing a separate, in-depth analysis of the ICA itself. Good.

The committee should also take names – not only of the handpicked analysts, but the hand-pickers. There is ample precedent for this. For example, those who shepherded the fraudulent National Intelligence Estimate on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq 15 years ago were named in the NIE. Without names, it is hard to know whom to hold accountable.

Here's the key ICA judgment with which the House committee does not concur: "We assess Putin, his advisers, and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump over Secretary Clinton." Not to be picky, but if House investigators have been unable to find enough persuasive evidence to convince them that "Putin's supposed preference" was Trump, there is little reason to take seriously the ICA's adolescent observations – like Putin held a "grudge" against Clinton because she called him nasty names – and other tortured reasoning in an Intelligence Community Assessment that, frankly, is an embarrassment to the profession of intelligence analysis.

I recall reading the ICA as soon as it was published. I concluded that no special expertise in intelligence analysis was needed to see how the assessment had been cobbled together around the "given" that Putin had a distinct preference for Trump. That was a premise with which I always had serious trouble, since it assumed that a Russian President would prefer to have an unpredictable, mercurial, lash-out-at-any-grievance-real-or-perceived President with his fingers on the nuclear codes. This – not name-calling – is precisely what Russian leaders fear the most.

Be that as it may, the ICA's evidence adduced to demonstrate Russian "interference" to help Trump win the election never passed the smell test. Worse still, it was not difficult to see powerful political agendas in play. While those agendas, together with the media which shared them, conferred on the ICA the status of Holy Writ, it had clearly been "writ" to promote those agendas and, as such, amounted to rank corruption of intelligence by those analysts "handpicked" by National Intelligence Director James Clapper to come up with the "right" answer.

Traces of the bizarre ideological – even racial – views of Intelligence Dean Clapper can also be discerned between the lines of the ICA. It is a safe bet that the handpicked authors of the ICA were well aware of – and perhaps even shared – the views Clapper later expressed to NBC's Chuck Todd on May 28, 2017

about Russians: “[P]ut that in context with everything else we knew the Russians were doing to interfere with the election,” he said. “And just the historical practices of the Russians, who typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique. So, we were concerned.”

Always Read the Fine Print

What readers of the intelligence assessment might have taken more seriously was the CYA in the ICA, so to speak, the truth-in-advertising cautions wedged into its final page. The transition from the lead paragraph to the final page – from “high confidence” to the actual definition of “high confidence” is remarkable. As a reminder, here’s how ICA starts:

“Putin Ordered Campaign To Influence US Election: We assess with high confidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election, the consistent goals of which were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. ...”

But wait, the fair warning on page 13 explains: “High confidence ... does not imply that the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong. ... Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that show something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Questionable Logic

The “logic” referred to rests primarily on assumptions related to Trump’s supposed friendliness with Putin, what Clinton Campaign Manager John Podesta called in 2015 a “bromance.” It assumes that Trump has been more than willing to do the Kremlin’s bidding from the White House, whether due to financial relationships Trump has with the Russians, or because he “owes them” for helping him get elected, or whether he is being blackmailed by “the pee tape” that Christopher Steele alluded to in his “dodgy dossier.”

This is the crux of the whole “treason” aspect of the Russiagate conspiracy theory – the idea that Trump is a Manchurian (or as some clever wags among Russiagaters claim, a *Siberian*) candidate who is directly under the influence of the Kremlin.

Even as U.S.-Russian relations drop to historic lows – with tensions approaching Cuban Missile Crisis levels – amazingly, there are still those promoting this theory, including some in the supposedly “progressive” alternative media like

The Young Turks (TYT). Following Putin's announcement on developments in Russia's nuclear program earlier this month, TYT's Cenk Uygur slammed Trump for not being more forceful in denouncing Putin, complaining that Trump "never criticizes Putin." Uygur even speculated: "I'm not sure that Trump represents our interests above Putin's."

This line of thinking ignores a preponderance of evidence that the U.S posture against Russian interests has only hardened over the past year-plus of the Trump administration – perhaps in part as a result of Trump's perceived need to demonstrate that he is not in "Putin's pocket."

The U.S. has intensified its engagement in Syria, for one thing, reportedly killing several Russians in recent airstrikes – a dangerous escalation that could lead to all-out military confrontation with Moscow and hardly the stuff of an alleged "bromance" between Trump and Putin. Then there was the Trump administration's recent decision to provide new lethal weapons to the Ukrainian military – a major reversal of the Obama administration's more cautious approach and an intensification of U.S. involvement in a proxy war on Russia's border. The Russian foreign ministry angrily denounced this decision, saying the U.S. had "crossed the line" in the Ukraine conflict and accused Washington of fomenting bloodshed.

On other major policy issues, the Trump administration has also been pushing a hard anti-Russian line, reiterating recently that it would never recognize Crimea as part of Russia, criticizing Russia for allegedly enabling chemical attacks in Syria, and identifying Moscow as one of the U.S.'s major adversaries in the global struggle for power and influence.

"China and Russia," the administration stated in its recent National Security Strategy, "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity." In the recently issued Nuclear Posture Review, the U.S. identifies Russia as a "contemporary threat," and has a chapter outlining "A Tailored Strategy for Russia." The document warns that Russia has "decided to return to Great Power competition."

