

# Russia-gate Flops as Democrats' Golden Ticket

**Exclusive:** The national Democrats saw Russia-gate and the drive to impeach President Trump as their golden ticket back to power, but so far the ticket seems to be made of fool's gold, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The national Democratic Party and many liberals have bet heavily on the Russia-gate investigation as a way to oust President Trump from office and to catapult Democrats to victories this year and in 2018, but the gamble appears not to be paying off.

The Democrats' disappointing loss in a special election to fill a congressional seat in an affluent Atlanta suburb is just the latest indication that the strategy of demonizing Trump and blaming Russia for Hillary Clinton's 2016 defeat may not be the golden ticket that some Democrats had hoped.

Though it's still early to draw conclusive lessons from Karen Handel's victory over Jon Ossoff – despite his raising \$25 million – one lesson may be that a Middle America backlash is forming against the over-the-top quality of the Trump-accusations and the Russia-bashing, with Republicans rallying against the image of Official Washington's "deep state" collaborating with Democrats and the mainstream news media to reverse a presidential election.

Indeed, the Democrats may be digging a deeper hole for themselves in terms of reaching out to white working-class voters who abandoned the party in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to put Trump over the top in the Electoral College even though Clinton's landslide win in California gave her almost three million more votes nationwide.

Clinton's popular-vote plurality and the #Resistance, which manifested itself in massive protests against Trump's presidency, gave hope to the Democrats that they didn't need to undertake a serious self-examination into why the party is in decline across the nation's heartland. Instead, they decided to stoke the hysteria over alleged Russian "meddling" in the election as the short-cut to bring down Trump and his populist movement.

## **A Party of Snobs?**

From conversations that I've had with some Trump voters in recent weeks, I was struck by how they viewed the Democratic Party as snobbish, elitist and looking

down its nose at “average Americans.” And in conversations with some Clinton voters, I found confirmation for that view in the open disdain that the Clinton backers expressed toward the stupidity of anyone who voted for Trump. In other words, the Trump voters were not wrong to feel “dissed.”

It seems the Republicans – and Trump in particular – have done a better job in presenting themselves to these Middle Americans as respecting their opinions and representing their fears, even though the policies being pushed by Trump and the GOP still favor the rich and will do little good – and significant harm – to the middle and working classes.

By contrast, many of Hillary Clinton’s domestic proposals might well have benefited average Americans but she alienated many of them by telling a group of her supporters that half of Trump’s backers belonged in a “basket of deplorables.” Although she later reduced the percentage, she had committed a cardinal political sin: she had put the liberal disdain for millions of Americans into words – and easily remembered words at that.

By insisting that Hillary Clinton be the Democratic nominee – after leftist populist Bernie Sanders was pushed aside – the party also ignored the fact that many Americans, including many Democrats, viewed Clinton as the perfectly imperfect candidate for an anti-Establishment year with many Americans still fuming over the Wall Street bailouts and amid the growing sense that the system was rigged for the well-connected and against the average guy or gal.

In the face of those sentiments, the Democrats nominated a candidate who personified how a relatively small number of lucky Americans can play the system and make tons of money while the masses have seen their dreams crushed and their bank accounts drained. And Clinton apparently still hasn’t learned that lesson.

### **Citing Women’s Rights**

Last month, when asked why she accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars for speaking to Goldman Sachs, Clinton rationalized her greed as a women’s rights issue, saying: “you know, men got paid for the speeches they made. I got paid for the speeches I made.”

Her excuse captured much of what has gone wrong with the Democratic Party as it moved from its working-class roots and New Deal traditions to becoming a party that places “identity politics” ahead of a duty to fight for the common men and women of America.

Demonstrating her political cluelessness, Clinton used the serious issue of women not getting fair treatment in the workplace to justify taking her turn at the Wall Street money trough, gobbling up in one half-hour speech what it would

take many American families a decade to earn.

While it's a bit unfair to personalize the Democratic Party's problems, Hillary and Bill Clinton have come to represent how the party is viewed by many Americans. Instead of the FDR Democrats, we have the Davos Democrats, the Wall Street Democrats, the Hollywood Democrats, the Silicon Valley Democrats, and now increasingly the Military-Industrial Complex Democrats.

To many Americans struggling to make ends meet, the national Democrats seem committed to the interests of the worldwide elites: global trade, financialization of the economy, robotization of the workplace, and endless war against endless enemies.

Now, the national Democrats are clambering onto the bandwagon for a costly and dangerous New Cold War with nuclear-armed Russia. Indeed, it is hard to distinguish their foreign policy from that of neoconservatives, although these Democrats view themselves as liberal interventionists citing humanitarian impulses to justify the endless slaughter.

Earlier this year, a Washington Post/ABC News poll found only 28 percent of Americans saying that the Democrats were "in touch with the concerns of most people" – an astounding result given the Democrats' long tradition as the party of the American working class and the party's post-Vietnam War reputation as favoring butter over guns.

Yet rather than rethink the recent policies, the Democrats prefer to fantasize about impeaching President Trump and continuing a blame-game about who – other than Hillary Clinton, her campaign and the Democratic National Committee – is responsible for Trump's election. Of course, it's the Russians, Russians, Russians!

### **A Problem's Deep Roots**

Without doubt, some of the party's problems have deep roots that correspond to the shrinking of the labor movement since the 1970s and the growing reliance on big-money donors to finance expensive television-ad-driven campaigns. Over the years, the Democrats also got pounded for being "weak" on national security.

Further, faced with Republican "weaponization" of attack ads in the 1980s, many old-time Democrats lost out to the Reagan Revolution, clearing the way for a new breed of Democrats who realized that they could compete for a slice of the big money by cultivating the emerging coastal elites: Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood and even elements of the National Security State.

By the 1990s, President Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council

defined this New Democrat, politicians who reflected the interests of well-heeled coastal elites, especially on free trade; streamlined financial regulations; commitment to technology; and an activist foreign policy built around spreading “liberal values” across the globe.

Mixed in was a commitment to the rights of various identity groups, a worthy goal although this tolerance paradoxically contributed to a new form of prejudice among some liberals who came to view many white working-class people as fat, stupid and bigoted, society’s “losers.”

So, while President Clinton hobnobbed with the modern economy’s “winners” – with sleepovers in the Lincoln bedroom and parties in the Hamptons – much of Middle America felt neglected if not disdained. The “losers” were left to rot in “flyover America” with towns and cities that had lost their manufacturing base and, with it, their vitality and even their purpose for existing.

### **Republican Fraud**

It wasn’t as if the Republicans were offering anything better. True, they were more comfortable talking to these “forgotten Americans” – advocating “gun rights” and “traditional values” and playing on white resentments over racial integration and civil rights – but, in office, the Republicans aggressively favored the interests of the rich, cutting their taxes and slashing regulations even more than the Democrats.

The Republicans paid lip service to the struggling blue-collar workers but control of GOP policies was left in the hands of corporations and their lobbyists.

Though the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American president, raised hopes that the nation might finally bind its deep racial wounds, it turned out to have a nearly opposite effect. Tea Party Republicans rallied many white working-class Americans to resist Obama and the hip urban future that he represented. They found an unlikely champion in real-estate mogul and reality TV star Donald Trump, who sensed how to tap into their fears and anger with his demagogic appeals and false populism.

Meanwhile, the national Democrats were falling in love with data predicting that demographics would magically turn Republican red states blue. So the party blithely ignored the warning signs of a cataclysmic break with the Democrats’ old-time base.

Despite all the data on opioid addiction and declining life expectancy among the white working class, Hillary Clinton was politically tone-deaf to the rumbles of discontent echoing across the Rust Belt. She assumed the traditionally

Democratic white working-class precincts would stick with her and she tried to appeal to the “security moms” in typically Republican suburbs by touting her neoconservative foreign policy thinking. And she ran a relentlessly negative campaign against Trump while offering voters few positive reasons to vote for her.

### **Ignoring Reality**

When her stunning loss became clear on Election Night – as the crude and unqualified Trump pocketed the electoral votes of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin – the Democrats refused to recognize what the elections results were telling them, that they had lost touch with a still important voting bloc, working-class whites.

Rather than face these facts, the national Democrats – led by President Obama and his intelligence chiefs – decided on a different approach, to seek to reverse the election by blaming the result on the Russians. Obama, his intelligence chiefs and a collaborative mainstream media insisted without presenting any real evidence that the Russians had hacked into Democratic emails and released them to the devastating advantage of Trump, as if the minor controversies from leaked emails of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta explained Trump’s surprising victory.

As part of this strategy, any Trump link to Russia – no matter how inconsequential, whether from his businesses or through his advisers – became the focus of Woodward-and-Bernstein/Watergate-style investigations. The obvious goal was to impeach Trump and ride the wave of Trump-hating enthusiasm to a Democratic political revival.

In other words, there was no reason to look in the mirror and rethink how the Democratic Party might begin rebuilding its relationships with the white working-class, just hold hearings featuring Obama’s intelligence chieftains and leak damaging Russia-gate stuff to the media.

But the result of this strategy has been to deepen the Democratic Party’s reliance on the elites, particularly the self-reverential mavens of the mainstream media and the denizens of the so-called “deep state.” From my conversations with Trump voters, they “get” what’s going on, how the powers-that-be are trying to negate the 63 million Americans who voted for Trump by reversing a presidential election carried out under the U.S. constitutional process.

