

# Italy's Choice: Shock or Stagnation

Exclusive: Italy's elections this weekend represent a choice between the status quo, with risks of further austerity and structural reforms, or a wild card of populists who may lack competence and hold anti-democratic views, explains Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Italy will hold elections on March 4, in which the essential choice for voters is to stay the course with the policies of the European Union, or to give populism a chance. The vote is the last in a year-long series of elections in major European countries, and the one where an anti-system party has the highest likelihood of breaking through.

In 2017, populist sentiment helped outsiders increase their support in Holland, France, Germany and Austria, although none of them won any elections outright. This led European elites to breath a major sigh of relief, in the hope that the nationalist and populist broadsides against neoliberal E.U. economic policies and tensions around undocumented immigration, would not force an actual change in the institutions.



Geert Wilder's Freedom Party in Holland came in a distant second, and Marine Le Pen of the National Front in France was soundly defeated in a run-off election with Emmanuel Macron. Yet the effects of the voters' revolt that emerged forcefully in the 2016 Brexit vote and the U.S. Presidential elections were subsequently felt in two more unexpected locations: Germany and Austria.

In Germany the largest two parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats both lost a considerable number of votes. This drop, coupled with the rise of the anti-E.U. Alternative for Deutschland (Afd), had major repercussions, forcing Chancellor Angela Merkel to engage in months of talks for a new Grand Coalition with the Social Democrats. Before the election, almost all commentators had predicted an easy win for Merkel.

In Austria, the Christian Democrats People's party came in first due in part to the tough-on-immigration stance of its young leader Sebastian Kurz. Along with the rise of the hardline Freedom Party, a new coalition government was formed

that moved the country's institutions significantly to the right.

Now it's Italy's turn. The populist revolt actually emerged here first, five years ago with the success of the Five Star Movement (M5S) founded by comedian Beppe Grillo. Based on the success of public rallies with the slogan "F.. you" to the "caste" that dominates the country's political institutions, Grillo decided to take aim at the political institutions. In 2013, while refusing to go on television or radio to campaign, the M5S got about 25% of the national vote, leading to a large presence in the Parliament.

The movement's members are generally young, "regular people" who just decided to fight against the corruption of the establishment, rather than candidates groomed to step into the country's ruling class.

Today, the M5S is positioned to be the top vote-getter in this weekend's elections, with recent polls showing its support at just under 30%. This is despite a concerted attempt to dampen its impact so as to ensure that it could never make it into the government. There are in fact many worries about the Movement, starting with a lack of experience and at times naive or contradictory policy positions. The biggest threat, however, has been seen as the call for a referendum on the European single currency, the Euro.

If there's one thing the Eurocracy fears, it's that voters will be given a chance to actually express their opinion on European economic policy, which has been dominated by the pro-finance and harsh austerity measures that Western populations have become disgusted with in recent years. The "responsible" politicians assure everyone that stopping or even slowing European integration would be a disaster, leading to depression and possibly even war. Yet they know well that when faced with the weakening of the middle class, stagnant growth and increasing social tensions due to immigration, a large percentage of voters blame the E.U. itself, which over the past two decades has gradually become the major legislative force in Europe, supplanting individual national governments.

The anti-populist imperative among Italian institutions has led establishment politicians to explicitly embrace the notion of staying the course.

Representatives of the Democratic Party (PD) of former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi argue that things are finally getting better now, with economic growth slowly ticking up, and the country beginning to make up the ground lost in recent years.

Renzi has worn out his welcome with many Italians, though. He came to power in 2014 without being elected, through a shake-up within his own party. He subsequently spent almost three years as the head of the government, but ended up betting everything on a referendum to reform the Constitution in December

2016, which he lost badly.

Voters got tired of his personalization of politics, a mix of big talk and modest results, and naturally began to blame him for the country's problems.

The result was a sort of Grand Coalition in which the PD and the center-right parties, led by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, have together supported the government of current Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni. Gentiloni is seen as competent and unassuming, and many would prefer him to stay on after the next elections.

Once again, though, there's the problem of the voters. The elites hope to stay the course and work gradually to improve the country's financial position and influence in Europe, but without challenging the neoliberal framework of the E.U. At this point the only way to obtain that result would be for nobody to win the election, thus allowing the centrist parties to again work together, while keeping out the supposed extremists on both the left and the right.

There are other parties, in addition to the M5S, that present themselves as anti-system. One is the Northern League, which has become more moderate since its pro-secession days, but still takes a hard line on immigration. Although the League is once again allied with Berlusconi's Forza Italia, it is also heavily critical of the E.U.

A number of smaller parties also support anti-establishment positions, yet many won't reach the minimum threshold for entering parliament.

The key factor in these elections is the electoral system itself. The fear of the M5S led the traditional parties to re-write the country's election laws. The goal was to favor coalitions, rather than parties, avoiding the fragmentation of the vote and weakening the outsiders.

This goal may well be reached. Despite leading the polls, M5S has always gone it alone, rather than teaming up with others. Thus the center-right coalition is likely to have more overall votes, allowing the President of the Republic to task them with forming a government. This could once again result in collaboration with the Democrats, although probably with a different Prime Minister.

The result would be little change in the direction of the country. Some see this as positive, to avoid upsetting the system with radical proposals. Yet the risk here is that there will be little progress on issues such as inequality, unstable working conditions, and the perception of an out-of-touch, self-serving political class; all factors that could drive more social and political unrest in the future.

Another possibility would be a government anchored by the Five Star Movement and the League, an alliance many fear could emerge after the vote. This would be a true shock to the system, although probably less dramatic than many expect. The M5S candidate for Prime Minister, 31-year old Luigi Di Maio, has recently stepped up efforts to be considered credible, with meetings in the City of London and the announcement of unthreatening technocrats as potential government ministers. The move may calm fears in the institutions, but could cost him some support among the public.

The League is also taking pains to project a less threatening image. This includes distancing itself from extreme supporters on the right who have committed acts of violence towards immigrants, and engaged in physical clashes with anti-fascist protestors from the left.

Both parties have set out programmatic proposals that could force a reckoning with the march towards further European integration, such as separation between commercial banks and investment banks (inspired by the Glass-Steagall Act in the U.S.), along with calls for moving back towards national sovereignty. This forms a significant contrast with the centrist parties, that especially on the left, have adopted the line of “more Europe,” counting on voters to shy away from endorsing the path of open conflict with E.U. institutions.

Thus Italy’s elections reflect a significant, but complicated choice. On the one hand voters can seek not to rock the boat, but risk further austerity and structural reforms, while hoping for gradual progress. The other possibility is the unknown of populists who on the one hand promise a serious challenge to the failed policies of recent years, but on the other raise fears of incompetence, and also undemocratic attitudes from Europe’s past.

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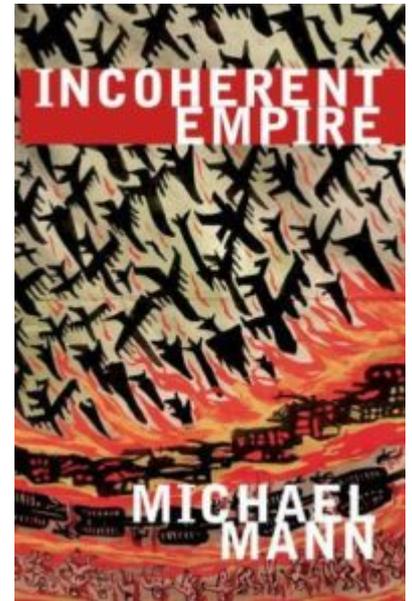
## U.S. Empire Still Incoherent After All These Years

Exclusive: Without solid economic, political and ideological bases, the U.S. lacks the legitimacy and authority it needs to operate beyond its borders, argues Nicolas J.S. Davies in this essay.

By Nicolas J.S. Davies

I recently reread Michael Mann’s book, [Incoherent Empire](#), which he wrote in 2003, soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Mann is a sociology professor at UCLA and the author of a four-volume series called [The Sources of Social Power](#), in which he explained the major developments of world history as the interplay between four types of power: military, economic, political, and ideological.

In *Incoherent Empire*, Mann used the same framework to examine what he called the U.S.'s "new imperialism" after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. He predicted that, "The American Empire will turn out to be a military giant; a back-seat economic driver; a political schizophrenic; and an ideological phantom."



What struck me most forcefully as I reread *Incoherent Empire* was that absolutely nothing has changed in the "incoherence" of U.S. imperialism. If I picked up the book for the first time today and didn't know it was written 15 years ago, I could read nearly all of it as a perceptive critique of American imperialism exactly as it exists today.

In the intervening 15 years, U.S. policy failures have resulted in ever-spreading violence and chaos that affect hundreds of millions of people in at least a dozen countries. The U.S. has utterly failed to bring any of its neo-imperial wars to a stable or peaceful end. And yet the U.S. imperial project sails on, seemingly blind to its consistently catastrophic results.

Instead, U.S. civilian and military leaders shamelessly blame their victims for the violence and chaos they have unleashed on them, and endlessly repackage the same old war propaganda to justify record military budgets and threaten new wars.

But they never hold themselves or each other accountable for their catastrophic failures or the carnage and human misery they inflict. So they have made no genuine effort to remedy any of the systemic problems, weaknesses and contradictions of U.S. imperialism that Michael Mann identified in 2003 or that other critical analysts like Noam Chomsky, Gabriel Kolko, William Blum and Richard Barnett have described for decades.

Let's examine each of Mann's four images of the foundations of the U.S.'s Incoherent Empire, and see how they relate to the continuing crisis of U.S. imperialism that he presciently foretold:

### **Military Giant**

As Mann noted in 2003, imperial armed forces have to do four things: defend their own territory; strike offensively; conquer territories and people; then pacify and rule them.

Today's U.S. military dwarfs any other country's military forces. It has unprecedented firepower, which it can use from unprecedented distances to kill more people and wreak more destruction than any previous war machine in history, while minimizing U.S. casualties and thus the domestic political blowback for its violence.

But that's where its power ends. When it comes to actually conquering and pacifying a foreign country, America's technological way of war is worse than useless. The very power of U.S. weapons, the "Robocop" appearance of American troops, their lack of language skills and their isolation from other cultures make U.S. forces a grave danger to the populations they are charged with controlling and pacifying, never a force for law and order, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or North Korea.

John Pace, who headed the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq during the U.S. occupation compared U.S. efforts to pacify the country to "trying to swat a fly with a bomb."

Burhan Fasa'a, an Iraqi reporter for Lebanon's LBC TV network, survived the second U.S. assault on Fallujah in November 2004. He spent nine days in a house with a population that grew to 26 people as neighboring homes were damaged or destroyed and more and more people sought shelter with Fasa'a and his hosts.

Finally a squad of U.S. Marines burst in, yelling orders in English that most of the residents didn't understand and shooting them if they didn't respond. "Americans did not have interpreters with them, " Fasa'a explained, "so they entered houses and killed people because they didn't speak English... Soldiers thought the people were rejecting their orders, so they shot them. But the people just couldn't understand them."