How does this in any way indicate that Trump is representing "Putin's interests" above "ours," as Uygur claims?

In short, there is no evidence to back up the theory that Putin helped Trump become president in order to do the Kremlin's bidding, and no one pushing this idea should be taken seriously. In this respect, the Republicans' "Initial Findings" – particularly the rejection of "Putin's supposed preference for candidate Trump" have more credibility than most of the "analysis" put out so far, including the Jan. 6, 2017 ICA that has been held up as sacrosanct.

Democrats Angry

The irrepressible Congressman Adam Schiff, Ranking Member of the House Intelligence Committee, and his fellow Democrats are in high dudgeon over the release of the Committee's "Initial Findings" after "only" one year of investigation. So, of course, is NBC's Rachel Maddow and other Russiagate aficionados. They may even feel a need to come up with real evidence – rather than Clapperisms like "But everyone knows about the Russians, and how, for example, they just really hated it when Mrs. Clinton called Putin Hitler."

I had the opportunity to confront Schiff personally at a think tank in Washington, DC on January 25, 2017. President Obama, on his way out of office, had said something quite curious at his last press conference just one week earlier about inconclusive conclusions: "The conclusions of the intelligence community with respect to the Russian hacking were not conclusive" regarding WikiLeaks. In other words, the intelligence community had no idea how the DNC emails reached WikiLeaks.

Schiff had just claimed as flat fact that the Russians hacked the DNC and Podesta emails and gave them to WikiLeaks to publish. So I asked him if he knew more than President Obama about how Russian hacking had managed to get to WikiLeaks.

Schiff used the old, "I can't share the evidence with you; it's classified." OK, I'm no longer cleared for classified information, but Schiff is; and so are all his colleagues on the House Intelligence Committee. The Republican majority has taken issue with the cornerstone assumption of those who explain Russian "hacking" and other "meddling" as springing from the "obvious fact" that Putin favored Trump. The ball is in Schiff's court.

Last but not least, the committee's Initial Finding that caught most of the media attention was that there is "no evidence of collusion, coordination, or conspiracy between the Trump campaign and the Russians." This, of course, poured cold water on what everyone listening to mainstream media "knows" about Russian "meddling" in the 2016 election. But, in the lack of persuasive evidence that President Putin preferred candidate Trump, why should we expect Russian "collusion, coordination, conspiracy" with the Trump campaign?

Ah, but the Russians want to "sow discord." Sounds to me like a Clapperism.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career at CIA, he was Chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch and preparer/briefer of the President's Daily Brief under Nixon, Ford, and Reagan. He is co-founder of

NBC's Clueless Boost for Putin

With the Russian president in the heat of a re-election campaign, Putin sat down to talk with NBC's Megyn Kelly for an interview that enabled him to burnish his credentials to the Russian electorate, Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

Russian President Vladimir Putin's team swept a doubleheader on March 1, with his mid-day speech claiming strategic parity with the U.S., and then the nightcap duel with NBC's Megyn Kelly. Any lingering doubt that Putin is a shoo-in for another term as President is now dispelled. Putin might consider sending NBC a thank-you note.

As I watched NBC's special, "Confronting Putin," Friday evening, I asked myself – naively – what possessed President Putin to subject himself again to what NBC calls a Megan Kelly "grilling," replete with supercilious questions and less-than-polite interruptions, just nine months after his first such "grilling." It then hit me that "grilling" is in the eye of the beholder.

Reviewing the original Russian tape of the interviews, it became clear that the tête-à-tête showed a Putin looking patiently but supremely presidential to Russian viewers who could see the whole interviews, not just the selective selected excerpts aired by NBC and "interpreted" by Russophobe-de-jour Richard Haas. (A close adviser to Secretary of State Colin Powell, Haas was among those who told him it was a swell idea to invade Iraq. When the anticipated "cakewalk" turned rather bloody, with no WMD to be found, Haas quit in July 2003 and became President of the Council on Foreign Relations where he is now well into his 15th year.)

Back to the Kelly-Putin pas de deux: At the March 1 interview the Russian President came out swinging. When Kelly asked the first time whether there is "a new arms race right now" after Putin's announcement of Russia's new strategic weapons, Putin reminded her that it was the U.S. that withdrew in 2002 from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972. He added that he had repeatedly warned the Bush/Cheney administration that Russia would be forced to respond to the dangerous upset of the strategic equilibrium.

For some reason best known to Kelly and NBC, Kelly tried repeatedly to make the

case that the U.S. decision to scrap the ABM treaty was a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when, she said, “the United States was reassessing its security posture.”

“Complete nonsense,” was Putin’s reply (“polniy chush” in Russian – chush ringing with onomatopoeia and a polite rendering of “B.S.”). Putin explained that “9/11 and the missile defense system are completely unrelated,” adding that even “housewives” are able to understand that. He found occasion to use “polniy chush” (or simply “chush) several times during the interview.

Russian “Interference”

It was no surprise that Kelly was armed with an array of questions about Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election, and at the start of the March 2 interview asked “can we have that discussion now?” Putin said, “I think we must discuss this issue if it keeps bothering you.” And they were off on a feckless exchange with Putin replying calming to Kelly’s hectoring.