### **A Letter from ‘Deplorable’ Land**

Some Trump supporters are even making this point publicly. Earlier this month, a

“proud deplorable” named Kenton Woodhead from Brunswick, Ohio, wrote to The New York Times informing the “newspaper of record” that he and other “deplorables” were onto the scheme.

“I wanted to provide you with an unsophisticated synopsis of The New York Times and the media’s quest for the implosion of Donald Trump’s presidency from out here in the real world, in ‘deplorable’ country. ... Every time you and your brethren at other news organizations dream up a new scheme to get Mr. Trump, we out here in deplorable land increase our support for him. ...

“Regardless of what you dream up every day, we refuse to be sucked into your narrative. And even more humorously, there isn’t anything you can do about it! And I love it that you are having the exact opposite effect on those of us you are trying to persuade to think otherwise.

“I mean it is seriously an enjoyable part of my day knowing you are failing. And badly! I haven’t had this much fun watching the media stumble, bumble and fumble in years. I wonder what will happen on the day you wake up and realize how disconnected you’ve become.”

So, despite Trump’s narcissism and incompetence – and despite how his policies will surely hurt many of his working-class supporters – the national Democrats are further driving a wedge between themselves and this crucial voting bloc. By whipping up a New Cold War with Russia and hurling McCarthistic slurs at people who won’t join in the Russia-bashing, the Democratic Party’s tactics also are alienating many peace voters who view both the Republicans and Democrats as warmongers of almost equal measures of guilt.

While it’s certainly not my job to give advice to the Democrats – or any other political group – I can’t help but thinking that this Russia-gate “scandal” is not only lacking in logic and evidence, but it doesn’t even make any long-term political sense.

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

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## The Price that Julian Assange Pays

People who challenge power are often viewed by their supporters as more icons than human beings thus missing the personal costs of their actions, a reality

that Julian Assange's mother revealed to Randy Credico and Dennis J Bernstein.

By Randy Credico and Dennis J Bernstein

June 19 marked the fifth full year that Wikileaks founder Julian Assange spent at the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he was given asylum against the threat of arrest from a Swedish prosecutor pursuing a sex-abuse investigation (since dropped) and possible extradition to the United States for a potential espionage charge related to publication of U.S. secrets.

To gain insights into what this long ordeal has meant to Assange, an Australian native, Randy Credico of WBAI's "On the Fly" and Dennis Bernstein of "Flashpoints" on Pacifica Radio interviewed Assange's mother, Christine Assange. The interview also explored the deep history that led her son to found Wikileaks and to challenge the enormous powers of the U.S. and British governments by exposing the truth about their dangerous, deadly and often illegal policies.

Randy Credico: I guess I should begin by asking, how long has it been since you've seen your son Julian?

Christine Assange: A number of years, but we communicate.

RC: Yes, you communicate, but it's not the same, so far away. It must be difficult. I mean he's not in prison, but it may as well be prison. I know for a mother to be separated from her son like this, it must be grueling, and a difficult row to hoe on a daily basis.

CA: It is. It's very hard to put into words this experience that we're going through over the last seven years. There have been periods where I've coped and periods where I haven't. It tends to go up and down, as I guess Julian does as well. And it's very hard to communicate with your son when you know that every phone call that you're making, every text that you're sending, is being listened to. Or even a letter that you write. You end up feeling that it's almost useless trying to communicate anything real.

RC: That must really take its toll. So it will be five years [on June 19th]. Five years! Can you believe that he's been there for five years at this point in time?

CA: No, the idea is horrifying to me actually. I mean we know that he's been detained for seven years without charge, but five of those have been in the Ecuadorian Embassy [in London], and we thank the people of Ecuador for their protection.

But during those five years, Randy, the U.K. government and the Swedish

government have refused all of Julian's requests for the normal one hour a day of life-giving fresh air, exercise and sunshine. It's a human right abuse of the grandest order.

Anyone who is involved with rights of refugees around the world should be highlighting his case. Here we are in the Western supposedly free world, interning someone without charge, and then denying them the rights that even people in Third World prisons get, including the right to have medical tests. He had a very bad shoulder with bad chronic pain for years, and they refused to allow him to have an MRI test.

Dennis Bernstein: Let me just ask you this question: do you remember the last time you were able to give your son a nice big hug?

CA: Yes, four years ago.

DB: Could you tell us what you remember about it?

CA: It's hard keeping up with all the fighting, Dennis. It's very hard to explain. But I got a big hug when I left. I was only there for a few weeks. I've actually got a few things here that I've got to look after. But probably the best time I remember him is the one with the picture you've got on your show, of me and him with his arm around me. That was when he'd just gotten out of prison, and I'd gone over there to campaign for him.

And we were out in the snow, at about 3 o'clock on the morning, outside of the place that he was staying. And that was with an Australian television crew and we were all Aussies together in that moment. And I was giving him a big hug, and they were cheering, and it was a really good moment. It all feels so far away, and so foreign for us all to be there together. And for me to hold Julian, with his countrymen around giving support, was a really good moment.

DB: And now that we've got Julian's mom on the phone, could you talk a little bit about ... the first clue that he was going to be perhaps an interesting person, a troublemaker, or somebody who was really interested in public affairs? How do you remember that beginning?

CA: Well I don't think there was any one point at which it happened. Julian had always been an incredibly curious child, and always wanted to know why – wanted to know how things worked. And I actually encouraged that in him as a child. He would ask how something would work, and rather than say, this is how it works, I would ask him, how do you think it works?

And then we would explore theories at his age level about how something would work, and he was very turned on by all that. I also read him a lot of books.



From the time he was a baby, he was read books every day, from fairy tales, to Greek legends, to the adventure heroic classics – Tarzan, for example, where good was trouncing evil, and there were heroic adventures.

The justice part of it was not to any form of ideology, it was just about showing empathy and fairness in everyday life. So I think all those things together – and he came from a creative background – all that enabled him to sort of explore justice, and the power to change.

Then he wanted to know how the world worked. He wanted to be a physicist because he wanted to get to the bottom of it. And he went to university for physics and was disappointed that most of the job opportunities involved working for the US government, developing weapons, etc., and so he wasn't very happy with that.

And then the next thing I remember, we were having a discussion about the ills of the world and what could make a change in the world and I asked him, what do you think would lead to a change? And he said he thought there are two possibilities: one was a cataclysmic event that knocked some sense into people because they'd have to really look at their environment.

The other one was technology. And I think Wikileaks was the result of the technology that he saw would change the world.

DB: You said something very interesting: that it wasn't about grand things, but about fairness in everyday life. Can you think of one of those everyday examples that sort of blossomed into the Julian Assange that we know in terms of his vision now for information?

CA: Well not anything specific in terms of day-to-day life, but just in general with people we were dealing with in the family or with neighbors: we wouldn't walk past somebody who was lying in the street, for example. If there was someone lying in the street, whether they were drunk or if it was a drug overdose, or if they were sick – we would stop and ask them if they were alright. And Julian would continue that. We were in a situation where we were helping some people involved in a justice situation that had to do with the court system, and Julian was boots and all defending people.

But also when he was a young teenager, he was very into computers. So I bought him a computer, and he went exploring on it, and later on he joined up with some other young people. And there was not a lot available in terms of being challenging and adventuring in the suburbs, but these bright young friends of his were challenging themselves on computers, and one of the ways they were doing it was to what they called "look-see" hacking, which was where they'd break in and they'd look at things, they wouldn't damage anything, but let

people know their system was insecure.

Now, in the process of doing that, I remember during the Gulf War that he got in and had a look, and he told me, "There's stuff going on here that's not right, there are people doing things that are not right here, and we're not being told about it – it's not coming out in the media."

And I think that also galvanized him into his concept of Wikileaks, which was basically a concept around really good media. And that is that the media hold the governments and the corporations through, basically the truth, responsible to the people.

RC: He has done an incredible job. We are much better off – we are more knowledgeable about our government's evil actions around the world, and obviously he's being penalized for that. First of all, he's been vilified by these phony allegations. How did you react when these allegations came out of the Swedish government prosecutor's office?

CA: Well I remember the time exactly. It was about 11 o'clock at night when I got a phone call, and the person didn't even introduce themselves, they just said, "Mrs. Assange, how does it feel to have your son accused of a double rape?"

And straight from my solar plexus I just said, "He didn't do it." Because I know my son, and I know that Julian wouldn't do it. But then I had to go through the whole process of investigating the case because, to defend him, I had to know exactly what was going on.

And so, like those who defended him with knowledge, we had to troll through all the documents, to find out the basis of the allegations, and then what we found was a complete and utter set up. And that was a horrifying feeling to find out that your son would actually be set up on something as serious as a rape allegation, purely because he published the truth about corrupt power.

DB: Where exactly are you right now?

CA: I'm in Australia.

DB: Oh, you're in Australia! You're very far away, but you're very close to us here, and we're really appreciating the kind of material that you're sharing about Julian Assange on this, his fifth year of his being held captive, really you have to say by threats of the United States government, who has a special penchant for hurting whistleblowers.