This is one personal account of one episode in a pattern of atrocities that grinds on, day in day out, in country after country, as it has done for the last 16 years. To the extent that the Western media cover these atrocities at all, the mainstream narrative is that they are a combination of unfortunate but isolated incidents and the "normal" horrors of war.

But that is not true. They are the direct result of the American way of war, which prioritizes "force protection" over the lives of human beings in other countries to minimize U.S. casualties and thus domestic political opposition to war. In practice, this means using overwhelming and indiscriminate firepower in

ways that make it impossible to distinguish combatants from non-combatants or protect civilians from the horrors of war as the Geneva Conventions require.

U.S. rules of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan have included: systematic, theater-wide use of torture; orders to “dead-check” or kill wounded enemy combatants; orders to “kill all military-age males” during certain operations; and “weapons-free” zones that mirror Vietnam-era “free-fire” zones.

When lower ranks have been prosecuted for war crimes against civilians, they have been acquitted or given light sentences because they were acting on orders from senior officers. But courts martial have allowed the senior officers implicated in these cases to testify in secret or have not called them to testify at all, and none have been prosecuted.

After nearly a hundred deaths in U.S. custody in Iraq and Afghanistan, including torture deaths that are capital crimes under U.S. federal law, the harshest sentence handed down was a 5 month prison sentence, and the most senior officer prosecuted was a major, although the orders to torture prisoners came from the very top of the chain of command. As Rear Admiral John Hutson, the retired Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Navy, wrote in Human Rights First’s Command’s Responsibility report after investigating just 12 of these deaths, “One such incident would be an isolated transgression; two would be a serious problem; a dozen of them is policy.”

So the Military Giant is not just a war machine. It is also a war crimes machine.

The logic of force protection and technological warfare also means that the roughly 800 U.S. military bases in other countries are surrounded by barbed wire and concrete blast-walls and staffed mainly by Americans, so that the 290,000 U.S. troops occupying 183 foreign countries have little contact with the local people their empire aspires to rule.

Donald Rumsfeld described this empire of self-contained bases as “lily pads,” from which his forces could hop like frogs from one base to another by plane, helicopter or armored vehicle, or launch strikes on the surrounding territory, without exposing themselves to the dangers of meeting the locals.

Robert Fisk, the veteran Middle East reporter for the U.K.’s Independent newspaper, had another name for these bases: “crusader castles” – after the medieval fortresses built by equally isolated foreign invaders a thousand years ago that still dot the landscape of the Middle East.

Michael Mann contrasted the isolation of U.S. troops in their empire of bases to the lives of British officers in India, “where officers’ clubs were typically on

the edge of the encampment, commanding the nicest location and view. The officers were relaxed about their personal safety, sipping their whisky and soda and gin and tonic in full view of the natives, (who) comprised most of the inhabitants – NCOs and soldiers, servants, stable-hands, drivers and sometimes their families.”

In 1945, a wiser generation of American leaders brought to their senses by the mass destruction of two world wars realized the imperial game was up. They worked hard to frame their new-found power and economic dominance within an international system that the rest of the world would accept as legitimate, with a central role for President Roosevelt’s vision of the United Nations.

Roosevelt promised that his “permanent structure of peace,” would, “spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the expedients that have been tried for centuries – and have always failed,” and that “the forces of aggression (would be) permanently outlawed.”

America’s World War II leaders were wisely on guard against the kind of militarism they had confronted and defeated in Germany and Japan. When an ugly militarism reared its head in the U.S. in the late 1940s, threatening a “preemptive” nuclear war to destroy the USSR before it could develop its own nuclear deterrent, General Eisenhower responded forcefully in a speech to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in St. Louis,

“I decry loose and sometimes gloating talk about the high degree of security implicit in a weapon that might destroy millions overnight,” Eisenhower declared. “Those who measure security solely in terms of offensive capacity distort its meaning and mislead those who pay them heed. No modern nation has ever equaled the crushing offensive power attained by the German war machine in 1939. No modern country was broken and smashed as was Germany six years later.”

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, the chief US representative at the London Conference that drew up the Nuremberg Principles in 1945, stated as the official U.S. position, “If certain acts in violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us.”

That was the U.S. government of 1945 explicitly agreeing to the prosecution of Americans who commit aggression, which Jackson and the judges at Nuremberg defined as “the supreme international crime.” That would now include the last six U.S. presidents: Reagan (Grenada and Nicaragua), Bush I (Panama), Clinton

(Yugoslavia), Bush II (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia), Obama (Pakistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen) and Trump (Syria and Yemen).

Since Mann wrote *Incoherent Empire* in 2003, the Military Giant has rampaged around the world waging wars that have killed millions of people and wrecked country after country. But its unaccountable campaign of serial aggression has failed to bring peace or security to any of the countries it has attacked or invaded. As even some members of the U.S. military now recognize, the mindless violence of the Military Giant serves no rational or constructive purpose, imperialist or otherwise.

### **Economic Back Seat Driver**

In 2003, Michael Mann wrote that, "The U.S. productive engine remains formidable, the global financial system providing its fuel. But the U.S. is only a back-seat driver since it cannot directly control either foreign investors or foreign economies."

Since 2003, the U.S. role in the global economy has declined further, now comprising only 22% of global economic activity, compared with 40% at the height of its economic dominance in the 1950s and 60s. China is displacing the U.S. as the largest trading partner of countries around the world, and its "new silk road" initiatives are building the infrastructure to cement and further expand its role as the global hub of manufacturing and commerce.

The U.S. can still wield its financial clout as an arsenal of carrots and sticks to pressure poorer, weaker countries do what it wants. But this is a far cry from the actions of an imperial power that actually rules far-flung territories and subjects on other continents. As Mann put it, "Even if they are in debt, the U.S. cannot force reform on them. In the global economy, it is only a back-seat driver, nagging the real driver, the sovereign state, sometimes administering sharp blows to his head."

At the extreme, the U.S. uses economic sanctions as a brutal form of economic warfare that hurts and kills ordinary people, while generally inflicting less pain on the leaders who are their nominal target. U.S. leaders claim that the pain of economic sanctions is intended to force people to abandon and overthrow their leaders, a way to achieve regime change without the violence and horror of war. But Robert Pape of the University of Chicago conducted an extensive study of the effects of sanctions and concluded that only 5 out of 115 sanctions regimes have ever achieved that goal.

When sanctions inevitably fail, they can still be useful to U.S. officials as part of a political narrative to blame the victims and frame war as a last

resort. But this is only a political ploy, not a legal pretext for war.

A secondary goal of all such imperial bullying is to make an example of the victims to put other weak countries on notice that resisting imperial demands can be dangerous. The obvious counter to such strategies is for poorer, weaker countries to band together to resist imperial bullying, as in collective groupings like CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and also in the UN General Assembly, where the U.S. often finds itself outvoted.

The dominant position of the U.S. and the dollar in the international financial system have given the U.S. a unique ability to finance its imperial wars and global military expansion without bankrupting itself in the process. As Mann described in *Incoherent Empire*,

“In principle, the world is free to withdraw its subsidies to the U.S., but unless the U.S. really alienates the world and over-stretches its economy, this is unlikely. For the moment, the U.S. can finance substantial imperial activity. It does so carefully, spending billions on its strategic allies, however unworthy and oppressive they may be.”

The economic clout of the U.S. back-seat driver was tested in 2003 when it deployed maximum pressure on other countries to support its invasion of Iraq. Chile, Mexico, Pakistan, Guinea, Angola and Cameroon were on the Security Council at the time but were all ready to vote against the use of force. It didn't help the U.S. case that it had failed to deliver the “carrots” it promised to the countries who voted for war on Iraq in 1991, nor that the money it promised Pakistan for supporting its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was not paid until the U.S. wanted its support again in 2003 over Iraq.

Mann concluded, “An administration which is trying to cut taxes while waging war will not be able to hand out much cash around the world. This back-seat driver will not pay for the gas. It is difficult to build an Empire without spending money.”

Fifteen years later, remarkably, the wealthy investors of the world have continued to subsidize U.S. war-making by investing in record U.S. debt, and a deceptive global charm offensive by President Obama partially rebuilt U.S. alliances. But the U.S. failure to abandon its illegal policies of aggression and war crimes have only increased its isolation since 2003, especially from countries in the Global South. People all over the world now tell pollsters they view the U.S. as the greatest threat to peace in the world.

It is also possible that their U.S. debt holdings give China and other creditors

(Germany?) some leverage by which they can ultimately discipline U.S. imperialism. In 1956, President Eisenhower reportedly threatened to call in the U.K.'s debts if it did not withdraw its forces from Egypt during the Suez crisis, and there has long been speculation that China could exercise similar economic leverage to stop U.S. aggression at some strategic moment.

It seems more likely that boom and bust financial bubbles, shifts in global trade and investment and international opposition to U.S. wars will more gradually erode U.S. financial hegemony along with other forms of power.

Michael Mann wrote in 2003 that the world was unlikely to "withdraw its subsidies" for U.S. imperialism "unless the U.S. really alienates the world and over-stretches its economy." But that prospect seems more likely than ever in 2018 as President Trump seems doggedly determined to do both.

### **Political Schizophrenic**

In its isolated fantasy world, the Political Schizophrenic is the greatest country in the world, the "shining city on a hill," the land of opportunity where anyone can find their American dream. The rest of the world so desperately wants what we have that we have to build a wall to keep them out. Our armed forces are the greatest force for good that the world has ever known, valiantly fighting to give other people the chance to experience the democracy and freedom that we enjoy.

But if we seriously compare the U.S. to other wealthy countries, we find a completely different picture. The United States has the most extreme inequality, the most widespread poverty, the least social and economic mobility and the least effective social safety net of any technologically advanced country.

America is exceptional, not in the imaginary blessings our Political Schizophrenic politicians take credit for, but in its unique failure to provide healthcare, education and other necessities of life to large parts of its population, and in its systematic violations of the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions and other binding international treaties.

If the U.S. was really the democracy it claims to be, the American public could elect leaders who would fix all these problems. But the U.S. political system is so endemically corrupt that only a Political Schizophrenic could call it a democracy. Former President Jimmy Carter believes that the U.S. is now "just an oligarchy, with unlimited political bribery." U.S. voter turnout is understandably among the lowest in the developed world.

Sheldon Wolin, who taught political science at Berkeley and Princeton for 40

years, described the actually existing U.S. political system as “inverted totalitarianism.” Instead of abolishing democratic institutions on the “classical totalitarian” model, the U.S.’s inverted totalitarian system preserves the hollowed-out trappings of democracy to falsely legitimize the oligarchy and political bribery described by President Carter.

As Wolin explained, this has been more palatable and sustainable, and therefore more effective, than the classical form of totalitarianism as a means of concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a corrupt ruling class.

The corruption of the U.S. political system is increasingly obvious to Americans, but also to people in other countries. Billion-dollar U.S.-style “elections” would be illegal in most developed countries, because they inevitably throw up corrupt leaders who offer the public no more than empty slogans and vague promises to disguise their plutocratic loyalties.