After one interruption, Putin said, “You keep interrupting me; this is impolite.” Kelly apologized, but dutifully went on to cover what seemed to be the remainder of her accusatory talking points. These included repeated insistence that Putin punish the click-bait farmers indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller for violating U.S. law.

No doubt fully briefed on the fact that Kelly sports a law degree, Putin asked, “Do you have people with legal training? ... We cannot even launch an investigation without cause. ... Give us at least an official inquiry with a statement of facts; send us an official paper.”

Kelly: “Isn’t it enough that U.S. intelligence agencies ... and now a Special Prosecutor (sic) with a criminal indictment – is that not enough for you to look into it?”

Putin: “Absolutely not. If you do not have legal training, I can assure you that an inquiry is required for this.”

Kelly: “I do.”

Putin: “Then you should understand that a corresponding official inquiry should be sent to the Prosecutor-General’s Office of the Russian Federation.”

The interview got testier toward the end, as Kelly tried to fit in all her questions, including the unsupported accusation that Syrian government forces are using chemical weapons and that Russia bears some responsibility for this.

During the back-and-forth on chemical weapons, Putin not only called the

accusations against Russia a lie, but saw fit to refer to Colin Powell's misbegotten speech at the UN just six weeks before the U.S./UK attack on Iraq: "It is a lie just as the vial with the white substance that allegedly proved that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, which the CIA gave to the Secretary of State."

For good measure, Putin threw in "Why did you encourage the government coup in Ukraine?"

Once again for the record, President Putin finished on a familiar note: "Russia and the U.S. should sit down and talk in order to get things straight. I have the impression that this is what the current President wants, but he is prevented from it by some forces. We are ready to discuss any matter, be it missile-related issues, cyberspace, or counterterrorism efforts. ... But the U.S. must also be ready."

Strong President

Sound presidential? Well, that, I'm now convinced, was the whole idea on Putin's part. And Megyn Kelly was, in many respects, the perfect foil. The Russians also took the trouble to publish a full English transcript of the Kelly-Putin interviews of March 1 and 2 for English speakers who might be interested in what NBC left on the cutting room floor.

With less than a week before the Russian election, Putin is no doubt happy that Megyn Kelly stopped by, and that NBC provided such a well-timed opportunity to burnish his credentials for another term as President of Russia.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Savior in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career as a CIA analyst, he was Chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch and later conducted the morning briefings of The President's Daily Brief to President Ronald Reagan's most senior national security advisers.

'Progressive' Journalists Jump the Shark on Russiagate

A lack of skepticism has characterized much of the reporting on Russiagate, with undue credibility being given to questionable sources like the Steele dossier, and now progressives like Jane Mayer and Cenk Uygur are joining the bandwagon, Ray McGovern observes.

By Ray McGovern

Jane Mayer of *The New Yorker* and Cenk Uygur of The Young Turks are the latest progressives to jump on the anti-Trump, pro-Russiagate bandwagon. They have made it crystal clear that, in Mayer's words, they are not going to let Republicans, or anyone else, "take down the whole intelligence community," by God.

Odd? Nothing is too odd when it comes to spinning and dyeing the yarn of Russiagate; especially now that some strands are unraveling from the thin material of the "Steele dossier."

Before the 2016 election, British ex-spy Christopher Steele was contracted (through a couple of cutouts) by the Clinton campaign and Democratic National Committee to dig up dirt on candidate Donald Trump. They paid him \$168,000. They should ask for their money back.

Mayer and Uygur have now joined with other Trump-despisers and new "progressive" fans of the FBI and CIA – among them Amy Goodman and her go-to, lost-in-the-trees journalist, Marcy Wheeler of Emptywheel.net. All of them (well, maybe not Cenk) are staying up nights with needle and thread trying to sew a silk purse out of the sow's-ear dossier of Steele allegations and then dye it red for danger.

Monday brought a new low, with a truly extraordinary one-two punch by Mayer and Uygur.

A Damning Picture?

Mayer does her part in a *New Yorker* article, in which she – intentionally or not – cannot seem to see the forest for the trees.

In her article, Mayer explains up front that the Steele dossier "painted a damning picture of collusion between Trump and Russia," and then goes on to portray him as a paragon of virtue with praise that is fulsome, in the full meaning of that word. For example, a friend of Steele told Mayer that regarding Steele, "Fairness, integrity, and truth, for him, trump any ideology."

Now, if one refuses to accept this portrait on faith, then you are what Mayer describes as a "Trump defender." According to Mayer, Trump defenders argue that Steele is "a dishonest Clinton apparatchik who had collaborated with American intelligence and law enforcement officials to fabricate false charges against Trump and his associates, in a dastardly (sic) attempt to nullify the 2016 election. According to this story line, it was not the President who needed to be investigated, but the investigators themselves."

Can you imagine!

I could not help but think that Mayer wrote her piece some months ago and that she and her editors might have missed more recent documentary evidence that gives considerable support to that “dastardly” story line. But seriously, it should be possible to suspect Steele of misfeasance or malfeasance – or simply telling his contractors what he knows they want to hear – without being labeled a “Trump supporter.” I, for example, am no Trump supporter. I am, however, a former intelligence officer and I have long since concluded that what Steele served up is garbage.