I'm thinking of this carpenter – this illiterate carpenter – who actually fled

from fascist Italy and ended up in fascist Argentina. And he used to spout these phrases, and one of the things he used to say is, "Truth has few friends, and those few are suicides" [Antonio Porchia]. Now that's a very dark comment, but it does seem, if you think about Julian Assange or other great truth tellers, what was waiting for them was a jail cell, or a bullet. Your thoughts on that – that courage that it takes to go forward?

CA: Well the original truth teller was Jesus Christ, wasn't he? He was throwing the money changers out of the temple. And now 2,000 years later we've got defense contractors, the oil industry and Wall Street. And he said, "And you shall know the truth and it shall set you free."

And nothing has really changed since then. We still have corrupt power consolidating itself, and really destroying the world, and not working on the behalf of people. And it sort of brings me back to what we should be doing, as people. What should we do? Our leaders let us down again and again. They say they're going to do something and when they get in power they're either bad leaders who were leading us on, or they're good leaders who are under pressure themselves. And they're fighting each other and name-calling, but it's still not working, is it?

So I see Wikileaks as a uniting point for everybody – from the Left and the Right and everything in between – uniting around the First Amendment, which is what you call it in America, or the free press around the world, to hold our leaders in the business world and in the government accountable through transparency and truth.

And good leaders are actually supported by Wikileaks because if they are indeed under pressure from the Deep State – for example, supposing we assume that Donald Trump is a good guy, and does want to, as he says, "drain the swamp", which is the Deep State, then he's going to need Wikileaks – not just during the campaign, when Wikileaks was wonderful and he loved Wikileaks, but even more so now, when the Deep State is going to try to prevent his campaign.

Now if he's not in fact a good guy, but a bad guy all along, then of course he's going to want to suppress Wikileaks. And our assessment of Donald Trump very much hinges on whether he is going to protect Wikileaks and Julian.

DB: We were just speaking with one of the attorneys, Jesselyn Radack, who has worked with Julian Assange, and we were talking about the message that might be being sent now by the very strong crackdown and arrest of the most recent whistleblower coming out of the National Security Agency [Reality Winner]. Does that give you pause or concern that Julian might have a tough row ahead?

CA: Oh, I've always known he's going to have a tough row ahead, you only have to look at the way they've treated their own whistleblowers, as you said, in their own CIA and NSA. The Obama administration arrested and prosecuted more whistleblowers than all other presidents combined, so things were certainly not looking good, even before this change of administration.

I'm not talking about Reality Winner. I'm not sure where she's coming from but, even so, wherever she's coming from, the protocol should still be the same. And I don't know if that's the case. If you are a whistleblower there should be protections for you and then it should be investigated and authenticated. And there should be a transparent legal process, and your rights should be protected during that time period. The reason I say I don't know where she's coming from, is because they've been talking about so-called leaks about Russians, and all the rest of it, and we know that they've been set up, that the Russians didn't hack the DNC.

They're going to say that there were leaks and they're not leaks, but because we don't know who, that's the reason why we need to protect all whistleblowers, including her, and why it should go through due process, the same as for any other citizen.

DB: We know that Julian was pretty troubled by the way in which *The Intercept* blew their source in this context. He seems to have been a lot more careful in his work in terms of protecting sources. I'm wondering if you noted that.

CA: Oh, absolutely. I remember when Wikileaks was being set up, that Julian was saying to me, "We're going to spend two years with the best minds in the world, to create an anonymous drop box, so that nobody can crack it, because we want to protect our sources. And we want people to feel so comfortable in leaking to us and not to feel frightened that they're going to be revealed". So he's kept to that, even to the risk to his own life and liberty.

Wikileaks has never revealed a source – no source has been exposed by Wikileaks. Chelsea Manning exposed herself on the Internet. And very few other media have been willing to rise to that challenge. So it's best to leak to Wikileaks if you're going to leak. It's a pity that she [Reality Winner] didn't leak to Wikileaks.

RC: Yes. I must say, he really is a remarkable individual. I am not a techie, but he really knows all of this stuff really well, he's brilliant, but he comes off so genuine. It's really amazing to see him on all of these talk shows, on radio – how well he comes off. And he's got a great sense of humor, he's got an incredible education, he's so well-spoken, so dignified when he's on. Does that amaze you?

CA: Yes... well yes and no... because he's grown up with me, and I've seen him, and he's always been a refined person. He's never been a crude person. He's been an honest person and an empathetic person, and he's always been very bright, so that he got to where he is on the world stage doesn't surprise me.

Though of course in another way it does, and I'm in awe of him as well – not in any kind of demigod way, but just as a human being with such resilience and courage, and so strong in the truth. And taking the most incredible amount of attacks, not just from governments and corporations, and what they're getting up to behind the scenes, but trolls.

I mean the thing that probably hurt me the most when watching him stand up for his work, was seeing other journalists, particularly UK journalists, trolling him on Wikileaks with the most vile, immature, picky, vicious comments. I couldn't believe that this was coming out of the mouths of so-called journalists! And he's resilient, and the ability to rise above it is quite awe-inspiring, isn't it?

DB: And he continues on despite it all. He certainly has a resolve and a focus that borders on super-human. He has not been distracted from the work, in fact he has managed to expand it. It's sort of a bit of a miracle.

CA: Well, Julian is very grounded. His convictions come out of critical analysis, they don't come out of an easy path of jumping on some ideological bandwagon, so that when the going gets tough, he's grounded in where he's coming from. Because he drove himself, he's not easily shaken by attacks, by ideological attacks, for example, or personal attacks. I think they've called him every "ist" there is – narcissist, racist, marxist, capitalist – and on and on it goes. But he knows that the reason he's doing this is about media truth and justice, and government transparency, and he's grounded in that reality, and that's why he's not so easily shaken.

RC: He is the most fearless individual. I mean he's got the entire Intelligence Community, the Military Community [against him] – not just here in the U.S. but in Britain – even your own government.

What is your own government doing to protect one of their citizens? Under Prime Minister Turnbull?

CA: They've never done anything under any of them! The Labor government under Julia Gillard called what he did illegal and wanted to take his passport away, and she actually said she was quite happy to hand him over to the U.S. and change our extradition laws specifically to make it easier for him to be handed over.

Basically we don't have a real government, we've got a puppet government – it's just a U.S. puppet, and they're constantly auditioning through the US Embassy for a place in the spotlight. Prime Minister Turnbull was an ex-Director of Goldman Sachs Australia. Not sure if you're familiar with the term "government sets"? That's where big US banks put their people in governments around the world.

So basically it would appear that in the Australian political landscape, if you want a promotion, you will swear on your credentials that you're willing to tow the line on Assange.

DB: And finally, we've got Julian's mom here, and I have to end this way – forgive me, Mom, but what are you most proud of in terms of your son? What part of his actions, his work, makes you the most proud as his mom?

CA: That he's standing ethically in truth for justice, with courage. That he's willing to risk his life and his liberty for his fellow man, basically. And that's what he's doing – he's risking his health, his liberty and even his life, because we've heard all the horrible stuff coming out of various commentators: things like "We're gonna shoot the son of a bitch" coming from Bob Beckel, a Democratic strategist.

And all the horrible things that Mike Pompeo said about him being a demon and "an unsafe intelligence actor." And nonsense stuff about him being involved in child pornography from both sides, trying to set him up. I mean most people would have fallen over by now. But I think that because Julian is standing for something that's good and right and correct, I think that's where he derives his strength.

RC: He does have a lot of support, and I've been getting a lot of support from his supporters for this show, on Twitter and social media.

[...] What can people do? What do you recommend people do to help out Julian?

CA: [...] Some of the American supporters have been very busy lately. They've organized the Boycott UK and it's under the hashtag #BoycottUK and also the hashtag #FreeAssangeNOW .

This is a very good idea because we all know that money makes the world go round and in fact some are saying that a lot of the opposition to Julian is from greedy corporations because he exposes things like some of the reasons for war, and some of them profit from defense contracts. They also know that by reducing profits for major corporations, they will lean on government to change their policy. So boycotting big UK businesses until they free Julian – all big businesses that are operating in the UK.

Another California supporter ... has put up a campaign called "5 dollars for 5 years" and that is about how Julian spent five years in the Ecuadorian Embassy giving the truth, fighting for us, for our right to know. How about if we donate five dollars – a dollar for each year that he spent there? And that will go to top up the Julian Assange Defense fund which is at [justice4assange.com](http://justice4assange.com). And you can donate your five dollars there.

Also on that site there's a lot of information – it's the best site in the world for finding out the facts about what's been happening to Julian Assange for the last seven years. And let me tell you, it reads like The Bourne Conspiracy – what the government's been up to to try to shut my son up is criminal and unbelievable.

So, just in America, just these last few weeks, American citizens have been standing up to fight.

But what you're doing is also incredibly important, Randy. We find that when people are apprised of the facts about Wikileaks, and the facts about Julian, that most come onboard to support him, and some even come onboard as very active supporters. So it's about getting out the facts, because there's an awful lot of propaganda and lies. But once people know the facts they are supportive, so that's also very important that people talk to each other about the facts, find out the facts. And there's a very good FAQ at [justice4assange.com](http://justice4assange.com).

So getting out the facts is really important, boycotting is very important, and funding Julian and funding Wikileaks is also important. We often feel very alone and powerless in the world at the moment, but we do have two things that we can still do.