In 2018, U.S. party bosses are still determined to divide us along the artificial fault-lines of the 2016 election between two of the most unpopular candidates in history, as if their vacuous slogans, mutual accusations and plutocratic policies define the fixed poles of American politics and our country’s future.

The Political Schizophrenic’s noise machine is working overtime to stuff the alternate visions of Bernie Sanders, Jill Stein and other candidates who challenge the corrupt status quo down the “memory hole,” by closing ranks, purging progressives from DNC committees and swamping the airwaves with Trump tweets and Russiagate updates.

Ordinary Americans who try to engage with or confront members of the corrupt political, business and media class find it almost impossible. The Political Schizophrenic moves in a closed and isolated social circle, where the delusions of his fantasy world or “political reality” are accepted as incontrovertible truths. When real people talk about real problems and suggest real solutions to them, he dismisses us as naive idealists. When we question the dogma of his fantasy world, he thinks we are the ones who are out of touch with reality. We cannot communicate with him, because he lives in a different world and speaks a different language.

It is difficult for the winners in any society to recognize that their privileges are the product of a corrupt and unfair system, not of their own superior worth or ability. But the inherent weakness of “inverted totalitarianism” is that the institutions of American politics still exist and can still be made to serve democracy, if and when enough Americans wake up from this Political Schizophrenia, organize around real solutions to real

problems, and elect people who are genuinely committed to turning those solutions into public policy.

As I was taught when I worked with schizophrenics as a social worker, they tend to become agitated and angry if you question the reality of their fantasy world. If the patient in question is also armed to the teeth, it is a matter of life and death to handle them with kid gloves.

The danger of a Political Schizophrenic armed with a trillion dollar a year war machine and nuclear weapons is becoming more obvious to more of our neighbors around the world as each year goes by. In 2017, 122 of them voted to approve the new UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

U.S. allies have pursued an opportunistic policy of appeasement, as many of the same countries did with Germany in the 1930s. But Russia, China and countries in the Global South have gradually begun to take a firmer line, to try to respond to U.S. aggression and to shepherd the world through this incredibly dangerous transitional period to a multipolar, peaceful and sustainable world. The Political Schizophrenic has, predictably, responded with propaganda, demonization, threats and sanctions, now amounting to a Second Cold War.

### **Ideological Phantom**

During the First Cold War, each side presented its own society in an idealized way, but was more honest about the flaws and problems of its opposite number. As a former East German now living in the U.S. explained to me, "When our government and state media told us our society was perfect and wonderful, we knew they were lying to us. So when they told us about all the social problems in America, we assumed they were lying about them too."

Now living in the U.S., he realized that the picture of life in the U.S. painted by the East German media was quite accurate, and that there really are people sleeping in the street, people with no access to healthcare and widespread poverty.

My East German acquaintance came to regret that Eastern Europe had traded the ills of the Soviet Empire for the ills of the U.S. Empire. Nobody ever explained to him and his friends why this had to be a "take it or leave it" neoliberal package deal, with "shock therapy" and large declines in living standards for most Eastern Europeans. Why could they not have Western-style political freedom without giving up the social protections and standard of living they enjoyed before?

American leaders at the end of the Cold War lacked the wisdom and caution of their predecessors in 1945, and quickly succumbed to what Mikhail Gorbachev now

calls "triumphalism." The version of capitalism and "managed democracy" they expanded into Eastern Europe was the radical neoliberal ideology introduced by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and consolidated by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. The people of Eastern Europe were no more or less vulnerable to neoliberalism's siren song than Americans and Western Europeans.

The unconstrained freedom of ruling classes to exploit working people that is the foundation of neoliberalism has always been an Ideological Phantom, as Michael Mann called it, with a hard core of greed and militarism and an outer wrapping of deceptive propaganda.

So the "peace dividend" most people longed for at the end of the Cold War was quickly trumped by the "power dividend." Now that the U.S. was no longer constrained by the fear of war with the U.S.S.R., it was free to expand its own global military presence and use military force more aggressively. As Michael Mandelbaum of the Council on Foreign Relations crowded to the New York Times as the U.S. prepared to attack Iraq in 1990, "For the first time in 40 years we can conduct military operations in the Middle East without worrying about triggering World War III."

Without the Cold War to justify U.S. militarism, the prohibition against the threat or use of military force in the UN Charter took on new meaning, and the Ideological Phantom embarked on an urgent quest for political rationales and propaganda narratives to justify what international law clearly defines as the crime of aggression.

During the transition to the incoming Clinton administration after the 1992 election, Madeleine Albright confronted General Colin Powell at a meeting and asked him, "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

The correct answer would have been that, after the end of the Cold War, the legitimate defense needs of the U.S. required much smaller, strictly defensive military forces and a greatly reduced military presence around the world. Former Cold Warriors, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Assistant Secretary Lawrence Korb, told the Senate Budget Committee in 1989 that the U.S. military budget could safely be cut in half over 10 years. Instead, it is now even higher than when they said that (after adjusting for inflation).

The U.S.'s Cold War Military Industrial Complex was still dominant in Washington. All it lacked was a new ideology to justify its existence. But that was just an interesting intellectual challenge, almost a game, for the Ideological Phantom.

The ideology that emerged to justify the U.S.'s new imperialism is a narrative of a world threatened by "dictators" and "terrorists," with only the power of the U.S. military standing between the "free" people of the American Empire and the loss of all we hold dear. Like the fantasy world of the Political Schizophrenic, this is a counter-factual picture of the world that only becomes more ludicrous with each year that passes and each new phase of the ever-expanding humanitarian and military catastrophe it has unleashed.

The Ideological Phantom defends the world against terrorists on a consistently selective and self-serving basis. It is always ready to recruit, arm and support terrorists to fight its enemies, as in Afghanistan and Central America in the 1980s or more recently in Libya and Syria. U.S. support for jihadis in Afghanistan led to the worst act of terrorism on U.S. soil on September 11th 2001.

But that didn't prevent the U.S. and its allies from supporting the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and other jihadis in Libya less than ten years later, leading to the Manchester Arena bombing by the son of an LIFG member in 2017. And it hasn't prevented the CIA from pouring thousands of tons of weapons into Syria, from sniper rifles to howitzers, to arm Al Qaeda-led fighters from 2011 to the present.

When it comes to opposing dictators, the Ideological Phantom's closest allies always include the most oppressive dictators in the world, from Pinochet, Somoza, Suharto, Mbutu and the Shah of Iran to its newest super-client, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia. In the name of freedom and democracy, the U.S. keeps overthrowing democratically elected leaders and replacing them with coup-leaders and dictators, from Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954 to Haiti in 2004, Honduras in 2009 and Ukraine in 2014.

Nowhere is the Ideological Phantom more ideologically bankrupt than in the countries the U.S. has dispatched its armed forces and foreign proxy forces to "liberate" since 2001: Afghanistan; Iraq; Libya; Syria; Somalia and Yemen. In every case, ordinary people have been slaughtered, devastated and utterly disillusioned by the ugly reality behind the Phantom's mask.

In Afghanistan, after 16 years of U.S. occupation, a recent BBC survey found that people feel safer in areas governed by the Taliban. In Iraq, people say their lives were better under Saddam Hussein. Libya has been reduced from one of the most stable and prosperous countries in Africa to a failed state ruled by competing militias, while Somalia, Syria and Yemen have met similar fates.

Incredibly, American ideologists in the 1990s saw the Ideological Phantom's ability to project counter-factual, glamorized images of itself as a source of

irresistible ideological power. In 1997, Major Ralph Peters, who is better known as a best-selling novelist, turned his vivid imagination and skills as a fiction writer to the bright future of the Ideological Phantom in a military journal article titled "Constant Conflict."

Peters imagined an endless campaign of "information warfare" in which U.S. propagandists, aided by Hollywood and Silicon Valley, would overwhelm other cultures with powerful images of American greatness that their own cultures could not resist.

"One of the defining bifurcations of the future will be the conflict between information masters and information victims," Peters wrote. "We are already masters of information warfare... (we) will be writing the scripts, producing (the videos) and collecting the royalties."

But while Peters' view of U.S. imperialism was based on media, technology and cultural chauvinism, he was not suggesting that the Ideological Phantom would conquer the world without a fight – quite the opposite. Peters' vision was a war plan, not a futuristic fantasy.

"There will be no peace," he wrote. "At any given moment for the rest of our lives, there will be multiple conflicts in mutating forms around the globe. Violent conflict will dominate the headlines, but cultural and economic struggles will be steadier and ultimately more decisive. The de facto role of the U.S. armed forces will be to keep the world safe for our economy and open to our cultural assault."

"To those ends," he added, "We will do a fair amount of killing."

## **Conclusion**

After reviewing the early results of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003, Michael Mann concluded, "We saw in action that the new imperialism turned into simple militarism."

Without solid economic, political and ideological bases, the Military Giant lacks the economic, political and ideological power and authority required to govern the world beyond its shores. The Military Giant can only destroy and bring chaos, never rebuild or bring order.

The sooner the people of the U.S. and the world wake up to this dangerous and destructive reality, the sooner we can begin to lay the new economic, political and ideological foundations of a peaceful, just and sustainable world.

Like past aggressors, the Military Giant is sowing the seeds of his own

destruction. But there is only one group of people in the world who can peacefully tame him and cut him down to size. That is us, the 323 million people who call ourselves Americans.

We have waited far too long to claim the peace dividend that our warmongering leaders stole from us after the end of the First Cold War. Millions of our fellow human beings have paid the ultimate price for our confusion, weakness and passivity.

Now we must be united, clear and strong as we begin the essential work of transforming our country from an Incoherent Empire into an Economic High-Speed Train to a Sustainable Future; a Real Political Democracy; an Ideological Humanitarian – and a Military Law-Abiding Citizen.

Nicolas J.S. Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

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## Honduras Nearing Ten Years of Stolen Elections, Neo-Colonial Rule

Despite an organized and active grassroots movement, Honduran politics have been repeatedly steamrolled by the self-interests of international ruling elites, as journalist and filmmaker Jesse Freeston explained to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

For weeks following its stolen election, the corrupt right-wing, neo-fascist government of Juan Orlando Hernández’s in Honduras has been terrorizing its people. Street protests and spontaneous blockades have been met by extreme violence. Dozens have already died on the frontlines and many more have been arrested and brutalized in detention, while often being held incommunicado.

I spoke to Jesse Freeston, who has been based in Honduras for the last eight years working as a video-journalist and documentary filmmaker, ever since the US supported/Hillary Clinton sustained 2009 coup d’état that purged the duly elected president, Manuel Zelaya. Freeston, who has reported for the Real News Network and Democracy Now en Español, is the producer of the feature documentary *“Resistencia: The Fight for the Aguan Valley.”*

Freeston reports that, among other crimes against the people, "this regime has: stolen an election; ignored calls from the Organization of American States to hold a new election; passed a law prohibiting the prosecution of all former and current members of Congress in the midst of a series of massive corruption scandals [and has] appointed a new national police chief who has clear evidence against him of drug trafficking..."