Character References

Mayer reports that Richard Dearlove, head of MI6 from 1999 to 2004, described Steele as “superb.” Personally, I would shun any “recommendation” from that charlatan. Are memories so short? Dearlove was the intelligence chief who briefed Prime Minister Tony Blair on July 23, 2002 after a quick trip to Washington. The official minutes of that meeting were leaked to the London Times and published on May 1, 2005.

Dearlove explained to Blair that President George W. Bush had decided to attack Iraq for regime change and that the war was to be “justified by the conjunction of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.” Dearlove added matter-of-factly, “The intelligence and facts are being fixed around the policy.”

Another character reference Mayer gives for Steele is former CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin (from 2000 to 2004) who, with his boss George Tenet, did the fixing of intelligence to “justify” the war on Iraq. State Department intelligence director at the time, Carl Ford, told the authors of “Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War” that both McLaughlin and Tenet “should have been shot” for what they did.

And then there is CIA veteran spy John Sipher who, Mayer says, “ran the Agency’s Russia program before retiring, in 2014.” Sipher tells her he thinks the Steele dossier is “generally credible” in “saying what Russia might be up to.” Sipher may be a good case officer but he has shown himself to be something of a cipher on substance.

Worse still, he displays a distinct inclination toward the remarkable view of former National Intelligence Director James Clapper, who has said that Russians are “typically, almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever.” If Mayer wanted to find some ostensibly authoritative figure to endorse the kind of material in Steele’s dossier, she surely picked a good one in Sipher.

Mayer notes, "It's too early to make a final judgment about how much of Steele's dossier will be proved wrong, but a number of Steele's major claims have been backed up by subsequent disclosures. She includes, as flat fact, his claim that the Kremlin and WikiLeaks were working together to release the DNC's emails, but provides no evidence.

Major Holes

Mayer, however, should know better. There have been lots of holes in the accusation that the Russians hacked the DNC and gave the material to WikiLeaks to publish. Here's one major gap we reported on Jan. 20, 2017: President Barack Obama told his last press conference on Jan. 18, that the U.S. intelligence community had no idea how the Democratic emails reached WikiLeaks.

Using lawyerly language, Obama admitted that "the conclusions of the intelligence community with respect to the Russian hacking were not conclusive as to whether WikiLeaks was witting or not in being the conduit through which we heard about the DNC e-mails that were leaked."

It is necessary to carefully parse Obama's words since he prides himself in his oratorical constructs. He offered a similarly designed comment at a Dec. 16, 2016 press conference when he said: "based on uniform intelligence assessments, the Russians were responsible for hacking the DNC. ... the information was in the hands of WikiLeaks."

Note the disconnect between the confidence about hacking and the stark declarative sentence about the information ending up at WikiLeaks. Obama does not bridge the gap because to do so would be a bald-faced lie, which some honest intelligence officer might call him on. So, he simply presented the two sides of the chasm – implies a connection – but leaves it to the listener to make the leap.

It was, of course, WikiLeaks that published the very damaging Democratic information, for example, on the DNC's dirty tricks that marginalized Sen. Bernie Sanders and ensured that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would win the Democratic nomination. What remained to be demonstrated was that it was "the Russians" who gave those emails to WikiLeaks. And that is what the U.S. intelligence community could not honestly say.

Saying it now, without evidence, does not make it true.

Cenk Also in Sync

Cenk Uygur of The Young Turks at once picked up, big time, on the part of Mayer's article that homes in on an "astonishing" report from Steele in late

November 2016 quoting one “senior Russian official.” According to that official, “The Kremlin had intervened to block Trump’s initial choice for secretary of state, Mitt Romney.” Steele’s late November memo alleged that the Kremlin had asked Trump to appoint someone who would be prepared to lift Ukraine-related sanctions and cooperate on security issues like Syria.

Mayer commented, “As fantastical as the memo sounds, subsequent events could be said to support it.” Fantastical or not, Uygur decided to run with it. His amazing 12-minute video is titled: “New Steele Dossier: Putin PICKED Trump’s Secretary of State.” Uygur asks: “Who does Tillerson work for; and that also goes for the President.”

Return to Sanity

As an antidote to all the above, let me offer this cogent piece on the views of Joseph E. diGenova, who speaks out of his unique experience, including as Counsel to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (the Church Committee). The article is entitled: “The Politicization of the FBI.”

“Over the past year,” diGenova wrote, “facts have emerged that suggest there was a plot by high-ranking FBI and Department of Justice (DOJ) officials in the Obama administration, acting under color of law, to exonerate Hillary Clinton of federal crimes and then, if she lost the election, to frame Donald Trump and his campaign for colluding with Russia to steal the presidency.”

He pointed out that nearly half of Americans, according to a CBS poll, believe that Mueller’s Trump-Russia collusion probe is “politically motivated.” And, he noted, 63 percent of polled voters in a Harvard CAPS-Harris Poll believe that the FBI withheld vital information from Congress about the Clinton and Russia collusion investigations.

This skepticism is entirely warranted, as diGenova explains, with the Russiagate probe being characterized by overreach from the beginning.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served in Army and CIA intelligence analysis for 30 years and, after retiring, co-founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Is MSNBC Now the Most Dangerous

Warmonger Network?