One thing is where we spend our consumer dollar. It might only be five dollars, but if a million people donate five dollars, that's really putting Julian and Wikileaks in a strong position to fight.

The other thing is the vote: keep your politician on speed dial and yank his or her chain every so often to remind them that we actually pay their wages, and we expect them to stand up for truth and government accountability, we expect them to not get in bed with corruption, and we are not impressed with them persecuting truth-telling media.

So there are just three things you can do straightaway. And of course you can always form your own Free Assange group – it can be a group of one or two or more. And this is what some ladies have done in America and around the world – nice people who have formed Free Assange groups. They are just ordinary people – they're not actually highly political people, they're often mothers who want to

see the world protected for their children, and they often have no political experience, but a lot of heart and drive and creativity. And they often make the best advocates.

RC: Well, Ms. Christine Assange, I really appreciate you being part of this show. You are welcome back anytime. You are really doing an incredible job on behalf of your son, who is a hero. And I would like to give you the last word. If there's something you want to convey to Julian and his supporters there in London, I'm going to give you the last word.

CA: Well, firstly, I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to all the supporters around the world who have stood up and fought to protect and defend Wikileaks and Julian. Sometimes you've only done one action, sometimes you've done more – it doesn't matter, you did something.

The people in London at the Ecuadorian Embassy have just been troopers. Both Ecuador and its embassy staff and the people of Ecuador and the people from the Julian Assange Defense Fund and Wise Up Action – those guys who stood outside that embassy, day-in, day-out – in the rain, hail, snow and sun – to support my son and protect him. And at one stage, when they tried to raid the embassy illegally and grab Julian, these people were his protectors. And I would encourage anybody who is visiting London anytime to drop into the embassy and stand outside the embassy and join these historic groups.

Show Julian that you care. Show the powers that be that the people care and they're not going away. Wikileaks, after all, is supplied by the people, with information for the people, for their protection. It's 100% funded by the people, and it's defended and protected by the people, including our lawyers. This is a people's publisher, and it just goes to show you what the people can achieve when they get together. Wikileaks is rocking the halls of power, and they're terrified. And they have come back as bad as IS [Islamic State] terrorists against the truth, but the people are standing firm.

And to my son, I love you, I'm still here, I'm still fighting, I'm incredibly proud of your work. You're a terrific human being, and we're all standing here and we will keep fighting until we get you out of there.

**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](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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# More Corporate Control of the Internet

The flip side of the Trump administration's war on government regulations is the expansion of corporate control, which is especially true for media and the Internet, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

In just a few short months, the Trump wrecking ball has pounded away at rules and regulations in virtually every government agency. The men and women the president has appointed to the Cabinet and to head those agencies are so far in sycophantic lockstep, engaged in dismantling years of protections in order to make real what White House strategist Steve Bannon infamously described as "the deconstruction of the administrative state."

The Federal Communications Commission is not immune. Its new chair, Republican Ajit Pai, embraces the Trump doctrine of regulatory devastation. "It's basic economics," he declared in an [April 26 speech at Washington's Newseum](#). "The more heavily you regulate something, the less of it you're likely to get."

His goal is to stem the tide of media reform that in recent years has made significant progress for American citizens. Even as we rely more than ever on digital media for information, education and entertainment, Pai and his GOP colleagues at the FCC seek to turn back the clock and increase even more the corporate control of cyberspace.

Net neutrality, the guarantee of an internet open to all, rich or poor, without preferential treatment, was codified by the FCC in 2015. Pai – a former lawyer for Verizon – wants net neutrality reversed and has taken the first steps toward its elimination. He has abandoned media ownership rules and attacked such FCC innovations as [the Lifeline program](#) that subsidizes broadband access for low income Americans. Among other rollbacks, he also has opposed rules capping the exorbitant cost of prison phone calls ([that cap was overturned](#) on June 13 by the US Court of Appeals).

A veteran of the FCC, Michael Copps vehemently opposes Pai's master plan to strengthen the grip of big business on our media. Copps served two terms as a commissioner, including a brief period as interim chair. He also has taught history, worked as chief of staff to former South Carolina Sen. Fritz Hollings and was an assistant secretary of commerce.

Today, Copps is special adviser for the Media and Democracy Reform Initiative at the nonpartisan grassroots organization Common Cause. He "just may be," [Bill](#)

Moyers once said, “the most knowledgeable fellow in Washington on how communications policy affects you and me.”

Recently, I spoke with Copps to get his assessment of how the election of Donald Trump and Ajit Pai’s FCC chairmanship are affecting Americans and the media landscape. “I remain convinced that the last presidential election we had was of, by, and for, big media,” he said. “It made billions of dollars for these big media companies. We’re entering into a period where there likely will be more mergers than we’ve ever had before. The political and marketplace atmosphere that we have in this country right now favors them.”

The transcript that follows has been edited for length and clarity.

**Michael Copps:** [CBS CEO Les] Moonves said it best: “I don’t know if Donald Trump is good for the country. but he’s damn good for CBS.” The election was just a glorified reality show and I do not think it was an aberration. Until we get that big picture straightened out and we get a civic dialogue that’s worthy of the American people and that actually advances citizens’ ability to practice the art of self-government – that informs citizens so they can cast intelligent votes and we stop making such damn-fool decisions – we’re in serious trouble.

To me, that remains the problem of problems, it remains at the top of the list. Journalism continues to go south, thanks to big media and its strangulation of news, and there’s not much left in the way of community or local media. Add to that an internet that has not even started thinking seriously about how it supports journalism. You have these big companies like Google and Facebook who run the news and sell all the ads next to it, but what do they put back into journalism? It isn’t much.

I don’t think right now that commercial media is going to fix itself or even that we can save it with any policy that’s likely in the near-term, so we have to start looking at other alternatives. We have to talk about public media – public media probably has to get its act together somewhat, too. It’s not everything that Lyndon Johnson had in mind back in 1967 [when the Public Broadcasting Act was signed], but it’s still the jewel of our media ecosystem. So I’m more worried than ever about the state of our media – not just fake news but the lack of real news.

That’s priority No. 1; I don’t think you solve anything until you find some ways to repair our commercial media. That’s not coming from inside the fabled Beltway anytime soon. It’ll require major input from the grass roots. Big media won’t cover its own shortcomings, so we have to have a national conversation and make some democracy-encouraging decisions. We just have to find a way.

**Michael Winship: What about “fake news?”**

**MC:** The fake news thing is a challenging phenomenon. No one has a viable solution yet that I know of. Again, don't look to Washington for much input under the present management. Maybe reinvigorating real news, the fact-based investigative journalism that big media has done so much to eliminate, would be the best solution. True journalism can do more than anything else to push aside fake news.

**MW: So how do you characterize the Trump administration's attitude toward communications issues?**

**MC:** This is not populism; this is a plutocracy. Trump has surrounded himself with millionaires and billionaires, plus some ideologues who believe in, basically, no government. And the Trump FCC already has been very successful in dismantling lots of things – not just the net neutrality that they're after now, but privacy, and Lifeline, which is subsidized broadband for those who can't afford it. And just all sorts of things up and down the line. The whole panoply of regulation and public interest oversight – if they could get rid of it all, they would; if they can, they will.

I think the April 26 speech that Ajit Pai gave at the Newseum, which was partially funded, I think, by conservative activist causes, was probably the worst speech I've ever heard a commissioner or a chairman of the FCC give. It was replete with distorted history and a twisted interpretation of judicial decisions. And then, about two-thirds of the way through, it became intensely political and ideological, and he was spouting all this Ronald Reagan nonsense – if the government is big enough to do what you want, it's big enough to take away everything you have, and all that garbage. It was awful.

It's maybe the worst FCC I've ever seen or read about.

**MW: How much of all this do you think is just simply the idea of destroying anything supported by the Obama White House? Is it that simple?**

**MC:** Well, I think that some of it is the ego problem, but I think it goes beyond that. I think there is that right wing, pro-business, invisible hand ideology, and then there's just the unabashed and unprecedented and disgusting level of money in politics. I don't blame just the Republicans; the Democrats are just about as beholden to it, too.

**MW: You mentioned Pai's speech at the Newseum; does he have any real philosophy?**

**MC:** Yes, I think he believes this stuff, I think he's a true believer. He was in the Office of General Counsel when I was in there – very articulate, very

bright, very pleasant. He is an attractive personality, but he has this *Weltanschauung* or whatever you want to call it that is so out of step with modern politics and where we should be in the history of this country that it's potentially extremely destructive. And Michael O'Rielly, the other Republican commissioner, is about the same. He's an ideologue, too.

It's all about the ideology, the world of big money, the access that the big guys have and continue to have. It's not that the FCC outright refuses to let public interest groups through the door or anything like that; it's just the lack of resources citizens and public interest groups have compared to what the big guys have. The public interest groups don't have much of a chance, but I think they've done a pretty good job given the lack of resources.

**MW: Did you expect Pai to move so fast against net neutrality?**

**MC:** It doesn't surprise me, but it's so dangerous. Net neutrality is the *sine qua non* of an open internet – "You can't have one without the other," as the old song goes. We'll need to hope for a good court outcome if the FCC succeeds in eliminating the rules. But I really don't see how big telecom or the commission can make a credible case to overturn what the court approved just two years ago, and then go back to what the court overturned before that. It's downright surreal. But citizens should not limit their pro-net neutrality messages to just the FCC; Congress needs to understand how popular these rules are, so they keep their hands off it, which they may be more inclined to do as the 2018 elections come closer.