I spoke to Freeston on February 7.

**Dennis Bernstein:** We continue our drumbeat coverage of Honduras and the recent stolen election there, an attempt to suppress the will of the people who, by all accounts, want to have a more progressive government. It has been a very violent situation since the election. We are hearing that dozens of people have been killed and that the atrocities being perpetrated by the government have resulted in a nightmare. Could you put this in the context of the last two recent election cycles in Honduras?

**Jesse Freeston:** On June 28, 2009, there was a vote on a non-binding resolution put forward by President Manuel Zelaya, who had taken up the call of various indigenous groups in the country to rewrite the constitution. When people went out to vote on that day, the military staged a coup d'état and Zelaya wound up in Costa Rica.

This led to the most organized national resistance movement Honduras has ever seen. Assemblies were held, which brought together all these people who stood to gain from a new constitution. Just about every sector of the society were represented, except perhaps the oligarchy.

This led to the formation of the Libre Party, which participated in the 2013 elections [with Manuel Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, running as the party's presidential candidate]. The election was officially won by Juan Orlando Hernandez but there was massive fraud. The November, 2017 elections were even more of a farce.

Despite all that, when the electoral tribunal released its first results, the Oppositional Alliance were up by 5% with 60% of the votes counted. One of the magistrates on the tribunal described it at the time as an "irreversible trend." Then, counting stopped for over a day when the computer system supposedly crashed. When it was back up again, the tendency had completely flipped and Hernandez ended up winning by one percentage point.

This led to another massive uprising. On one day of action there were 48 blockades of highways and major boulevards in the country. During the last two months, this has been happening a couple times a week.

Even international observers such as the European Union Commission and the Organization of American States—who have been discredited here after turning their back many times in the last eight years to the crimes of this regime—even they have said that they have to redo the election or there has to be a recount.

Nevertheless, the members of those organizations, like Canada, like the United States and the countries of the European Union, went ahead and validated the election.

**DB:** We have heard that activists and members of the resistance have been arrested.

**JF:** Yes, there are dozens of political prisoners behind bars right now. One of the most worrying cases is that of Edwin Espinal. He is someone who has consistently paid a price for his resistance against the ongoing coup d'état.

In September of 2009, Edwin Espinal's wife died from tear gas inhalation after taking part in several protests. A week later, Edwin was at a small neighborhood protest after which he was arrested for kidnapping because he took a child with him on his motorcycle when he was fleeing the tear gas. The mother of the child went over and over to the police station to explain that she had pleaded with Edwin to take her kid with him. Another time he was jailed for car theft for driving a friend's car.

The first thing that the newly-formed military-trained urban police force did was raid Espinal's house, claiming they had proof that he was a drug trafficker. The police falsely accused him of being involved in the Marriot Hotel fire and right now he is in a maximum security prison on that charge. Journalists and human rights workers are not allowed in to talk to him, his family have not been allowed to see him. This is the first time since the 1980's that a civilian will be tried inside a military base.

**DB:** How would you describe the US role in this situation? We know that Hillary Clinton played a key role in sustaining the coup in 2009.

**JF:** I think that informed people in Honduras realize that changes in political leadership in the US don't make much difference in how Honduras is treated. Decisions are made here at the US Embassy and ambassadors act as de-facto rulers here, as shadow presidents.

The one constant here is the massive military funding from the US. Since the coup, the Honduran military has received more direct funding from the US than any other country in the Americas, despite the fact that they have not been involved in a single military conflict or been threatened with one.

The military is purely used against people inside the country. Although the United States is by far the largest funder of the Honduran military, other countries are also involved because humanitarian and other aid is typically diverted to the military.

**DB:** You said that there is a continuity between the last administration's policy toward Honduras and the Trump administration's policy. In terms of so-called US interests, the real problem is that we push a program of "free trade" and we insist on having our military bases there. So we have every reason to sustain the government as long as it provides us with an opportunity to police the region. Could you talk about the geopolitical part of this?

**JF:** I think the more a country depends on its natural resources, the more everything comes down to who controls the land. In 1961, [John F.] Kennedy launched a program called The Alliance for Progress, which was billed as a kind of Marshall Plan for Latin America. It was a response to the Cuban revolution and an attempt to ward off similar revolutions across Latin America.

We were going to give billions of dollars to countries in Latin America if they promised to undertake land reform, if the oligarchy agreed to give up a portion of their land. When Johnson replaced Kennedy there was much less priority assigned to this program. Nonetheless, the Honduran government had to pass a number of land reform laws to receive the money, but none of those laws were ever implemented.

If the US intends to keep its business interests here alive—the sweatshop sector as well as bananas and palm oil—and for Canada, gold mining primarily—they need to maintain their alliance with this land-holding oligarchy. It is this alliance that the resistance is asking the countries of the North and the West to break.

With eight and a half years of organizing experience, the people of Honduras could put together a government so fast it would make your head spin. This movement is very organized. They know who to trust, they know who can provide intellectual support, they know who can run the economy. They are just waiting for the international community to change its alliances.

**DB:** So will the resistance to the Hernandez regime go on?

**JF:** The Oppositional Alliance has decided to wage a "peaceful insurrection," something they are entitled to do under the Honduran constitution, which states that no one owes obedience to a government which takes power by force. The numbers now at the protests have been considerably less than in the past two months, particularly since the inauguration on January 27.

It is hard to predict what will happen but the vast majority of the population do not want this regime. There is a massive corruption scandal developing and we will see what happens with that. Students are planning a strike for next month. But we will have to wait to see what kinds of ideas are going to be put forward in Honduras.

People are looking at Honduras as a laboratory for the ultra-right of the world. Fortunately, there is a well-organized movement here that will be rising up again and again. It is up to those of us in the international community to put pressure on those who claim to represent us to change their allegiances.

**DB:** Would you say that this is a movement inspired by young people in the country?

**JF:** Yes, and that is the key to understanding this new law that the National Party is trying to pass which would regulate social media. It has to do with this young generation that has grown up in this period following the coup.

Someone like Zelaya doesn't necessarily reach them. This new law the government is trying to pass would give them the right to criminalize anyone posting anything they deem "hateful" on social media. And this is a government that labels "racist" people who are defending rivers from dams being built.

**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.**

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## A Treacherous Crossing

Paul Ryan's recent trip to the Gulf reiterated the U.S. government's support of the Saudi-led assault on Yemen and a bellicose stance towards Iran, which has created a watershed of human suffering, writes Kathy Kelly.

By Kathy Kelly

On January 23rd an overcrowded smuggling boat capsized off the coast of Aden in Southern Yemen. Smugglers packed 152 passengers from Somalia and Ethiopia in the boat and then, while at sea, reportedly pulled guns on the migrants to extort additional money from them. The boat capsized, according to *The Guardian*, after the shooting prompted panic. The death toll, currently 30, is expected to rise.

Dozens of children were on board.



The passengers had already risked the perilous journey from African shores to Yemen, a dangerous crossing that leaves people vulnerable to false promises, predatory captors, arbitrary detention and tortuous human rights violations. Sheer desperation for basic needs has driven hundreds of thousands of African migrants to Yemen. Many hope, upon arrival, they can eventually travel to prosperous Gulf countries further north where they might find work and some measure of security. But the desperation and fighting in southern Yemen were horrible enough to convince most migrants that boarded the smuggling boat on January 23rd to try and return to Africa.

Referring to those who drowned when the boat capsized, Amnesty International's Lynn Maalouf said: "This heart-breaking tragedy underscores, yet again, just how devastating Yemen's conflict continues to be for civilians. Amid ongoing hostilities and crushing restrictions imposed by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition, many people who came to Yemen to flee conflict and repression elsewhere are now being forced yet again to flee in search of safety. Some are dying in the process."

In 2017, more than 55,000 African migrants arrived in Yemen, many of them teenagers from Somalia and Ethiopia where there are few jobs and severe drought is pushing people to the verge of famine. It's difficult to arrange or afford transit beyond Yemen. Migrants become trapped in the poorest country in the Arab peninsula, which now, along with several drought-stricken North African countries, faces the worst humanitarian disaster since World War II.

In Yemen, eight million people are on the brink of starvation as conflict-driven near-famine conditions leave millions without food and safe drinking water. Over one million people have suffered from cholera over the past year and more recent reports add a diphtheria outbreak to the horror. Civil war has exacerbated and prolonged the misery while, since March of 2015, a Saudi-led coalition, joined

and supported by the U.S., has regularly bombed civilians and infrastructure in Yemen while also maintaining a blockade that prevented transport of desperately needed food, fuel and medicines.

Maalouf called on the international community to “halt arms transfers that could be used in the conflict.” To heed Maalouf’s call, the international community must finally thwart the greed of transnational military contractors that profit from selling billions of dollars of weapons to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and other countries in the Saudi-led coalition. For instance, a November, 2017 Reuters report said that Saudi Arabia has agreed to buy about \$7 billion worth of precision guided munitions from U.S. defense contractors. The UAE also has purchased billions in American armaments.

Raytheon and Boeing are the companies that will primarily benefit from a deal that was part of a \$110 billion weapons agreement coinciding with President Donald Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia in May.

### **Paul Ryan’s Remarks**

Another dangerous crossing happened in the region on January 24th. U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) arrived in Saudi Arabia, along with a congressional delegation, to meet with the monarchy’s King Salman and subsequently with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who has orchestrated the Saudi-led coalition’s war in Yemen. Following that visit, Ryan and the delegation met with royals from the UAE.

“So rest assured”, said Ryan, speaking to a gathering of young diplomats in the UAE, “we will not stop until ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates are defeated and no longer a threat to the United States and our allies.

“Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, we are focused on the Iranian threat to regional stability.”

Beyond the simple well-recorded fact of lavish Saudi financial support for Islamist terrorism, Ryan’s remarks overlook the Saudi-led coalition military assaults and “special operations” in Yemen, which the U.S. supports and joins. The war there is arguably undermining effort to combat jihadist groups, which have flourished in the chaos of the war, particularly in the south which is nominally under the control of the government allied to Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian government Ryan denounced does have allies in Yemen and may be smuggling weapons into Yemen, but no one has accused them of supplying the Houthi rebels with cluster bombs, laser-guided missiles and littoral (near-coastal) combat ships to blockade ports vital to famine relief. Iran does not provide in-air refueling for warplanes used in daily bombing runs over Yemen.

The U.S. has sold all of these to countries in the Saudi-led coalition which have, in turn, used these weapons to destroy Yemen's infrastructure as well as create chaos and exacerbate suffering among civilians in Yemen.

Ryan omitted any mention of the starvation, disease, and displacement afflicting people in Yemen. He neglected to mention documented human rights abuses in a network of clandestine prisons operated by the UAE in Yemen's south. Ryan and the delegation essentially created a smokescreen of concern for human life that conceals the very real terror into which U.S. policies have thrust the people of Yemen and the surrounding region.

Potential starvation of their children terrifies people who can't acquire food for their families. Those who can't obtain safe drinking water face nightmarish prospects of dehydration or disease. Persons fleeing bombers, snipers, and armed militias who might arbitrarily detain them shudder in fear as they try to devise escape routes.