A recent study revealed that MSNBC's coverage of 'Russiagate' vastly outweighs its coverage of other issues, such as the US-backed humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and the network's refusal to correct the disparity could lead to dangerous conclusions, notes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

The evidence is damning. And the silence underscores the arrogance.

More than seven weeks after a devastating report from the media watch group FAIR, top executives and prime-time anchors at MSNBC still refuse to discuss how the network's obsession with Russia has thrown minimal journalistic standards out the window.

FAIR's study, "MSNBC Ignores Catastrophic U.S.-Backed War in Yemen," documented a picture of extreme journalistic malfeasance at MSNBC:

– "An analysis by FAIR has found that the leading liberal cable network did not run a single segment devoted specifically to Yemen in the second half of 2017. And in these latter roughly six months of the year, MSNBC ran nearly 5,000 percent more segments that mentioned Russia than segments that mentioned Yemen."

– "Moreover, in all of 2017, MSNBC only aired one broadcast on the U.S.-backed Saudi airstrikes that have killed thousands of Yemeni civilians. And it never mentioned the impoverished nation's colossal cholera epidemic, which infected more than 1 million Yemenis in the largest outbreak in recorded history."

– "All of this is despite the fact that the U.S. government has played a leading role in the 33-month war that has devastated Yemen, selling many billions of dollars of weapons to Saudi Arabia, refueling Saudi warplanes as they relentlessly bomb civilian areas and providing intelligence and military assistance to the Saudi air force."

Meanwhile, MSNBC's incessant "Russiagate" coverage has put the network at the media forefront of overheated hyperbole about the Kremlin. And continually piling up the dry tinder of hostility toward Russia boosts the odds of a cataclysmic blowup between the world's two nuclear superpowers.

In effect, the programming on MSNBC follows a thin blue party line, breathlessly conforming to Democratic leaders' refrains about Russia as a mortal threat to American democracy and freedom across the globe. But hey—MSNBC's ratings have

climbed upward during its monochrome reporting, so why worry about whether coverage is neglecting dozens of other crucial stories? Or why worry if the anti-Russia drumbeat is worsening the risks of a global conflagration?

FAIR's report, written by journalist Ben Norton and published on Jan. 8, certainly merited a serious response from MSNBC and the anchors most identified by the study, Rachel Maddow and Chris Hayes. Yet no response has come from them or network executives. (Full disclosure: I'm a longtime associate of FAIR.)

In the aftermath of the FAIR study, a petition gathered 22,784 signers and 4,474 individual comments—asking MSNBC to remedy its extreme imbalance of news coverage. But the network and its prime-time luminaries Maddow and Hayes refused to respond despite repeated requests for a reply.

The petition was submitted in late January to Maddow and Hayes via their producers, as well as to MSNBC senior vice president Errol Cockfield and to the network's senior manager in charge of media relations for "The Rachel Maddow Show" and "All In with Chris Hayes."

Signers responded to outreach from three organizations—Just Foreign Policy, RootsAction.org (which I coordinate), and World Beyond War—calling for concerned individuals to "urge Rachel Maddow, Chris Hayes, and MSNBC to correct their failure to report on the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen and the direct U.S. military role in causing the catastrophe by signing our petition." (The petition is still gathering signers.)

As the cable news network most trusted by Democrats as a liberal beacon, MSNBC plays a special role in fueling rage among progressive-minded viewers toward Russia's "attack on our democracy" that is somehow deemed more sinister and newsworthy than corporate dominance of American politicians (including Democrats), racist voter suppression, gerrymandering and many other U.S. electoral defects all put together.

At the same time, the anti-Russia mania also services the engines of the current militaristic machinery.

It's what happens when nationalism and partisan zeal overcome something that could be called journalism.

"The U.S. media's approach to Russia is now virtually 100 percent propaganda," the independent journalist Robert Parry wrote at the end of 2017, in the last article published before his death. "Does any sentient human being read the New York Times' or the Washington Post's coverage of Russia and think that he or she is getting a neutral or unbiased treatment of the facts?"

Parry added that “to even suggest that there is another side to the story makes you a ‘Putin apologist’ or ‘Kremlin stooge.’ Western journalists now apparently see it as their patriotic duty to hide key facts that otherwise would undermine the demonizing of Putin and Russia. Ironically, many ‘liberals’ who cut their teeth on skepticism about the Cold War and the bogus justifications for the Vietnam War now insist that we must all accept whatever the U.S. intelligence community feeds us, even if we’re told to accept the assertions on faith.”

Across a U.S. media landscape where depicting Russia as a fully villainous enemy is now routine, MSNBC is a standout. The most profound dangers from what Rachel Maddow and company are doing is what they least want to talk about—how the cumulative effects and momentum of their work are increasing the likelihood that tensions between Washington and Moscow will escalate into a horrendous military conflict.

Even at the height of the Cold War during the 1960s, when Soviet Communists ruled Russians with zero freedom of speech or press, most U.S. political and media elites recognized the vital need for détente. They applauded the “Spirit of Glassboro” when the top leadership of the United States and Russia met at length. Now, across most of the U.S. media spectrum, no such overtures to the Kremlin are to be tolerated.

The U.S. government’s recently released “Nuclear Posture Review” underscores just how unhinged the situation has become.