**MW: There's so much of an X factor to everything.**

**MC:** There really is. I just hope we can get the media covering it better. I think if we get a couple of really big mergers, and of course we have AT&T and Time Warner out there now, which Trump said he was going to oppose. I don't think he really will, but that itself should be an issue. And then, if we can join that to the net neutrality issue, then I think we can get some media attention. If we can do that with Time Warner and AT&T or whatever other mergers come along, certainly including Sinclair-Tribune, then we can actually make some progress. I sure hope so.

**MW: There still seems to be a lot public support for net neutrality.**

**MC:** No question about it, but there would be an avalanche if more people were informed about the issue by the media. Many Trump voters, I am convinced, are not consumers who support \$232 a year for a set-top box or who like constantly rising bills for cable and internet service, or who want a closed internet. That's not why they voted for him.

**MW: Have the net neutrality rules passed in 2015 had a chance to work? Have they had a chance to be effective?**

**MC:** Yes, I think so. Some say they are a solution in search of a problem, but that's not true. I think the companies have been on their good behavior over the last few years, by and large – but there have been numerous abuses, too. But once you throw out the rules we have now, it'll be "Katy bar the door," and by the time we get another administration in, either the FCC or the Congress, it'll probably be too late to reverse the tide.

**MW: What are the implications for free speech?**

**MC:** They are huge. If you have an internet service provider [ISP] that's capable of slowing down other sites, or putting other sites out of business, or favoring their own friends and affiliates and customers who can pay for fast lanes, that's a horrible infringement on free speech. It's censorship by media monopolies.

It's tragic: here we have a technology, the internet, that's capable really of being the town square of democracy, paved with broadband bricks, and we are letting it be taken over by a few gatekeepers. This is a first amendment issue; it's free speech versus corporate censorship.

**MW: I want to talk to you about privacy, about protecting consumer information that's on the net.**

**MC:** If the huge internet service providers are going to glean all manner of personal information about us and share it with others or sell it to others, we ought to have a right to say, "Yes, count me in, I don't mind that," or "No, I don't want any part of that." And I think the vast majority would say, "No, thank you, I don't want any part of that." So privacy is a huge issue. We've talked about it some in national security terms, but it's a much bigger issue in citizen terms and what it does to the average person.

**MW: You mentioned Lifeline; I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about that..**

**MC:** Lifeline is directed toward those who cannot afford to be connected to broadband. How do they find a job when most corporations don't accept paper resumes or don't want to interview you in person? Nowadays you have to email something to potential employers. How do you and your kids educate yourselves? How do kids do their homework when they don't have broadband, and the kid in the next town or even in the next block has high-speed broadband? How do you care for your health – especially that now we're getting seriously into tele-health and tele-medicine?

You cannot be a fully functioning 21<sup>st</sup>-century citizen in this country unless you have access to high-speed broadband. It's as simple as that. We shouldn't settle for less. I don't know that the FCC can do this by itself, and we need a national mission to do this. And we need everybody pushing for it. I hope it's going to be included in Trump's infrastructure plan, but I'll be surprised if it's in such a meaningful way that it's going to get coverage for all the people in the inner cities and rural America.

And, you know, we're way, way down in the rankings in broadband penetration, adoption and affordability. And without competition, even when you have broadband, without competition people are paying through the ceiling for inferior service. They've got to feed families and find shelter, but broadband is also essential to them.

**MW: I think another issue that a lot of people aren't aware of is the whole prison telephone problem.**

**MC:** Commissioner Mignon Clyburn has done a fantastic job on that. We have such a high percentage of our population in the United States incarcerated and for their families to communicate with them or vice versa has become just very, very expensive. It's an industry that has made a lot of money off of other people's distress, and if you have a son in prison, and you can't afford to communicate with them, that doesn't help anybody, including the person who's in prison.

Commissioner Clyburn made some good progress on interstate calling in this regard, but then you've got to go state by state, and now the court has just thrown some obstacles in the way of the intrastate calls. So, there's work to be done, and we'll see how far it goes. But we were on the track of making good progress under the previous commission.

**MW: Do you think there's any interest in consumer service remaining among the Republicans on the FCC or in Congress?**

**MC:** It's mighty hard to find if you look at all the party-line votes and partisanship at work. I think there will be some cooperation for infrastructure if broadband is included. It depends on how much. Some Republicans will vote for that, but you can't find a Republican for net neutrality, and you can't find a Republican for doing anything to counteract the outrageous influence of money in the political bloodstreams.

**MW: With so many of these American Enterprise Institute types and various other conservative groups and people wielding influence, would they lobby to eliminate the FCC completely?**

**MC:** Oh, yes indeed. There were reports during the transition that some of those

people were actually saying, “Do we even need an FCC? Why don’t we just get rid of it?”

**MW: So what can we all do at this point?**

**MC:** Figure out how you really make this a grass-roots effort – and not just people writing, in but people doing more than that. In July, we will have a day devoted to internet action, so stay tuned on that. In addition, as Bill Moyers says, “If you can sing, sing. If you can write a poem, write a poem.” Different initiatives attract different audiences, so whatever you can do, do. John Oliver made a huge difference in getting us to net neutrality and now he’s helping again. If you went up to the Hill right after that first John Oliver show on net neutrality [in 2014], you saw immediately that it made a difference with the members and the staff.

There’s no one silver bullet, no “do this” and it suddenly happens. You just have to do whatever you can do to get people excited and organized. It’s as simple as that.

**MW: So that’s where the hope is?**

**MC:** Well, that’s where my hope is. I don’t see anything else unless we get a change in power in Washington, and not just the name of the party in control but candidates who really are ready for a change and ready to do something to make it more reflective of what, I think, is the popular will.

**MW: Which of the Democrats are good on these issues?**

**MC:** There are a lot of them. I hesitate to get into names for fear of missing some. The problem is that Republicans inside the Beltway are joined in lockstep opposition on almost all these issues, and the level of partisanship, lobbying, big money, and ideology have thus far been insurmountable obstacles. But I believe if members of Congress spent more time at home, holding more town hall meetings, they would quickly learn that many, many of their constituents are on the pro-consumer, pro-citizen side of these issues.

It’s just such a formative time, and in many respects the future is now. I don’t know how long you can let this go on. How long can you open the bazaar to all this consolidation, how much can you encourage all this commercialization, how much can you ignore public media until you get to the point of no return where you can’t really fix it anymore? And I also think that the national discourse on the future of the internet has really suffered while we play ping pong with net neutrality; one group comes in, does this, the other group, comes in and reverses it, boom, boom, boom. And net neutrality is not the salvation or the solution to all of the problems of the internet. As you know, it’s kind of the

opening thing you have to have, it lays a foundation where we can build a truly open internet.

But net neutrality alone doesn't solve consolidation, it doesn't solve commercialization, it doesn't solve, really, the big questions of the future of the internet. Add to the list issues of artificial intelligence and is AI going to put us out of work? These aren't strictly communication issues, but they are internet issues. What does AI mean for the future of work in our society? Are we even going to be working? Or, can we say the internet is throwing people out of work without sounding Luddite, because that's been said throughout history and it's been proven wrong, but I think now it looks like a lot of people already have been thrown out of work by it.

If Hillary Clinton had been elected, I would have gone down and talked with her and suggested a White House conference on the future of the internet. You can't answer all these questions that I just posed but you can ask the questions and you can get the best minds in the country talking about them. Give the conference a mandate and get them to come back with a report and some recommendations and at least put people on it with enough visibility that the media has to cover it.

If we could win net neutrality, which is a stretch, there will be a lot of people who say, "Well, that takes care of the internet, everything's fine and dandy right now." But that's not true at all. It's just not true.

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## Blaming Bernie Sanders for a Shooting

The mainstream media usually won't blame non-violent political speech for a crazed gunman's shooting spree, but made an exception linking Bernie Sanders to the GOP-baseball-practice shooting, notes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

It's routine for right-wing outlets like Fox to smear



progressive activists under the guise of “news” coverage. But why the New York Times? And why the special venom for Bernie Sanders?

After the horrific June 14 shooting of Congressman Steve Scalise and three other participants in a Republican baseball practice, the media floodgates opened for slimy innuendos. Before the day was done, a major supplier of the political sewage was the New York Times, which prominently published a left-blaming [article](#) that masqueraded as news reporting.

The media watch group FAIR [pointed out](#) that the Times piece “started with a false premise and patched together a dodgy piece of innuendo and guilt-by-association in order to place the blame for a shooting in Virginia on ‘the most ardent supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders.’”

It would be a mistake to think that the Times story was only the result of bias inflamed by the grisly shooting spree. A few days earlier, the newspaper had front-paged another “news” [story](#) hostile to grassroots political forces aligned with Sanders – a de facto editorial masquerading as news coverage, headlined: “Democrats in Split-Screen: The Base Wants It All. The Party Wants to Win.”

In a bizarre disconnect from electoral reality, the article portrayed a party establishment that had lost election after election, including a cataclysmic loss to Trump, as being about winning. And the article portrayed the party’s activist base as interfering with the establishment’s winning ways.