Paul Ryan, and the congressional delegation traveling with him, had an extraordinary opportunity to support humanitarian appeals made by UN officials and human rights organizers.

Instead, Ryan implied the only security concerns worth mentioning are those that threaten people in the U.S. He pledged cooperation with brutally repressive dictators known for egregious human rights violations in their own countries, and in beleaguered Yemen. He blamed the government of Iran for meddling in the affairs of other countries and supplying militias with funds and weapons. U.S. foreign policy is foolishly reduced to "the good guys," the U.S. and its allies, versus "the bad guy," – Iran.

The "good guys" shaping and selling U.S. foreign policy and weapon sales exemplify the heartless indifference of the smugglers who gamble human life in exceedingly dangerous crossings.

**Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence ([www.vcnv.org](http://www.vcnv.org)).**

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## Ten Commonsense Suggestions for Making Peace, Not War

President Trump's first year in office brought an escalation of military aggression abroad as he built on the interventions of previous administrations,

but there are steps America can take to move towards a more peaceful future, writes retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel William J. Astore at TomDispatch.

By William J. Astore

Whether the rationale is the need to wage a war on terror involving 76 countries or renewed preparations for a struggle against peer competitors Russia and China (as Defense Secretary James Mattis suggested recently while introducing America's new National Defense Strategy), the U.S. military is engaged globally.

A network of 800 military bases spread across 172 countries helps enable its wars and interventions. By the count of the Pentagon, at the end of the last fiscal year about 291,000 personnel (including reserves and Department of Defense civilians) were deployed in 183 countries worldwide, which is the functional definition of a military uncontained. Lady Liberty may temporarily close when the U.S. government grinds to a halt, but the country's foreign military commitments, especially its wars, just keep humming along.

As a student of history, I was warned to avoid the notion of inevitability.

Still, given such data points and others like them, is there anything more predictable in this country's future than incessant warfare without a true victory in sight? Indeed, the last clear-cut American victory, the last true "mission accomplished" moment in a war of any significance, came in 1945 with the end of World War II.

Yet the lack of clear victories since then seems to faze no one in Washington.

In this century, presidents have regularly boasted that the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in human history, while no less regularly demanding that the most powerful military in today's world be "rebuilt" and funded at ever more staggering levels. Indeed, while on the campaign trail, Donald Trump promised he'd invest so much in the military that it would become "so big and so strong and so great, and it will be so powerful that I don't think we're ever going to have to use it."

As soon as he took office, however, he promptly appointed a set of generals to key positions in his government, stored the mothballs, and went back to war.

Here, then, is a brief rundown of the first year of his presidency in war terms.

### **Trump's First Year of War-Making**

In 2017, Afghanistan saw a mini-surge of roughly 4,000 additional U.S. troops (with more to come), a major spike in air strikes, and an onslaught of munitions of all sorts, including MOAB (the mother of all bombs), the never-before-used

largest non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal, as well as precision weapons fired by B-52s against suspected Taliban drug laboratories. By the Air Force's own count, 4,361 weapons were "released" in Afghanistan in 2017 compared to 1,337 in 2016. Despite this commitment of warriors and weapons, the Afghan war remains – according to American commanders putting the best possible light on the situation – "stalemated," with that country's capital Kabul currently under siege.

How about Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State? U.S.-led coalition forces have launched more than 10,000 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria since Donald Trump became president, unleashing 39,577 weapons in 2017. (The figure for 2016 was 30,743.) The "caliphate" is now gone and ISIS deflated but not defeated, since you can't extinguish an ideology solely with bombs.

Meanwhile, along the Syrian-Turkish border a new conflict seems to be heating up between American-backed Kurdish forces and NATO ally Turkey.

Yet another strife-riven country, Yemen, witnessed a sixfold increase in U.S. airstrikes against al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (from 21 in 2016 to more than 131 in 2017). In Somalia, which has also seen a rise in such strikes against al-Shabaab militants, U.S. forces on the ground have reached numbers not seen since the Black Hawk Down incident of 1993. In each of these countries, there are yet more ruins, yet more civilian casualties, and yet more displaced people.

Finally, we come to North Korea. Though no real shots have yet been fired, rhetorical shots by two less-than-stable leaders, "Little Rocket Man" Kim Jong-un and "dotard" Donald Trump, raise the possibility of a regional bloodbath.

Trump, seemingly favoring military solutions to North Korea's nuclear program even as his administration touts a new generation of more usable nuclear warheads, has been remarkably successful in moving the world's doomsday clock ever closer to midnight.

Clearly, his "great" and "powerful" military has hardly been standing idly on the sidelines looking "big" and "strong." More than ever, in fact, it seems to be lashing out across the Greater Middle East and Africa. Seventeen years after the 9/11 attacks began the Global War on Terror, all of this represents an eerily familiar attempt by the U.S. military to kill its way to victory, whether against the Taliban, ISIS, or other terrorist organizations.

This kinetic reality should surprise no one. Once you invest so much in your military – not just financially but also culturally (by continually celebrating it in a fashion which has come to seem like a quasi-faith) – it's natural to want to put it to use. This has been true of all recent administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, as reflected in the infamous question Madeleine

Albright posed to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell in 1992: "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

With the very word "peace" rarely in Washington's political vocabulary, America's never-ending version of war seems as inevitable as anything is likely to be in history. Significant contingents of U.S. troops and contractors remain an enduring presence in Iraq and there are now 2,000 U.S. Special Operations forces and other personnel in Syria for the long haul. They are ostensibly engaged in training and stability operations. In Washington, however, the urge for regime change in both Syria and Iran remains strong – in the case of Iran implacably so. If past is prologue, then considering previous regime-change operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the future looks grim indeed.

Despite the dismal record of the last decade and a half, our civilian leaders continue to insist that this country must have a military not only second to none but globally dominant. And few here wonder what such a quest for total dominance, the desire for absolute power, could do to this country. Two centuries ago, however, writing to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams couldn't have been clearer on the subject. Power, he said, "must never be trusted without a check."

The question today for the American people: How is the dominant military power of which U.S. leaders so casually boast to be checked? How is the country's almost total reliance on the military in foreign affairs to be reined in? How can the plans of the profiteers and arms makers to keep the good times rolling be brought under control?

As a start, consider one of Donald Trump's favorite generals, Douglas MacArthur, speaking to the Sperry Rand Corporation in 1957:

"Our swollen budgets constantly have been misrepresented to the public. Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear – kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor – with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it by furnishing the exorbitant funds demanded. Yet, in retrospect, these disasters seem never to have happened, seem never to have been quite real."

No peacenik MacArthur. Other famed generals like Smedley Butler and Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke out with far more vigor against the corruptions of war and the perils to a democracy of an ever more powerful military, though such sentiments are seldom heard in this country today. Instead, America's leaders insist that other people judge us by our words, our stated good intentions, not our

murderous deeds and their results.

## **Perpetual Warfare Whistles Through Washington**

Whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the war on terror, the U.S. is now engaged in generational conflicts that are costing us trillions of dollars, driving up the national debt while weakening the underpinnings of our democracy.

They have led to foreign casualties by the hundreds of thousands and created refugees in the millions, while turning cities like Iraq's Mosul into wastelands.

In today's climate of budget-busting "defense" appropriations, isn't it finally time for Americans to apply a little commonsense to our disastrous pattern of war-making? To prime the pump for such a conversation, here are 10 suggestions for ways to focus on, limit, or possibly change Washington's now eternal war-making and profligate war spending:

1. Abandon the notion of perfect security. You can't have it. It doesn't exist. And abandon as well the idea that a huge military establishment translates into national safety. James Madison didn't think so and neither did Dwight D. Eisenhower.
2. Who could have anything against calling the Pentagon a "defense" department, if defense were truly its focus? But let's face it: the Pentagon is actually a war department. So let's label it what it really is. After all, how can you deal with a problem if you can't even name it accurately?
3. Isn't it about time to start following the Constitution when it comes to our "wars"? Isn't it time for Congress to finally step up to its constitutional duties? Whatever the Pentagon is called, this country should no longer be able to pursue its many conflicts without a formal congressional declaration of war. If we had followed that rule, the U.S. wouldn't have fought any of its wars since the end of World War II.
4. Generational wars – ones, that is, that never end – should not be considered a measure of American resolve, but of American stupidity. If you wage war long, you wage it wrong, especially if you want to protect democratic institutions in this country.
5. Generals generally like to wage war. Don't blame them. It's their profession. But for heaven's sake, don't put them in charge of the Department of "Defense" (James Mattis) or the National Security Council (H.R. McMaster) either – and above all, don't let one of them (John Kelly) become the gatekeeper for a volatile, vain president. In our country, civilians should be in charge of the war makers, end of story.
6. You can't win wars you never should have begun in the first place.

America's leaders failed to learn that lesson from Vietnam. Since then they have continued to wage wars for less-than-vital interests with predictably dismal results. Following the Vietnam example, America will only truly win its Afghan War when it chooses to rein in its pride and vanity – and leave.

7. The serious people in Washington snickered when, as a presidential candidate in 2004 and 2008, Congressman Dennis Kucinich called for a Department of Peace. Remind me, though, 17 years into our latest set of wars, what was so funny about that suggestion? Isn't it better to wage peace than war? If you don't believe me, ask a wounded veteran or a Gold Star family.
8. Want to invest in American jobs? Good idea! But stop making the military-industrial complex the preferred path to job creation. That's a loser of a way to go. It's proven that investments in "butter" create double or triple the number of jobs as those in "guns." In other words, invest in education, health care, and civilian infrastructure, not more weaponry.
9. Get rid of the very idea behind the infamous Pottery Barn rule – the warning Secretary of State Colin Powell offered George W. Bush before the invasion of Iraq that if the U.S. military "breaks" a country, somehow we've "bought" it and so have to take ownership of the resulting mess. Whether stated or not, it's continued to be the basis for this century's unending wars. Honestly, if somebody broke something valuable you owned, would you trust that person to put it back together? Folly doesn't decrease by persisting in it.
10. I was an officer in the Air Force. When I entered that service, the ideal of the citizen-soldier still held sway. But during my career I witnessed a slow, insidious change. A citizen-soldier military morphed into a professional ethos of "warriors" and "warfighters," a military that saw itself as better than the rest of us. It's time to think about how to return to that citizen-soldier tradition, which made it harder to fight those generational wars.

Consider retired General John Kelly, who, while defending the president in a controversy over the president's words to the mother of a dead Green Beret, refused to take questions from reporters unless they had a personal connection to fallen troops or to a Gold Star family. Consider as well the way that U.S. politicians like Vice President Mike Pence are always so keen to exalt those in uniform, to speak of them as above the citizenry. ("You are the best of us.")

Isn't it time to stop praising our troops to the rooftops and thanking them endlessly for what they've done for us – for fighting those wars without end – and to start listening to them instead? Isn't it time to try to understand them not as "heroes" in another universe, but as people like us in all their frailty

and complexity? We're never encouraged to see them as our neighbors, or as teenagers who struggled through high school, or as harried moms and dads.