Consider the assessment from the head of a first-rate research organization in the nuclear weapons field, the Los Alamos Study Group. Its executive director, Greg Mello, said: “What is most ‘missing in action’ in this document is civilian leadership. Trump is not supplying that. In part the fault for this comes from Democrats—who, allied with the intelligence community and other military-industrial interests, insist that the U.S. must have an adversarial relationship with Russia. There is no organized senior-level opposition to the new Cold War, which is intensifying week by week. This document reflects, and is just one of many policies embodying, the new and very dangerous Cold War.”

But—with everyone’s survival at stake—none of that seems to matter much to those who call the shots at MSNBC.

Norman Solomon is the coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.” Solomon was a member of the independent task force that wrote the recent report “Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis.” [This article was originally published at Truthdig (www.truthdig.com).]

California Dems Withhold Endorsement of Sen. Feinstein

California Democrats did not endorse longstanding Senator Dianne Feinstein for the upcoming primary election, setting the stage for a tough campaign against challengers such as California Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin de León, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

It is no secret that the second most powerful politician in the State of California, Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin de León, is gearing up for a knock-down, drag-out primary fight with California's senior Senator, Dianne Feinstein. Many feel it's time for a changing of the guard and time for a person of color to represent the white minority state of California.

This passed weekend, California democrats refused to endorse Senator Feinstein, in a major rebuke of California's senior senator, opening the door wide for de León to run.

According to the Sacramento Bee, "As a child, de León spent time on both sides of the border, in Tijuana, Baja California, and Logan Heights in San Diego and identifies strongly with Mexican culture, though he doesn't know where his grandparents are from."

Senator de León recently led a coalition to sponsor legislation "that addresses lapses in our justice and labor systems creating serious challenges for the California's immigrant community, including stronger wage theft laws, securing u-visas from law enforcement, and providing healthcare for undocumented children."

Before joining the Legislature, de León taught citizenship courses to immigrants. When he was sworn in as the 47th president pro tem of the California Senate in 2014, he became the first Latino to hold the position in more than a century.

Bernstein spoke to Kevin de León on February 14, 2018.

Dennis Bernstein: With everyone watching Washington and wondering whether humane immigration reform can be passed, what are you expecting from Congress?

Kevin de León: These are very difficult times for many of us. As a nation, we are grappling with the resurgence of ugly, hateful ideologies, including white supremacy, spewing from the highest levels of our federal government. We are confronting something we have never had to come to terms with before in our political history.

At the same time, I have never been more proud to be a Californian. In November 2016, Californians rejected the politics fueled by resentment and bigotry. The DACA issue is very dear to my heart. In California, we have the vast majority of DACA beneficiaries, the vast majority of Dreamers, and we have the vast majority of beneficiaries of the TPS [Temporary Protected Status] program, primarily from El Salvador. We are also home to the majority of immigrants in the nation, both those who became naturalized US citizens and those who have yet to normalize their status because of the dysfunction in Washington, D.C.

In this context, the DACA program is really a low-hanging fruit. Both Democrats, as well as Republicans among the national electorate, strongly support the Dreamers and DACA. Why the issue should seem so complex is beyond me, except that there is political gamesmanship being played and the DACA beneficiaries have been taken as hostages. I hope that a common sense settlement can be reached to give these young men and women the protections they deserve. We need sensible comprehensive immigration reform for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants across the nation.

DB: What is your response then you hear that we have to do something about the problem of “chain migration”?

KdL: For me, “chain migration” is another word for family reunification. The thesis behind the new term is quite pernicious. Quite frankly, many of my close family members would not have been eligible to enter this country had there been a so-called “chain migration” clause in the country’s immigration policy. If we’d had an immigration policy that was exclusively merit-based, I would never have become the leader of the California State Senate.

DB: In a press release toward the end of January you expressed your concern that Homeland Security was threatening to go after public officials if they continued to give their support to sanctuary cities. Do you really think ICE will be out arresting officials like you?

KdL: These are extraordinary threats meant to intimidate and silence political opponents. But threatening to weaponize federal agencies against Californians and their elected representatives will only strengthen our resolve.

DB: I’d like to change the subject for a moment. This concerns the economy and

the environment. As you know, the Trumpites are gung-ho about offshore drilling. This is a huge issue in the context of global warming and is pitting California against the rest of the country.

KdL: California is blessed with an incomparably beautiful and pristine coastline and we want to keep it that way for future generations. In California we have some of the most progressive climate change policies in the entire world. By the year 2030, we will be generating half of our electricity from renewable sources: wind, solar and geothermal. We are investing in rooftop solar power in low-income communities. We are looking for ways to provide electric vehicles to communities at the lowest economic strata. We are doing this intentionally to make sure that we democratize our climate change benefits and offer relief to those communities that suffer disproportionately from the devastations of carbon dioxide and other emissions.

We are witnessing an administration that is trying to unilaterally, through executive action, unwind all of our progressive policies in a state like California. We have created 500,000 jobs in the clean energy space alone. That means there are ten times more clean energy jobs now in California than there are coal jobs in all of America! No doubt about it, there is a battle brewing between Washington and California, and not just around the issue of immigration.

DB: We are seeing now the roll-out of the recreational marijuana industry, which is looking to become a huge cash crop. What role do you see marijuana playing in the future of California?