Such Times stories are now operating under a heightened

sense of journalistic impunity since the newspaper [abolished](#) its 14-year-old ombudsperson position of “public editor” more than two weeks ago – further insulating its reporters and editors from accountability. More than ever, calling the shots at the Times – the most influential news outlet in the United States – means never having to say you’re sorry, or even justify what you’ve done.

## **Media Hostility**

Corporate-owned media hostility toward Sanders and the progressive base has been conspicuous and well-documented. That hostility [started early](#) in his [campaign](#) and never let up, sometimes manifested as giving him [scant coverage](#). When the momentum of the Bernie campaign gained powerful traction as a threat to the corporate order, big media efforts to trash him went over the top.

At a key political moment last year, as FAIR analyst Adam Johnson [wrote](#), “the Washington Post ran 16 negative stories on Bernie Sanders in 16 hours, between roughly 10:20 PM EST Sunday, March 6, to 3:54 PM EST Monday, March 7 – a window that includes the crucial Democratic debate in Flint, Michigan, and the next morning’s spin.” The day after this onslaught, Sanders stunned the elite pundit class by winning the Michigan primary.

Now, in mid-2017, with no presidential election in sight, why is the corporate media hostility toward Sanders so prone to surface?

Consider, as an example, this structural reality: Jeff Bezos, the owner of the Washington Post, has just unveiled plans for his company Amazon to buy Whole Foods. And Bernie

Sanders, the [most popular](#) politician in the United States according to polls, is strongly opposed to allowing such huge consolidations of corporate power.

For good reasons, media powerhouses like the New York Times and Washington Post are averse to Donald Trump. At the same time, they remain quite cozy with Hillary Clinton's political orientation and especially with the sectors of the corporate-military establishment that she represents. Like so much of the mass media, those outlets see Sanders as dangerously anti-corporate and way too willing to challenge Wall Street, big insurance companies, the fossil fuel industry and the like.

On a political level, the Clinton wing of the party has been running on the equivalent of dumpster-fire fumes since the disastrous loss in November. The party's establishment, entwined with Wall Street and an agenda of continuous military intervention overseas, was just barely able to shoehorn its handpicked choice, Tom Perez, into becoming the new chair of the Democratic National Committee.

In a classic [joint interview](#) with MSNBC two months ago, Perez and Sanders showcased just how different their politics are. Perez mumbled platitudes, Sanders was forthright. Perez spoke about victims of an unfair economy, but he refused to denounce or even name their corporate victimizers – while Sanders was glad to do so.

The U.S. media establishment often conflates “populism” of the right and the left, as though Trump and Sanders are somehow symmetrical as anti-establishment figures. And, as in the case of the New York Times article that appeared

hours after the GOP baseball tragedy, the Times has sometimes jumped at the chance to draw far-fetched parallels between Trump's violence-tinged, pseudo-populist messaging from the right and Sanders's humane, inclusive messaging from the left.

Like it or not, the battle over the future of the Democratic Party – including what kind of presidential nominee the party should have in 2020 – is already underway. Overall, the top echelons of corporate media are oriented toward promoting the Clinton wing while denigrating the Bernie wing. The forces that brought us the disastrous 2016 Clinton campaign are not about to give up.

**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*.**

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## Trump Embraces GOP Tax-Cut Orthodoxy

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

By Jonathan Marshall

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

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

by multinational corporations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rates of corporate tax avoidance are soaring. A 2014 study by Gabriel Zucman, an

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

### **Individuals Evade Taxes, Too**

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

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

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

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

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

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

“In a major jolt of support for President Trump, the powerful political network overseen by conservative billionaire Charles Koch is launching a multimillion-

dollar campaign to drive Trump's tax plan through Congress," USA Today reported in May. The Kochs' network, which pools contributions from 550 super-rich donors, "plan(s) to spend \$300 million to \$400 million on policy and political campaigns ahead of the 2018 elections," the paper said.

### **More Tax Cuts**

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

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

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

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

"I'm appalled, that's all I can say," said Lawrence B. Gibbs, who served as IRS Commissioner under President Reagan from 1986 to 1989. In light of the nation's challenges, he added, "the one thing people ought to agree on is that we should have a revenue system that works and works well."

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

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

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

**Jonathan Marshall is a regular contributor to Consortiumnews.com.**

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## Europe Discovers a Volatile Populism

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

By Andrew Spannaus

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

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

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

The political élites lost that battle, as the British population sent a strong message not only to the E.U. institutions in Brussels and Frankfurt, but



principally to its own political representatives, who were seen as pursuing their own interests, while ignoring those of large segments of the population.

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

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

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

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

### **Weak Recovery**

The recovery since that time has been weak, and particularly unequal among socio-economic classes, so it is not surprising that the underlying economic difficulties have fueled protest votes whenever the population is given the possibility to stick it to the politicians. The June 8 general election in the U.K. shows just how important it is to recognize these undercurrents, as opposed to seeking support on collateral issues that many voters may ultimately recognize as superficial.

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

What May ignored, however, is the need to link the political argument to people's basic economic needs. She paid lip service to the issue, promising benefits for the British people by leaving the European common market, and announcing new initiatives to expand trade. The voters didn't buy it though,

because at the same time, May found herself on the wrong side of the all-important issue of austerity, leaving a massive flank open to Corbyn and Labour.

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

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

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

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

### **Fed Up with Austerity**

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

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

What we have seen throughout the Western world in the past year is that the

population is no longer buying it. The hollowing out of the middle class in the name of promoting economic and financial globalization has led to a revolt of voters against the Establishment.

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

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

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

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

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## Trump Tests the Emoluments Clause

The Founders sought to shield the U.S. government from foreign influence via the Emoluments Clause, which is now being tested by President Trump's financial conflicts, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

A lawsuit filed by Maryland and the District of Columbia is the second such suit alleging that President Trump is violating the clause in the U.S. Constitution that prohibits officials from accepting emoluments from foreign states.

The principal focus of the suits is the Trump hotel that occupies the Old Post Office Building a few blocks from the White House (and is the subject of yet another irregularity, in that government officials are supposed to be legally barred from leasing that publicly owned property).

The new suit may have a better chance than the first one of establishing standing to sue, given that the plaintiffs represent jurisdictions with business interests that may lose customers to the Trump hotel because of its connection to the presidency. Earlier this year, for example, the Kuwaiti embassy, which for many years had held its national day celebration at the Four Seasons Hotel, held the event instead at Trump's hotel.

The lost business is legally significant regarding standing to sue, and when a public official gains a commercial advantage because of his position, there is a fairness issue regarding businesses competing on an uneven playing field. But which Washington hotel gets to host embassy parties is hardly the most important question involved.

We can get a sense of the relevant concerns of the Founding Fathers by noting that the Emoluments Clause is part of a broader prohibition in the Constitution (in Article I, Section 9) that bars the granting of any title of nobility and the acceptance "of any present, Office, Emolument, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State."

*Emolument* may be an Eighteenth-Century word that is not in many active vocabularies in the Twenty-first Century, but the concern about the effects of flattery and favor are at least as relevant today as they were when the Constitution was written.

### **Trump's Fondness for Flattery**

In fact, with the current President, the concern is more relevant than ever. The role of flattery in the Trump presidency was in full display in the public portion of a cabinet meeting this week, in which the self-congratulation from the man in the center and the sycophancy from nearly everyone else at the table was what one might expect from a meeting of the North Korean cabinet.

Foreign governments have concluded that flattering Trump is one of the best ways to influence his policies. The Saudis pulled out all the stops to do so during Trump's recent visit to the kingdom, including projecting a five-story image of Trump's face on the side of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. In view of the output of the visit, including Trump quickly taking Saudi Arabia's side as it subsequently lowered the boom on Qatar, the Saudis no doubt consider their efforts to have been worthwhile.

Another all-too-obvious strand of Trump's presidency, and one at least as relevant to his ownership of unfairly advantaged hotels, is his throwing of ethics into the trash. A shameless mixing of public business and private financial interest has been a major feature of this presidency (and such steps as letting his sons manage his business day-to-day do nothing to remove the conflict of interest stemming from his ownership of businesses that profit from presidential actions).

That disregard for ethics also has set a terrible example for people around that Cabinet table and others in this administration who also have conflicts of interest. All this is a major problem even when no foreign governments are involved. Many aspects of domestic policy are being shaped by people who have private interests at stake, which often point in a different direction than the nation's interests.

### **Founders' Worries**

The writers of the Constitution were concerned about this broader problem of keeping public business separate from private pecuniary interests. Another place in the document where the term *emolument* comes up is in Article II, which is about the presidency and the Executive Branch. Section 1 says that the president's salary should not be changed during his term and that "he shall not receive within that Period any other Emolument from the United States, or any of them."

In contrast to Barack Obama, whose respect for the Constitution, including the Emoluments Clause, led him to request a formal legal opinion from the Department of Justice to determine whether he should be permitted to accept his Nobel Prize, Trump gives no indication of having even passing thoughts about such things, or about government ethics. His conduct in that regard is the opposite of what the writers of the Constitution sought in trying to erect a strict divide between private interests and the nation's business.

When a foreign government is involved, in violation of the Emoluments Clause in Article I, the fundamental problem is that U.S. foreign policy may be influenced by the President's private financial interests and thus may be shaped in ways different from what is in the national interest. The shaping need not entail a specific quid pro quo with a foreign state; general affinities or preferences, or a natural inclination to favor those who have bestowed favors – or profitable business – in the other direction may be sufficient to shape policy in ways detrimental to U.S. interests.