Our troops are, of course, human and vulnerable and imperfect. We don't help them when we put them on pedestals, give them flags to hold in the breeze, and salute them as icons of a feel-good brand of patriotism. Talk of warrior-heroes is worse than cheap: it enables our state of permanent war, elevates the Pentagon, ennobles the national security state, and silences dissent. That's why it's both dangerous and universally supported in rare bipartisan fashion by politicians in Washington.

So here's my final point. Think of it as a bonus 11th suggestion: don't make our troops into heroes, even when they're in harm's way. It would be so much better to make ourselves into heroes by getting them out of harm's way.

Be exceptional, America. Make peace, not war.

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## Connecticut Court Decision Highlights U.S. Educational Failures

A recent court decision in Connecticut overturned a mandate that would have addressed inadequate education funding for poorer communities, a historic problem of the U.S. educational system, which relies on local resources instead of federal wealth, as Jonathan Kozol and Dennis J. Bernstein discussed.

By Dennis J Bernstein

In 1973, I was a struggling young teacher working in inner city Brooklyn when I discovered Jonathan Kozol's National Book Award-winning *Death at an Early Age*.

It became my young teacher's bible on understanding the nature of the school system and the pervasive racism at its core. Its subtitle, "The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools" is as relevant now as it was when it was published some 53 years ago.

Witness the recent decision by the Connecticut Supreme Court [Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell], which rejected a claim by a coalition of municipalities, parents and students that the state's education

funding formula is unconstitutional.

According to the AP, a divided court recently overturned a lower court ruling that had ordered state officials to develop plans for an overhaul of the state's education system, citing a huge gap in test scores between students in rich and poor towns. In response, Kozol remarked recently that this Court decision condones and sustains a system of virtual total segregation.

Kozol has worked with children in inner city schools for some fifty years.

*Death at an Early Age* was followed by a series of books, each one a powerful indictment of the public school system in the US, even as he celebrates the kids he meets and their teachers who continue to do their best, despite the abandonment of public schools and the racism that accompanies it.

His subsequent books include *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, and *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*.

I spoke with Kozol on January 31st in Boston.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Could you begin by describing what the decision was that the court overturned and explaining why it is significant.

**Jonathan Kozol:** A lower court had found that the inequalities within the state between wealthy and poor school districts were unacceptable and unconstitutional. But the Connecticut Supreme Court in a divided decision unfortunately overturned the lower court judge. This has been a pattern all over the United States. By and large, we have seen this for decades.

In the 1990's we had the same situation in Ohio. They actually prevailed three times in showing that the system was blatantly unequal and won at the supreme court level. Even then, in contempt of court, the governor and legislature refused to obey the order. The governor finally packed the court with new appointees and the next time around they accepted the status quo.

This kind of thing has happened everywhere. Legislatures and governors have a thousand ways to drag their heels. In some cases they just say they don't have the money to do it.

There is a very poor town in Virginia named Petersburg. It is an important city in a way because it was a center of the slave trade and some important slave rebellions took place there. They have basically an all-Black school system.

They get about \$10,000 per child a year. Not so far away, in Arlington, Virginia, they're spending \$19,000 every year per child. That is almost twice as much, and of course the irony was that the kids in Petersburg were more in need!

They don't have parents who can take them to Paris before their French finals. They don't get three years of preschool like wealthy kids do. There's just no level playing field in the United States.

I don't think this is ever going to be solved at the state level. The problem will only be solved when the education of every child in America is financed with the real wealth of the nation by the federal government. This is the way it is done in almost every other advanced society in the world.

We can't do that now because of a dreadful court decision [San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez] way back in 1972 in Texas. The poor districts prevailed at the local level and then the US Supreme Court overruled the district court. They ruled that education is not a protected right under the US Constitution.

**DB:** Your first book, *Death at an Early Age*, really broke the story of the unequal distribution of wealth among schools. As a substitute teacher in New York City, I remember that I would get called into a school on the east side of Manhattan and they had everything: a gymnasium, a library full of books, guidance counselors. You go up twenty or thirty blocks and the Dewey decimal system is still in place, athletics amounts to "here's a basketball, go out and play." It was always amazing for me to see the incredible difference in the same school system!

**JK:** I must say parenthetically that even in these very poorly funded schools, I keep running into terrific teachers. I've spent some time in Kern County, California, in schools that are just an hour and a half drive from L.A. These are badly funded schools but I would run into these great teachers and good principals, too.

But when these poorer kids do badly on these standardized tests, who does the media blame? They don't blame the state for cheating these kids from the hour of their birth, they blame the kids or else they blame their teachers. We have this whole regime now in the United States that holds the victims accountable.

In the poorer schools, we spend half the year drilling them for the tests, which has little to do with education but is training them to outsmart the test. We try to pump the scores a couple points and if that doesn't happen we blame the teachers.

The new solution is to set up charter schools in these cities, which become drill academies. Virtually all of them are apartheid schools because they specifically target minorities. And if they can raise the scores a few points, then the media says ah, that's the answer! Actually, they are just slightly

higher-scoring separate and unequal schools.

If it were only inequality, then we could say it is a technical problem, we can solve it somehow. But there is a toxic synergy between financially unequal schools and virtually total abandonment of any integration efforts. In fact, when I talk about integration at school conferences, the corporate types that sponsor these events start to yawn.

What they do is sort of reinvent Dr. King's dream. They say, this is an all-Black school but we are living Dr. King's dream because we are training these Black and Latino kids to be more responsible for themselves and improving their character.

But Dr. King didn't say, "I have a dream that one day our victims will be more productive." It was about separate and unequal. We are back to that again. In my hometown of Boston, the system is more segregated than when I started teaching in 1964.

You mentioned New York and the Upper East Side. The Upper West Side is the classic example of what is happening now. There are a lot of affluent white professionals who are historically liberal in every way except this one. Just ten, twenty blocks to the north in Harlem you have virtually all-minority schools. And there are some schools that are kind of on the border between the two neighborhoods, but white people, for all their liberal beliefs, shun those schools.

When enlightened civic leaders ask why these kids can't go to school together, the white parents aren't as obvious in their racism as people were in Alabama fifty years ago, but they will say, of course we believe in diversity, but if they go to those schools our kids won't do as well.

There is still this assumption of basic inferiority in the minority kids. They wouldn't say it is genetic inferiority but, for a combination of social reasons, these kids are going to ruin our kids' education. That is what it amounts to.

It is heartbreaking to me. I am 81 years old and I felt sure in 1968 that all this was going to change within ten years.

There are answers, of course. At least in small or middle-sized cities like Boston, we could very easily create a metropolitan school system. It wouldn't be a long ride for a kid to go in either direction. But that agenda is off the table, it's unfashionable now. This withdrawal from the mountaintop has been going on for a quarter century.

**DB:** One important point you make in *Savage Inequalities* is that we have to change the way public schools are funded. Schools are set up for failure from

the get-go when so much depends on the local economic base. Is a lack of resources at the heart of the matter?

**JK:** These experts at the Hoover Institution and Heritage Foundation are always asking, "Is money really the answer?" Supposed liberals will look me in the face and say, "Jonathan, can you really solve the problems of those kinds by throwing money at them?" These are the same people who send their kids to prep schools that cost \$60,000 a year. My answer is always: "It seems to work for your kids, doesn't it?" It is sheer hypocrisy.

The basic funding for public schools comes from property taxes. States contribute what is known as "foundation money" so that no school goes without the bare minimum even if their local property taxes are insignificant.

The problem is that these foundation levels are always set so low. All the wealthy districts have to do is have a small bond levy and raise their property taxes half of one percent, and since they have lots of million dollar homes their funding shoots way up. Or they hold fundraising parties and in one night they will raise half a million dollars to build a new library or bring in art and music teachers. A poor district is lucky if they can raise \$800.

The only answer, I believe, is to do what all other developed nations do already and fund education out of the real wealth of the nation. It makes sense not only in practical terms, but in moral terms, in terms of citizenship. You don't go to school to be a citizen of Nebraska or California. We go to school to be Americans. Kids pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States.

What we have today is an uneven social contract. If not for that decision in 1972, equal education would be a fundamental right under the US Constitution.

If Bernie Sanders had won, perhaps we would have ended up with a Supreme Court that would reexamine that decision.

**DB:** Finally, what do you think of the job our Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, is doing?

**JK:** She is a catastrophe. First of all, although she is not very smart, she is slick and gives a slick veneer to this old slogan "freedom of choice."

This was the slogan of segregationists in the South after the Brown decision, when they started so-called "voucher schools." She is not simply in favor of more and more of these segregated charter schools, which are even more segregated than public schools; she is also in favor of vouchers, the invidious idea that goes way back to Milton Friedman in the 1950's and was tested out in Pinochet's Chile.

Devos also wants to open this up to religious schools. She represents the spearhead of the privatization movement that would like to do away with public education altogether.

We are at the lowest point in the history of education in America that I can remember since the hopeful moment at the tail end of the 1960's. Fortunately, there is a younger generation that is gathering momentum now. I am working with Black Lives Matter on a project. They are talking about these issues at last.

When I visit colleges, I'll stay up half the night with these young minority kids, and sometimes some damn decent white kids who identify with the struggle. Maybe they are going to save us.

**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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## Forced Migration vs. 'Chain Migration'

Neoliberal economic policies have created a system of forced migration for many people but the Trump team is planning to ramp-up its assault on immigrants and those who advocate for migrants rights, activist Nativio Lopez explained to Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

On January 17, Kevin De Leon, California's Senate President Pro Tempore stated "Immigration and Customs Enforcement is reportedly amassing agents from across the United States as it prepares to launch the most aggressive deportation raids under the Trump Administration in northern California in the coming weeks."

According to Senator De Leon, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen "is exploring pressing criminal charges against state and local officials who implement 'sanctuary' policies. "The Department of Homeland Security has even admitted they are considering a move to arrest political leaders such as myself," De Leon continued, " who have led the charge in California to prevent the feds from commandeering state and local resources to tear hard working families apart. These extraordinary threats against the President's political opponents are meant to intimidate us, designed to silence and subjugate us. But they will do the opposite."

Indeed, an army of immigrants right supporters, in the form of lawyers, human

rights and local community activist, and concerned politicians are now mobilizing from one end of the state to the other to fight back.

I spoke about the significance of the ICE threats and the grassroots uprising in response, with Nativio Lopez. Lopez is a longtime advocate for the undocumented Spanish-speaking communities in Southern California, and a spokesperson for Hermandad Mexicana, a social, cultural and political organization based in Los Angeles. I spoke to Lopez in Los Angeles on January 30.

**Dennis Bernstein:** In terms of deportations, Obama still holds the record as Deporter and Chief, but Trump seems to be pulling out all the stops now.

**Nativio Lopez:** Well, it is almost like “back to the future” with this administration. We saw the most devastating deportation numbers under the Obama administration and now we are seeing much of the same. Actually the numbers are lower compared to the first two years of the Obama administration. But Trump is continuing the work of terrorizing immigrants and the communities they are a part of. Immigrants are the target but working class communities are really feeling the effects of the repressive measures initiated by this administration.