KdL: Recreational use of cannabis is now the law of the land in California. It has the overwhelming support of the people. It is the responsibility of state and local government to roll out a regulatory framework that is responsible and fiscally prudent. But it is now the law in California, and any threats from the Department of Justice—and specifically from Jeff Sessions, who has his mind fixated on a certain era in American history—will be met with legal resistance.

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.

The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died

Exclusive: The FBI’s Russia indictments last week have whipped Democrats and the

mainstream media into a frenzy but the “scandal” may be collapsing under its own weight, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Fads and scandals often follow a set trajectory. They grow big, bigger, and then, finally, too big, at which point they topple over and collapse under the weight of their own internal contradictions. This was the fate of the “Me too” campaign, which started out as an exposé of serial abuser Harvey Weinstein but then went too far when Babe.net published a story about one woman’s bad date with comedian Aziz Ansari. Suddenly, it became clear that different types of behavior were being lumped together in a dangerous way, and a once-explosive movement began to fizzle.

So, too, with Russiagate. After dominating the news for more than a year, the scandal may have at last reached a tipping point with last week’s indictment of thirteen Russian individuals and three Russian corporations on charges of illegal interference in the 2016 presidential campaign. But the indictment landed with a decided thud for three reasons:

- It failed to connect the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the alleged St. Petersburg troll factory accused of political meddling, with Vladimir Putin, the all-purpose evil-doer who the corporate media say is out to destroy American democracy.
- It similarly failed to establish a connection with the Trump campaign and indeed went out of its way to describe contacts with the Russians as “unwitting.”
- It described the meddling itself as even more inept and amateurish than many had suspected.

After nine months of labor, Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller thus brought forth a mouse. Even if all the charges are true – something we’ll probably never know since it’s unlikely that any of the accused will be brought to trial – the indictment tells us virtually nothing that’s new.

Yes, IRA staffers purchased \$100,000 worth of Facebook ads, 56 percent of which ran *after* Election Day. Yes, they persuaded someone in Florida to dress up as Hillary Clinton in a prison uniform and stand inside a cage mounted on a flatbed truck. And, yes, they also got another “real U.S. person,” as the indictment terms it, to stand in front of the White House with a sign saying, “Happy 55th Birthday Dear Boss,” a tribute, apparently, to IRA founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the convicted robber turned caterer whose birthday was three days away. Instead

of a super-sophisticated spying operation, the indictment depicts a bumbling freelance operation that is still giving Putin heartburn months after the fact.

Not that this has stopped the media from whipping itself into a frenzy. “Russia is at war with our democracy,” screamed a headline in the Washington Post.

“Trump is ignoring the worst attack on America since 9/11,” blared another.

“...Russia is engaged in a virtual war against the United States through 21st-century tools of disinformation and propaganda,” declared the New York Times, while Daily Beast columnist Jonathan Alter tweeted that the IRA’s activities amounted to nothing less than a “tech Pearl Harbor.”

All of which merely demonstrates, in proper backhanded fashion, how grievously Mueller has fallen short. Proof that the scandal had at last overstayed its welcome came five days later when the Guardian, a website that had previously flogged Russiagate even more vigorously than the Post, the Times, or CNN, published a news analysis by Cas Mudde, an associate professor at the University of Georgia, admitting that it was all a farce – and a particularly self-defeating one at that.

Mudde’s article made short work of hollow pieties about a neutral and objective investigation. Rather than an effort to get at the truth, Russiagate was a thinly-veiled effort at regime change. “[I]n the end,” he wrote, “the only question everyone really seems to care about is whether Donald Trump was involved – and can therefore be impeached for treason.

With last week’s indictment, the article went on, “Democratic party leaders once again reassured their followers that this was the next logical step in the inevitable downfall of Trump.” The more Democrats play the Russiagate card, in other words, the nearer they will come to their goal of riding the Orange-Haired One out of town on a rail.

This makes the Dems seem crass, unscrupulous, and none too democratic. But then Mudde gave the knife a twist. The real trouble with the strategy, he said, is that it isn’t working:

“While there is no doubt that the Trump camp was, and still is, filled with amoral and fraudulent people, and was very happy to take the Russians help during the elections, even encouraging it on the campaign, I do not think Mueller will be able to find conclusive evidence that Donald Trump himself colluded with Putin’s Russia to win the elections. And that is the only thing that will lead to his impeachment as the Republican party is not risking political suicide for anything less.”

Other Objectives of “Russiagate”

No collusion means no impeachment and hence no anti-Trump “color revolution” of the sort that was so effective in Georgia or the Ukraine. Moreover, while 53 percent of Americans believe that investigating Russiagate should be a top or at least an important priority according to a recent poll, figures for a half-dozen other issues ranging from Medicare and Social Security reform to tax policy, healthcare, infrastructure, and immigration are actually a good deal higher – 67 percent, 72 percent, or even more.

Summed up Mudde: “...the Russia-Trump collusion story might be the talk of the town in Washington, but this is not the case in much of the rest of the country.” Out in flyover country, rather, Americans can’t figure out why the political elite is more concerned with a nonexistent scandal than with things that really count, i.e. de-industrialization, infrastructure decay, the opioid epidemic, and school shootings. As society disintegrates, the only thing Democrats have accomplished with all their blathering about Russkis under the bed is to demonstrate just how cut off from the real world they are.