Moreover, the ability of foreign states to influence U.S. policies in this way is not an equal opportunity matter. Governments that are better able to do

things such as holding expensive receptions at high-priced Pennsylvania Avenue hotels have more of an opportunity to play this game than do governments that are less well-heeled. Favoring the former over the latter is not necessarily in U.S. interests.

There can be a further detriment to U.S. interests that involves how other foreign governments perceive the drivers of U.S. policy, and their willingness to conform to or cooperate with that policy. If foreign leaders are left to wonder whether a U.S. president's policies reflect the president's private pocketbook rather than U.S. national interests, let alone interests that the two countries share, U.S. credibility suffers.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a [blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## Oliver Stone Reveals a Vulnerable Putin

**Exclusive:** The U.S. political/media demonization of Russia's Putin is unrelenting, but an interview series with director Oliver Stone poses tough questions to Putin while also letting Americans see the real person, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Before we stumble into a nuclear war and end life on the planet, the American people might want to watch Oliver Stone's four-part series of interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin on "Showtime." Stone accomplishes what Western journalists should do but don't, by penetrating deeply into the personality of this historic figure.

Typically these days, American TV news personalities use interviews with a demonized foreign leader, like Putin, to demonstrate their own "toughness" on air, hurling insulting questions at the target and pretending that this preening behavior proves their courage.

In reality, it is bad journalism for a wide variety of reasons: The interview subject will normally retreat into canned talking points, so nothing is really learned; the TV viewer will get to see some theatrics but no insights into what makes the foreign leader tick; and – most importantly – chances of going to war

with the despised leader's country increase.

Yet, it's not all bad: the "confrontation" will boost the career prospects of the self-aggrandizing "journalist" who will add the highlights of the insult-fest to his or her video résumé.

Stone does something quite different and, in today's modern world, quite remarkable. As you go deeper into the four segments of "The Putin Interviews," you begin to realize that Stone, the award-winning movie director, is using his directorial skills to peel back the layers of self-consciousness that can inhibit an actor from reaching his or her full potential, but, in this case, Stone is using those same techniques to get Putin to reveal more of his true self.

By coming across as unthreatening and personable – almost like the TV detective Columbo – Stone strips away many of Putin's defenses, creating a dynamic in which the Russian president struggles between his characteristic cautiousness and a willingness to be more candid.

Putin seems to like Stone while sensing that Stone is playing him. In one of the early interviews, in July 2015, Stone asks Putin about the "ambiguity" of Josef Stalin's legacy, obviously a sensitive and complex question for a Russian who may admire Stalin's determination during World War II but abhor Stalin's excesses in annihilating political enemies.

"I think you are a cunning person," Putin tells Stone.

### **Stone Directs Putin**

At the start of a late interview in February 2017, Stone even acts like a director, dispatching Putin down a hallway so his entrance can be more dramatically filmed. "Pretend we haven't seen each other in months," Stone tells Putin.

After Putin has retreated down the hallway, Stone yells, "Action! Action!" but when nothing happens, he tells the official interpreter, "Tell him 'action' in Russian."

Then, after more delay, Stone seeks out his assistant director: "Where's my A.D.? Come on! Where's my A.D.?" before worrying that maybe Putin "went into another meeting."

But Putin finally strolls down the hallway, carrying two cups of coffee, offering one to Stone in English, "Coffee, sir?"

Yet, perhaps the climatic scene in this tension between "director" and "actor"

comes at the end of the four-part series when Putin seems to recognize that Stone may have gotten the better of him in this friendly competition spread out in conversations from July 2015 to February 2017.

After finishing what was meant to be the last interview (though a later one was tacked on), Putin turns to Stone and voices concern for the risks that the director is taking by undertaking this series of interviews which Putin knows – because the interviews are not openly antagonistic to Putin – will draw a hostile reaction from the mainstream U.S. media.

At that moment, the roles get reversed. Putin, the wary subject of Stone's interviews, is being solicitous of Stone, throwing the director off-balance.

"Thank you for your time and your questions," Putin tells Stone. "Thank you for being so thorough." Putin then adds: "Have you ever been beaten?"

Caught off guard, Stone replies: "Beaten? Oh, yes."

Putin: "So it's not going to be something new, because you are going to suffer for what you are doing."

Stone: "Oh, sure, yeah. I know but it's worth it if it brings some more peace and cautiousness to the world."

Putin: "Thank you."

What the savvy Putin understands is that Stone will face recriminations in the United States for treating the Russian president with any degree of respect and empathy.

In modern America – the so-called "land of the free, home of the brave" – a new media paradigm has taken hold, in which only the official U.S. side of a story can be told; any suggestion that there might be another side of the Russia story, for instance, makes you a "Putin apologist," a "Moscow stooge" or a disseminator of "propaganda" and "fake news."

### **Harsh Reviews**

And Putin was not mistaken. The early mainstream media's reaction to Stone's interview series has concentrated on attacking Stone for not being tougher on Putin, just as Putin expected.

For instance, The New York Times headlines its review in its print editions, "Letting Vladimir Putin Talk, Unchallenged," and begins with a swipe at Stone for his "well-established revisionist views on American history and institutions." Stone is also mocked for questioning the current elite groupthink



that Russia helped make “Donald J. Trump president of the United States.”

The Washington Post column by Ann Hornaday was even snarkier, entitled in print editions: “Stone drops cred to give a Russian bear hug.” Although only seeing the first two segments of the four-part series, Hornaday clearly wanted Stone to perform one of those self-righteous confrontations, like all the “star journalists” do, beating their breasts and repeating the usual litany of unsubstantiated charges against Putin that pervade the major U.S. media.

Hornaday writes: “But what might have once promised to be an explosive on-screen matching-of-wits instead arrives just in time to be colossally irrelevant: an erstwhile scoop made instantly negligible by the breaking news it’s been engulfed by, and the imaginative and ideological limits of its director.”

The truth, however, is that Stone asks pretty much all the tough questions that one would pose to Putin and succeeds in drawing Putin out from his protective shell. In so doing, Stone sheds more light on the potentially existential conflict between the two nuclear-armed superpowers than anything else that I have seen.

While the series makes some genuine news, it also allows Putin to explain his thinking regarding some of the key controversies that have stoked the New Cold War, including his reaction to the Ukraine crisis. While Putin has offered these explanations before, they will be news to many Americans because Putin’s side of the story has been essentially blacked out by the major U.S. newspapers and networks.

### **A Vulnerable Character**

Personally, I came away from watching “The Putin Interviews” both more and less impressed with the Russian leader. What I saw was a more vulnerable personality than I had expected, but I was impressed by Putin’s grasp of global issues, including a sophisticated understanding of American power.

Putin surely does not appear to be the diabolical monster that current American propaganda presents, which may be the greatest accomplishment of Stone’s series, revealing Putin as a multi-dimensional and complex figure. You may go into the series expecting a cartoonish villain, but that is not what you’ll find.

Putin comes across as a politician and bureaucrat who found himself, somewhat unwittingly and unwillingly, thrust into a historical role at an extraordinarily challenging time for Russia.

In the 1990s, Russians were reeling from the devastating impact of U.S.-prescribed economic “shock therapy” after the collapse of the Soviet Union in

1991. The nation's riches were sold off to well-connected thieves who became known as the "oligarchs," overnight billionaires who used their riches to gain control of the political and media levers of power. Meanwhile, average Russians fell into poverty and saw their life expectancy drop at unparalleled rates for a country not at war.

Boris Yeltsin, the Russian Federation's first president and a corrupt drunkard who was kept in power by American manipulation of the 1996 Russian election, picked Putin, a former KGB intelligence officer and security bureaucrat, to be his prime minister in August 1999.

To Stone, Putin explains his hesitancy to accept the promotion: "When Yeltsin offered me the job for the first time, I refused. ... He invited me into his office and told me he wanted to appoint me Prime Minister, and that he wanted me to run for President. I told him that was a great responsibility, and that meant I would have to change my life, and I wasn't sure I wanted to do that. ...

"It's one thing when you are a bureaucrat, even a high-level one, you can almost live an ordinary life. You can see your friends, go to the cinema and the theater, and not assume personal responsibility for the fate of millions of people and for everything that is going on in the country. And to assume responsibility for Russia back then was a very difficult thing to do."

### **Family Fears**

Putin continues: "Frankly speaking, I didn't know what President Yeltsin's final plans were with regard to me. And I didn't know how long I would be there. Because at any moment the President could tell me, 'You are fired.' And there was only one thing I was thinking about, 'Where to hide my children?' ...

"Just imagine, if I were dismissed, I didn't have any bodyguards. Nothing. And what would I do? How would I live? How would I secure my family? And back then I decided if that was my fate, then I had to go to the end. And I didn't know beforehand that I would become President. There were no guarantees of that."

However, at the dawn of the new Millennium, Yeltsin surprisingly announced his resignation, making Putin his heir apparent. It was a time of extraordinary crisis for Russia and Russians.

When Stone compares the challenges that President Ronald Reagan faced in the 1980s to those that Putin confronted when he took power in 2000, Putin replied, with classic Russia whimsy, "Almost being broke and actually being broke are two entirely different things."