It has targeted California because it has declared itself a sanctuary state.

The government of California, including the attorney general, will now be tested as to what their interpretation is of the term “sanctuary.”

**DB:** Of course, Obama earned the title “Deporter in Chief,” but Trump now takes it to the next level because he is not afraid to talk in terms of ethnic cleansing.

**NL:** When he makes references to El Salvador, Haiti, and the continent of Africa, these are the same communities who now live within the US. The proposal that he is now making on immigration, supposedly to save the day for the Dreamers, is to legalize the status of 1.8 million but at the same time eliminate the ability to legally bring family members to the United States.

Despite all this talk about “illegal immigration” over the years, the underlying motive of these xenophobes has always been to reduce legal immigration to the United States from Latin American and Asian Pacific countries. They are intent on preserving their idea of a white America by reducing the ability of nationalized immigrants to bring family members to the United States.

**DB:** What is your understanding of the right-wing term “chain immigration”?

**NL:** They are talking from both sides of their mouths. They say people should wait in line and do it legally, and yet we see they are really trying to reduce legal immigration to the country.

Under current law, legal immigrants to this country have the right to immigrate their parents, their siblings, their spouse and any children they have who were born outside the United States. What they are trying to do is eliminate in Congress the ability of a legal immigrant to immigrate his or her parents or siblings. This would reduce by half the number of immigrants who legally come to the United States.

This has happened under both Republican and Democratic administrations. The majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States today are undocumented because of a migration law that was passed in 1978 during the Carter administration which eliminated the right of US citizens to immediately immigrate their parents until the US citizen reached the age of twenty-one.

I myself fought against that legislation because I knew that it would immediately create a balloon of undocumented parents in the United States.

After massive resistance and lobbying, we were able to get legislation in 1986, during the time of the Reagan administration, that allowed parents to legalize their status because they had been in the country so long. They were able to obtain legal permanent status.

**DB:** Instead of chain migration, maybe we should be talking about forced migration.

**NL:** When we talk about defending immigrants against deportation, we should talk about the right to not immigrate to the United States. What forces so many to immigrate here? Extreme poverty, the inability to obtain employment at a decent wage, social violence, drug cartel violence. This is what is forcing migration to the United States.

Certainly the free trade agreements in Mexico and Central America contributed to the mass emigration from those countries. In Mexico alone, over the course of the NAFTA years from 1994 to the present day, four to five million small farm owners have been thrown off their lands and forced to migrate to America because agribusiness, both in Mexico and the United States, gobbled up those lands and forced production to meet the agricultural needs of the United States. Prior to 1994, Mexico was self-sufficient in its domestic corn production. Today it imports from the United States between 40 and 60 percent of its corn. So those are the push factors that bring migrants to the United States.

I laugh when I hear the former president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, criticize the Trump administration. When Fox was president, he did absolutely nothing to defend those Mexicans who were forced to come to the United States, and he was actually a purveyor of privatization of the petroleum industry to serve the interests of US multinational corporations.

**DB:** I am looking at a press release from Kevin de Leon's office, where he writes that "The Department of Homeland Security has even admitted that they are considering a move to arrest political leaders such as myself who have led the charge in California to prevent the feds from commandeering state and local resources to tear hard-working families apart."

**NL:** There is such a thing as state sovereignty and a state's ability to pass laws to protect its residents. At the end of the day, the governor, the president pro tempore, the Latino caucus and other progressive caucuses, the California attorney general—all of them will be tested in the next several days if, in fact, Homeland Security launches the kind of massive detention and deportation that they are threatening against California.

**DB:** We know that every day about 122 Dreamers are losing their DACA status and are faced with uncertainty about their future. We have seen the Democrats collapse on this issue. Do you expect anything at the federal level?

**NL:** I really don't. It is possible that the Democrats cave in and give Trump the \$20 billion he wants to build the wall. It looks like he is going to use the Dreamers as hostages to make good on his campaign promise. Our recommendation to the legislators is to not cave in but to fight back.

We want a clean bill, meaning that all DACA recipients should be allowed to obtain permanent resident status without having to concede anything related to the border wall and certainly anything related to the ability of legal residents to immigrate their family members.

There needs to be massive resistance. I know that in Northern California they are talking about organizing a 100,000 person march in February. We need to do that throughout California. We need to resist in the courts, we need to resist in the streets.

Actually, a DACA permit holder stands a better chance of fighting deportation than a person who has nothing. Some argue that if we don't accept what Trump is offering, we will be putting in jeopardy 800,000 young people with DACA status. The fact of the matter is that there is an injunction in place in the federal courts against the cancellation of the DACA program which is going to take months to work its way through the courts.

My personal and political recommendation is to fight for a clean bill and to throw these people out of Congress and out of the White House. If the complexion of Congress changes in November, that will make it extremely difficult for the administration to move forward with its plans for massive deportation.

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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## Treasury’s ‘Kremlin Report’ Seen as Targeting Russian Economy

The Treasury Dept. has issued a list of some 200 Russians for sanctions, which could impact the whole Russian economy and further exacerbate U.S.-Russian tensions, Gilbert Doctorow explains.

By Gilbert Doctorow

January 29 had been seen as a kind of “D-Day” in Russia, with anticipation and apprehension building for weeks over what many Russians believed could mark a critical change for the worse in relations with the United States. Russian media pitched their coverage to the country’s elites, who were under the Sword of Damocles of new U.S. sanctions that might be directed against them, but also to the general Russian public, who have watched with uneasiness, concerned over the effects of sanctions on the economy, on their livelihoods and living standards.



The document to be released on Jan. 29 was the Treasury Department’s so-called “Kremlin Report,” which identified 210 Russian officials and billionaires considered to be part of President Vladimir Putin’s ruling elite. The report, which the Trump administration was required to file with Congress no later than the 29<sup>th</sup> under the terms of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, could open up these “oligarchs” to sanctions.

CAATSA was passed overwhelmingly by Congress and signed into law by President Trump on August 2, 2017, notwithstanding the Act directly contradicting his stated desire to normalize relations with Russia. His signature was effectively forced, in the recognition that his possible veto would be instantly overridden and further embitter his relations with Congress at a time when his administration had still no legislative achievements to its record.

With the anticipation of a breaking-news story of great importance to the nation, Russian media spared no expense to ensure their coverage of the Kremlin Report on the ground in the U.S. at the time of the release of reports relating to sanctions would be appropriate to the suspense at home. The top-rated Russian state news channel, Rossiya-1 sent its principal talk show presenter Yevgeni Popov to Washington to head up a panel of local experts that would get extensive broadcast time back home.

Among the American panelists chosen to speak about the Kremlin Report were the credible and well known commentators Paul Sanders of *The National Interest* and David Filipov, until recently the Moscow bureau chief of *The Washington Post*. Their live coverage began at mid-day Moscow time which turned out to be almost 20 hours before the Report about which they were expected to comment was actually released. No matter, talk shows often dwell on speculation and so the medium did not disappoint.

By contrast, American and European media generally reacted more slowly and with less interest to the release of the Kremlin Report, with most coverage appearing only after the fact. While part of the lag might be explained by the timing of the report's release just before midnight on the 29th – and the six-hour time difference between the U.S. and Europe – the differences in coverage may also be explained by the level of prioritization the various players in the media give to Russian affairs.

In any case, be it known that notwithstanding the midnight hour of release, the European newspapers *The Financial Times (UK)* and *Le Monde* were right there in their morning online editions with excellent news coverage of the reports that remained factual and did little or no editorializing. This set them apart from other mainstream print media on the Continent who had zero coverage even in the middle of the business day on the 30<sup>th</sup>. I think in particular of *The Guardian (UK)*, *Le Figaro (France)*, *Die Zeit* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Germany)*.

Tuesday morning in the United States found no coverage of the Kremlin Report in mainstream print media including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, despite the report's potential for aggravating U.S. tensions.

Typically on major developments relating to Russia that somehow take an unexpected turn, as was surely the case with the Kremlin Report, the editorial boards take their time, sniff the air to see which way the wind is blowing, and only then commit themselves to an editorial position that directs their journalistic reporting.

And so it was not before mid-afternoon that the online edition of *The New York Times* took a stand on the report. And it was an equivocal and arm's length

stand, telling us that the Trump administration had issued a report that managed to offend both sides to the issue: the Russians and the American Congressmen, both sides objecting to the lists and how they were compiled.

U.S. electronic media were faster off the mark and gave much more extensive coverage to the issue. None entered the fray with greater zest for the scent of blood than CNN, the longstanding *bête noire* of the Trump administration. CNN reporter and guest experts rounded on the President for defying the will of Congress and not immediately ratcheting up the sanctions on Russia to punish them for their meddling in the 2016 presidential elections and to prevent continued meddling in the 2018 midterm elections as CIA director Pompeo had warned might happen just the day before.

Meanwhile, Bloomberg's online article on the sanctions was factual if brief, while their opinion writer specializing in Russian affairs, Leonid Bershidsky, smelled a rat in the way the lists of officials and in particular "oligarchs" had been compiled. As one-time chief editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes*, the rather embittered anti-Putin émigré Bershidsky used his space less for objective analysis and more for editorializing on how the lists really should have been drawn up and on how sanctions should have been imposed now.

Russian concerns over what exactly the Trump administration would issue had been fed by statements to the media from several advisers to the sanctions list project, all of whom have well established reputations as Russia-bashers. I make reference to the authors of an article entitled "How to Identify the Kremlin Ruling Elite and its Agents. Criteria for the US Administration's Kremlin Report" published by the Atlantic Council on November 13, 2017.

These authors are Anders Aslund, Daniel Fried, Andrei Illarianov and Andrei Piontkovsky. The idea they wished to see realized was an exposé of Putin and his "cronies," tracing their alleged illicit gains through corruption and abuse of power. Their view follows directly on the principles that guided the first American sanctions on Russia, the Magnitsky Act of 2012. In the days just before the 29<sup>th</sup>, Russian television carried a short video of several of the authors. One, Aslund, boasted that the coming sanctions would be "smart," as in targeted against the malefactors running things in Russia while doing no harm to the general population.

For more than a week in advance of what they called "Judgment Day," Russian media had featured warnings that the Kremlin Report could spell sharply stepped up sanctions. In Davos last week, Andrei Kostin, CEO of VTB Bank, one of the country's largest state-owned financial institutions decried the expected new sanctions as all-out economic warfare which would get a very harsh response from the Kremlin.

Against the background of threats by American Neocons and Russian fears and warnings in response, US Ambassador in Moscow Jon Huntsman had, in the meanwhile, been issuing statements to the press insisting that the sanctions would not be a serious impediment to relations,, that he sought dialogue with Russia just as his counterpart, the Russian Ambassador in Washington, was doing, and that there remain prospects for cooperation in areas of common interest notwithstanding the disagreements making the news.