But Russiagate is not just about regime change, but other things as well. One is repression. Where once Democrats would have laughed off Russian trolls and the like, they’re now obsessed with making a mountain out of a molehill in order to enforce mainstream opinion and marginalize ideas and opinions suspected of being un-American and hence pro-Russian. If the RT (Russia Today) news network is now suspect – the Times described it not long ago as “the slickly produced heart of a broad, often covert disinformation campaign designed to sow doubt about democratic institutions and destabilize the West” – then why not the BBC or Agence France-Presse? How long until foreign books are banned or foreign musicians?

“I’m actually surprised I haven’t been indicted,” tweets Bloomberg columnist Leonid Bershidsky. “I’m Russian, I was in the U.S. in 2016 and I published columns critical of both Clinton and Trump w/o registering as a foreign agent.” When the Times complains that Facebook “still sees itself as the bank that got robbed, rather than the architect who designed a bank with no safes, and no alarms or locks on the doors, and then acted surprised when burglars struck,” then it’s clear that the goal is to force Facebook to rein in its activities or stand by and watch as others do so instead.

Add to this the classic moral panic promoted by #MeToo – to believe charges of sexual harassment and assault without first demanding evidence “is to disbelieve, and deny due process to, the accused,” notes Judith Levine in the Boston Review – and it’s clear that a powerful wave of cultural conservatism is crashing down on the United States, much of it originating in a classic neoliberal-Hillaryite milieu. Formerly the liberal alternative, the Democratic

Party is now passing the Republicans on the right.

But Russiagate is about something else as well: war. As National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster warns that the “time is now” to act against Iran, the New York Times slams Trump for not imposing sanctions on Moscow, and a spooky “Nuclear Posture Review” suggests that the US might someday respond to a cyber attack with atomic weapons, it’s plain that Washington is itching for a showdown that will somehow undo the mistakes of the previous administration. The more Trump drags his feet, the more Democrats conclude that a war drive is the best way to bring him to his knees.

Thus, low-grade political interference is elevated into a *casus belli* while Vladimir Putin is portrayed as a supernatural villain straight out of *Harry Potter*. But where does it stop? Libya has been set back decades, Syria, the subject of yet another US regime-change effort, has been all but destroyed, while Yemen – which America helps Saudi Arabia bomb virtually around the clock – is now a disaster area with some 9,000 people killed, 50,000 injured, a million-plus cholera cases, and more than half of all hospitals and clinics destroyed.

The more Democrats pound the war drums, the more death and destruction will ensue. The process is well underway in Syria, the victim of Israeli bombings and a US-Turkish invasion, and it will undoubtedly spread as Dems turn up the heat. If the pathetic pseudo-scandal known as Russiagate really is collapsing under its own weight, then it’s not a moment too soon.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in January highlighted misrepresented historic events, analyzed shortcomings of the Democratic Party, and remembered Robert Parry’s legacy.

“Giving War Too Many Chances” by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Jan. 3, 2018

“Missing the Trump Team’s Misconduct” by J.P. Sottile., Jan. 9, 2018

“Pesticide Use Threatens Health in California” by Dennis J. Bernstein, Jan. 10, 2018

“Trump Lashes Pakistan over Afghan War” by Dennis J. Bernstein, Jan. 11, 2018

"The FBI Hand Behind Russia-gate" by Ray McGovern, Jan. 11, 2018

"Haiti and America's Historic Debt" by Robert Parry, Jan. 12, 2018

"Why Senator Cardin Is a Fitting Opponent for Chelsea Manning" by Norman Solomon, Jan. 16, 2018

"Trump Ends Protections for El Salvador" by Dennis J. Bernstein, Jan. 18, 2018

"An Update to Our Readers on Editor Robert Parry" by Nat Parry, Jan. 19, 2018

"Regime Change and Globalization Fuel Europe's Refugee and Migrant Crisis" by Andrew Spannaus, Jan. 20, 2018

"'The Post' and the Pentagon Papers" by James DiEugenio, Jan. 22, 2018

"Foxes in Charge of Intelligence Hen House" by Ray McGovern, Jan. 22, 2018

"A National Defense Strategy of Sowing Global Chaos" by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Jan. 23, 2018

"George W. Bush: Dupe or Deceiver?" by Robert Parry, Jan. 23, 2018

"Tom Perez, the Democratic Party's Grim Metaphor" by Norman Solomon, Jan. 25, 2018

"The Struggle Against Honduras' Stolen Election" by Dennis J. Bernstein, Jan. 26, 2018

"Unpacking the Shadowy Outfit Behind 2017's Biggest Fake News Story" by George Eliason, Jan. 28, 2018

"Robert Parry's Legacy and the Future of Consortiumnews" by Nat Parry, Jan. 28, 2018

"Assault on the Embassy: The Tet Offensive Fifty Years Later" by Don North, Jan. 30, 2018

"Will Congress Face Down the Deep State?" by Ray McGovern, Jan. 30, 2018

"Treasury's 'Kremlin Report' Seen as Targeting Russian Economy" by Gilbert Doctorow, Jan. 31, 2018

"Mass Surveillance and the Memory Hole" by Ted Snider, Jan. 31, 2018

"How Trump and the GOP Exploit Israel" by Jonathan Marshall, Jan. 31, 2018

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