Once assuming office, however, Putin set about reining in many of the oligarchs

and rebuilding the Russian economy and social safety net. His success in achieving an economic turnaround and a marked improvement in the social metrics explain much of his enduring popularity with the Russian people.

But Putin does not come off as a natural politician. When you see Putin up close for the several hours of these interviews, you can't miss his unease in the spotlight, a tight control, even a shyness. Yet, there is a winning quality from that vulnerability which seems to have further endeared him to the Russian people.

Compared to many Western politicians, Putin also has retained a common touch. One scene shows Stone interviewing Putin as the Russian president drives his own car, something you would never see an American president doing.

Putin also takes Stone along for a hockey match in which the now 64-year-old Putin dons a uniform and laces up skates for a wobbly performance on the ice. By his own admission, he just began skating a few years earlier and he takes a couple of falls or stumbles. Putin doesn't come across as the all-powerful autocrat of U.S. propaganda.

At the end of part two of "The Putin Interviews," Stone even gets Putin to watch Stanley Kubrick's 1964 Cold War classic "Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb," a very dark comedy about the U.S. and the Soviet Union bumbling into a nuclear conflagration, a film that Putin hadn't seen before.

After watching the movie with Stone, Putin reflects on its enduring message. "The thing is that since that time little has changed," Putin says. "The only difference is that the modern weapon systems have become more sophisticated, more complex. But this idea of retaliatory weapons, and the inability to control such weapon systems still hold true to this day. It has become even more difficult, more dangerous."

Stone then gives Putin the movie's DVD case, which Putin carries into an adjoining office before realizing that it is empty. He reemerges, holding the empty case with the quip, "Typical American gift." An aide then rushes up to hand him the DVD.

**[More about the substance of "The Putin Interviews" to come.]**

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

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# Trump Isolates America from the World

In 2016, American voters faced a painful dilemma, electing a proven war hawk or a climate-change denier – and somehow the climate denier won – as Donald Trump just reminded the world, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump's inexcusable withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement was widely expected and amply telegraphed by Trump himself, of course. And yet, there were reasonable grounds for hope that this might have been one place where Trump would move from being a demagogic campaigner to being a real president, one who deals not just with applause lines but with real U.S. interests and with America's place in the world.

The substantive importance of the issue is unsurpassed, involving the fate of the planet. The main reasons to stay with the agreement are compelling, involving not only the habitability of Earth but also economic dynamism, U.S. leadership, and U.S. credibility. The non-binding nature of the agreement meant that there was not some unbearable onus that could be removed only through withdrawal.

And even though Trump has made much of fulfilling campaign promises, he already has allowed himself to be deflected from some such promises when they have collided with reality. He has not torn up the nuclear agreement with Iran, in the face of Iran's compliance with that accord. And on the very day Trump announced the pull-out from the Paris agreement, he signed a paper that keeps the U.S. embassy to Israel in Tel Aviv, in the face of what would be certain uproar, deleterious to any prospects for peace, if he had moved the embassy as promised to Jerusalem.

The withdrawal from the Paris agreement is indefensible, and thus Trump's statement announcing the move has much hot air, foreshadowing the increased hot air that everyone will be feeling without increased efforts to arrest global warming. There is, for example, the usual Trumpian assertion about being able to get a better deal, as if this were possible with an agreement that has 195 signatories and with respect to which, given Trump's withdrawal, the United States is now virtually alone.

He harangues about how the Green Climate Fund that the agreement established is "costing the United States a vast fortune." Barack Obama committed \$1 billion to the fund and promised a total of \$3 billion through 2020; for comparison, the

proposed increase in military spending in Trump's budget for fiscal 2018 is \$53 billion.

Trump repeatedly complains about what China will be allowed to do while ignoring completely the leadership role that China is assuming in moving to clean energy. He predicts economically crippling blackouts and brownouts under the agreement while ignoring completely the rapid progress in implementing generation of renewable energy. He avows that he "cares deeply about the environment," which is a laughable claim in light of what Trump has been doing not only to climate change but also to the Environmental Protection Agency and to stewardship of public lands.

### **Ideology Over Realism**

Opposition to the Paris agreement reflects, as Heather Hurlburt observes, some larger patterns within American political ideology that go beyond the President himself and that Trump has exploited. Those patterns, as Hurlburt notes, are related to the unusual American experience of being a superpower, an experience that also underlies several other unconstructive American habits of perceiving and dealing with the outside world.

But the President's withdrawal is also very much a statement about Trump himself. Given the reasons that one might have expected a better decision on this issue, the decision demonstrates that Trump's worst and most destructive qualities are deeply entrenched. It demonstrates that things are unlikely to get much better, with many other issues, under Trump.

The episode shows that Trump will continue to play to a narrow base that squeaked him through to victory last November rather than being president of all the people, let alone a leader of the free world. It shows that campaign themes and the urge not to do whatever Obama did will continue to be more important to him than will enlightened interest, even enlightened self-interest.

It shows that he will continue to shove aside even the most glaring and indisputable facts if they conflict with the themes. It shows that his capability to focus is very short in terms of both time and space. And it shows a deficient moral sense, including in the respects in which morality is involved in what a generation bequeaths to future generations.

As citizens brace and prepare for three years and seven plus months more of this, the problem of climate change itself should be at the top of issues that require not just bracing and preparation but also creative thinking about how to deal with the issue as long as this kind of destructive force is in control of the U.S. government. A reminder is in order that Americans are citizens not only

of the United States but also of states, localities, and civil society and also – uniquely important to this issue – citizens of the world, the same world that climate change endangers.

Regarding the smaller units, what states, cities and the private sector are doing to transition to clean energy deserves all the support it can get. Regarding citizenship of the world, Americans will have to consider carefully how to respond to the rest of the world's response to the irresponsibility on this issue in Washington.

The responsible posture may entail not just respect and understanding but also support for some of those responses. Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* has even written about sanctions as a response to U.S. withdrawal from the Paris agreement. More plausible, more worthy of support from individual Americans, defensible under the rules of the World Trade Organization, and already talked about among foreign government officials, would be a carbon tariff applied to U.S. exports.

Our children and grandchildren, feeling increasingly the effects of climate change, will read about what Trump did and wonder how our generation could have placed such a small-minded man in such a position of power with such lasting and damaging consequences.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## Trump Tosses Red Meat to Red States

Cornered by the expanding Russia-gate investigation, President Trump reached back to his hardcore "base" by tossing out the Paris climate accord, but the move may hurt U.S. interests, says JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

President Trump just yanked the Yanks from a treaty that was intentionally designed to be mostly non-binding because the Senate would never pass a binding treaty on climate. It was, however, a significant global political agreement to move toward goals that would create a working framework built on an unprecedented consensus. Mostly, Paris was an important admission that there is

a problem ... like an environmental AA meeting.

So, what just happened?

Trump used the Paris Climate Agreement as a buttress. This was a political ploy to shore up support among his loyalists out in the vast swath of Red on that electoral map he recently hung in the White House. This was a move meant to give the President a chance to say he's fulfilling promises. This was about serving red meat to demoralized Trumpist media outlets. This is about generating a much-needed point of agreement with increasingly uncomfortable conservatives in Congress. This is about selling a new catchphrase: "Pittsburgh before Paris." And this speech signaled the return of Steve Bannon.

Trump rehashed the grievances of his campaign with all its incessant whining about the ways the world is taking advantage of America. It doesn't matter that the global system was constructed by the U.S. ... in the interest of the U.S. ... and with American corporations and financial "leaders" always benefiting from this system.

It doesn't matter that the American people have benefited mightily from this system, too. America is less than 5 percent of the global population, but it consumes over 26 percent of the world's resources. America's middle class was enriched by America's domination of the global system it created. But now the world is leveling out a bit and Trump is telling the people they should moan and groan because the benefits of the post-World War II system are waning ... because America isn't getting everything.

Yet the truth is that America's wealth isn't being stolen by wily Chinese or shady Indians or conniving Europeans. The people who've hoarded the wealth are not only a lot like the people in Trump's cabinet ... some of them are in Trump's cabinet. Ivanka and Jared are hoarders, too. And so, too, have the oil industry and the defense industry held a death-lock grip on this system. In fact, the intersection of weapons and crude is the nexus of the system Trump slugs-off as some global conspiracy to deny Americans their birthright. And it is a big reason why the Paris Agreement was needed in the first place.

But that's okay. Why? Because Trump is unintentionally creating space for the rest of the world to finally have a real say in the way the global system works. He's catalyzing even more leveling-off of an imbalanced system long tilted by America in America's favor.

Trump has been totally played by President Xi of China. Outmaneuvered by Vladimir Putin of Russia. Dismissed by Chancellor Merkel of Germany. And now he's shown the world that America is more fallible than ever. It is moving

backwards. It is retreating. And that's more room for China and Europe and Russia.

Maybe that's not so bad. Maybe it is a good thing that America is the laughingstock that Trump, in a perfect moment of solipsistic irony, said he wanted to forestall. One thing is for sure, the rest of the world shouldn't wait around for America to clean up its own mess ... because that's something it was loath to do well before Trump body-slammed the body politic and put the future in a headlock. Alas, that's a wrestling match America is now having with itself ... and the rest of the world should just head for the exits.

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