So we must ask yet again, which voice on Russia policy coming from Washington is authoritative? Who has the upper hand: Congress or the White House? And within the administration, the President or his cabinet, and in particular his Secretary of State, who has in recent months become an intellectual hostage to the same neocons who ran the Obama foreign policy and before that the foreign policy of George W. Bush?

The Kremlin Report mandated by U.S. law was released to the public by the Treasury at the same time as a longer secret redaction was delivered to Congress. The time of delivery and more importantly the content of the report suggest that the Trump administration was responding to the letter of a law that the President had opposed but could not veto given its fulsome support in the legislature.

Yet, the administration dragged its feet and produced at the very last moment a report that could have been compiled in a couple of hours if it so desired. And the public version of the report itself is so patently absurd in content as to bring ridicule on the Congress that ordered it.

To wit, as the few Russians who were amused by this cynical anti-Russian exercise commented, the authors of the Kremlin Report lists of 200-plus Russians eligible for future sanctions just took the telephone directory of the Russian cabinet of ministers, presidential administration, and parastatal institutions and copied down the names of the top officers. The only high official omitted was Vladimir Putin himself.

As for the "oligarchs," they were arbitrarily defined as persons with net worth of more than \$1 billion, as shown in the Forbes ranking of the 100 richest persons in Russia.

If there was any exposé, any dirt on Russia's government and business elite in the secret version of the report, one can be sure that would have been leaked by now, given past behavior of the US authorities in anti-Russian operations. Nothing at all has surfaced so far.

This, of course, did not prevent the Russian authorities from hyperventilating

over the sanctions report when asked to comment by local and international media today. For his part, while attending a campaign gathering, Vladimir Putin explained his views on the Kremlin Report in taking a question from the floor as to why he alone in the government was not on the sanctions list.

Putin said that the report named individuals who hold sway over whole sectors of the economy and strata of the population, which means, in a sense, that the sanctions lists embraced the entire Russian nation of 146 million people.

He noted that things could have been worse, and that he had been prepared, if necessary, *to cut all ties with the United States down to zero*. Nonetheless, he deemed the release of the Kremlin Report to be a hostile act that would contribute only to further deterioration of relations with the United States. For the moment, he said, there would be no Russian counter-measures, with his government adopting a wait-and-see posture.

Indeed, while the Kremlin Report did not introduce new personal sanctions and only identified those who would be the first to feel them if the situation justifying sanctions changed, that situation itself is very much under the control of American authorities and their proxies in Ukraine, in the Baltics, in Syria. The possibility is ever present that some miscalculation or some provocation would once again bring opprobrium upon the Russian Federation and prompt imposition of severe sanctions that were averted now.

Finally, let us consider the second report delivered by the Trump administration to Congress under the terms of the CAATSA: the report on advisability of further sectoral sanctions on Russian companies.

This was still briefer and will surely be questioned by the Russia-bashers in Congress. The administration reported that the existing sectoral sanctions on Russia's military industrial complex and on those who do business with it domestically in Russia and abroad were working effectively, so that no further sectoral actions were required. Specifically, it was claimed that thanks to the sanctions in place, Russia had been denied sales of arms worth several billion dollars.

That claim may be hard to verify, but January 29 was also the effective date for application of previously enacted sanctions on companies anywhere in the world doing business with prescribed Russian defense manufacturers and sales or import entities.

The ultimate objective of these sanctions is to attack Russia's arms sales abroad which amounted to more than \$14 billion in 2017, making it one of the largest suppliers worldwide. Major customers for Russian arms were India, China,

Algeria, Vietnam, Iraq and Egypt as reported by the news agency RBC quoting *Jane's* for 2016.

Theoretically the U.S. can punish companies violating this ban on dealings with the Russian military industrial complex by applying any of five different sanctions including restricting their access to credits from American banks, a prohibition on carrying out transactions in dollars, or barring their officers from entering the United States.

However, in practice these sales can be shifted from private companies to Ministries of Defense, and then the feasibility of attaching sanctions becomes doubtful. The recent efforts of the U.S. to persuade the Turkish authorities to abandon their \$2.5 billion contract with Russia for procurement of its S-400 air defense system failed miserably. In these open trials of strength with the objective of punishing Russia, the United States exposes itself to failure and humiliation.

To summarize, should the United States resolve one day to impose sanctions on the whole Russian government listed in the Kremlin Report of 29 January, it will create a barrier that will quickly be broken by kinetic action, meaning a hot war with Russia.

If it implements the possibilities it theoretically enjoys against Russian industrial sectors, and in particular against the military industrial complex, then it is likely to suffer humiliation as other nations refuse to be bullied. For the United States in relation to Russia, the whole sanctions game amounts to a "heads you win, tails I lose" proposition.

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## Prospects of Return to El Salvador Pose Difficult Choice

The Trump administration's decision to rescind Temporary Protected Status for people from El Salvador (as well as Nicaragua, Sudan and Haiti) is confronting migrants with a terrible choice, explained Ramon Cardona in an interview with Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

On January 8, the Trump administration abruptly put an end to Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadorans now living and working in the US. Many have been in the country for 15 or 20 years, and have established jobs and families. Nearly 200,000 Salvadorans now living in the U.S. may be affected. According to the the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Salvadorans, who account for about 60% of TPS recipients, will have until Sept. 9, 2019 to either adjust their status if eligible, make plans to return to El Salvador, or face deportation.

According to many immigrant and human rights groups, those being sent back will face harsh economic conditions and will probably end up unemployed. Some will be physically brutalized and possibly murdered in what has become one of the most violent countries in the world.

The following interview with Ramon Cardona, a former U.S.-based government official of the FMLN in El Salvador, and director of Centro Latino Cuzcatlan in Northern California, is part of a series for Consortiumnews.com on the multiple issues surrounding the battle for truly fair and humane immigration reform. "It's shocking," Cardona said. "It's news that we kind of expected, but now that it's official, it hurts."

I spoke to Cardona on January 9th, 2018.

**Dennis Bernstein:** I think it would be good for you to tell us a little bit about your history, and how TPS came to pass and the impact of its sudden spiking by President Trump.

**Ramon Cardona:** I am an immigrant from El Salvador. I was brought to the United States as a teenager. Currently I run Centro Latino Cuzcatlan, a community-based agency providing immigration services mainly to the Latino community.

I have been involved with the Salvadoran solidarity movement since my university years back in the 1970s. I witnessed the first fight in Congress for protective status, which we eventually won in 1990 when Congress was made aware that Salvadoran deportees were being systematically labeled as subversives and murdered by the National Guard. Later, in 1997, the Nicaraguan and Central American Relief Act was passed which made these people legal permanent residents.

Today, the Salvadoran community receives shocking news when Homeland Security stated that TPS will no longer continue for Salvadorans, who are being given an 18-month reprieve to "put their things in order" and return home.

On average, these people have been living over twenty years in the United States. They have made their homes here, their children were born on U.S. territory. They contribute some \$4.5 billion in remittances, which is nearly equal to the national budget of El Salvador last year. What they basically need is for their temporary status to be made permanent.

**DB:** How many people are affected and could you tell us about some of the people you know who will be directly impacted?

**RC:** 188,000 Salvadorans are TPS recipients and another 192,000 are U.S.-born children. By September 2019, many thousands of families have to make a horrendous decision, whether to revert back to undocumented status, lose their work permits and be vulnerable to deportation or return to a country rife with violence of every form, rampant unemployment and a dire lack of public services. How will such a country be able to integrate tens of thousands of Salvadorans?

This decision by Homeland Security is based on the false claim that the conditions that prompted Temporary Protected Status back in 2001 have been overcome and the government is capable of integrating these people back into society. People are coming to us and asking us what they should do now, what is going to happen. Will they be able to obtain permanent legal residence? We are telling people to seek proper legal advice and find out what other immigration laws apply to their situation.

And we are advising them to join the struggle to pressure the U.S. Congress to once and for all recognize these people as productive members of society in the United States. A third of these people are paying on home mortgages. Many are business owners providing jobs in their communities. Every 18 months they have to pay a substantial amount of money to continue getting benefits and have to go through FBI background checks. Anyone who is found to have committed a crime loses all their benefits. It would be to everyone's benefit for Congress to adopt a solution for permanent residency.

**DB:** Please take a moment to remind people of the conditions which forced this massive migration to the United States from El Salvador and the role that the United States played.

**RC:** The first large migration from El Salvador took place in the late 1970's when the US-backed military government carried out a program of terror and repression in answer to a revolutionary pro-democracy movement. Military death squads went after union people, university students, teachers, organized public employees. Many people took to the mountains and joined the FMLN and many sought refuge outside El Salvador's borders. This was in the late seventies and throughout the 1980's.

A settlement was reached with the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] to address the fact that Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees were soliciting political asylum and seeing only one or two percent approval rates, while others coming from Poland or claiming to be fleeing the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were seeing upwards of 70% approval rates.

**DB:** This was at a time when priests were being killed, when Archbishop Oscar Romero was shot through the throat while saying mass. We saw nuns beaten, raped and killed. The U.S. government didn't want people coming to the US and telling this story.

**RC:** That time was a part of our collective history. Many, many families had members who were murdered or disappeared.

**DB:** While the U.S. government was perpetrating this violence, we saw the emergence of the sanctuary movement here. The number of people coming across the border was a direct barometer of the intensity of the wars that the U.S. was prosecuting in El Salvador and Guatemala. This is the dirty history that the United States is still trying to cover up.

**RC:** And then we have to ask how the high levels of generalized violence in El Salvador today got started. It began with mass deportations of youngsters who grew up in Los Angeles, went to jail there, joined gangs there, and then got deported to a hopeless existence in El Salvador. All they could do was join a gang.

Again, this last year, El Salvador was the most violent country in Central America and one of the most violent countries throughout the world. Anyone coming to El Salvador from the United States is an automatic target because it is assumed they have money.

**DB:** Are you getting any support from members of Congress or the administration who oppose what Homeland Security is doing?

**RC:** There are two legislative initiatives, one presented by New York Congresswoman Lydia Velazquez, which already has the support of nearly 100 representatives, most of them Democrats. There is also a bipartisan initiative that was started by Carlos Curbelo, a Republican representative from Florida.

But we know that both initiatives are up against very powerful anti-immigrant forces in Congress and we also have a president who ran for office calling Latin American immigrants rapists and criminals.

**DB:** As regards El Salvador, there is a lot of blood on the hands of U.S. politicians and they have a responsibility now to act. What do you think is the

best way for people to get involved now? I imagine you want the support of as many people as possible.

**RC:** One of our challenges is to reach out to all TPS's and make sure they get proper legal counsel. When a U.S.-born child becomes 21 years of age, they can seek access to permanent residency. We have to speak directly to people to make sure they understand that there are legal options, even if they have already been charged with deportation orders.

There is also a national campaign that people can link to at [www.savetps.com](http://www.savetps.com). We are going to Washington, D.C. between the 4th and the 6th of February, not just Salvadorans, but Nicaraguans and Haitians, who also benefit from TPS. And of course we continue to lobby Congress to take responsibility for this situation.

**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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