

Questioning the Russia-gate 'Motive'

A key pillar of the Russia-gate affair is the assumption that Russia's leaders wanted to stop Hillary Clinton and boost Donald Trump, but the Kremlin's views on last year's election were much more nuanced, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The American public is now experiencing mass paranoia over Russia-gate, hysteria about Russia supposedly corrupting and manipulating the U.S. political system. This panic originated with Obama administration holdovers in the intelligence community who outlined the narrative while providing few if any facts – and it has been carried forward by Democrats, some Republicans hostile to President Trump, and by the U.S. mainstream media.

The Russia-gate frenzy has similarities to the madness that followed the 9/11 attacks when public passions were manipulated to serve the geopolitical agenda of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. In that case, civil liberties that had become accepted norms in the U.S. were suddenly cast aside – and the public was deceptively led into the invasion of Iraq.

In both cases – the Iraq War and Russia-gate – the U.S. intelligence community played central roles by – regarding Iraq – promoting false intelligence that Iraq was hiding WMD and had ties to Al Qaeda and – in the Russian case – assessing (without presenting evidence) that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the hacking of Democratic emails and their publication via WikiLeaks to hurt Hillary Clinton's campaign and to help elect Donald Trump.

While the Iraq deception was driven by the neoconservatives in the Bush-Cheney administration, the Russia paranoia was started by the nominally left-of-center administration of Barack Obama in the closing months of his presidency. It has been fanned ever since by liberals and centrists in the Democratic Party and the never-Trump contingent in the Republican Party as well as the mainstream media – with the goal of either removing Trump from office or politically crippling him and his administration, i.e., to reverse the results of the 2016 election or, as some might say, reverse the “mistake” of the 2016 election.

Because promoters of the Russia-gate hysteria talk about the Kremlin's “war” on the U.S. political process, the frenzy also carries extreme dangers, even greater than the death and destruction from the Iraq War. Russia is the only country on earth capable of turning the United States into ashes within a day. And even as U.S. journalists and politicians have casually – and sloppily – hyped the Russia-gate affair, the Russians have taken the growls of hostility

from the United States very seriously.

Rumbles of War

If Russia is preparing for war, as the latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine tells us, we have no one but our political leaders and media pundits to blame. They have no concern for Russian national sensitivities and the “red lines” that the Russians have drawn. U.S. senators and congressmen listen only to what U.S. “experts” think the Russian interests should be if they are to fit into a U.S.-run world. That is why the Senate can vote 98-2 in favor of elevating President Obama’s executive sanctions against Russia into federal law as happened this past summer so President Trump can’t reverse them.

There have been a few U.S. journalists and academics who have examined the actual facts of the Russia-gate story and found them lacking in substance if not showing outright signs of fabrication, including Consortiumnews.com, Truthdig.com, and Antiwar.com. But they make up a very small minority.

Instead the major U.S. media has taken the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” accusing the Russians of meddling in the 2016 election as unassailable truth despite its stunning lack of evidence. According to President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, that “assessment” came from a “hand-picked” group of analysts from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency, not the “all 17 intelligence agencies consensus” that the public was repeatedly told.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the Russia-did-the-hacking “assessment” came from a study of the available forensic evidence by a group of former U.S. intelligence officers with relevant technical expertise from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

The VIPS’ analysis of the known download speed of one batch of Democratic emails concluded in July that the emails were likely extracted by a local download, not an external hack over the Internet, i.e., an inside job by someone with direct access to the computers. But the VIPS findings were largely ignored by the U.S. mainstream media, which has treated the original “assessment” by those “hand-picked” analysts as unchallengeable if not flat fact.

Besides the conventional wisdom that Russia did “hack” the emails and somehow slipped the emails to WikiLeaks, there is another core assumption of the Jan. 6 report – that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the hack of the Democratic emails and their publication through WikiLeaks because of his contempt for Hillary Clinton and his desire for Trump to win.

Indeed, the Jan. 6 “assessment” treats this supposed motive as the central

evidence of Russian guilt, since actual physical or testimonial evidence is lacking. Yet what is also missing from the report is any recognition of other attitudes among the Russian political elite that would go against the report's thesis, including whether Putin would have taken such a risk in the face of a widespread consensus that Clinton was the near-certain winner – and the strong possibility that any Russian operation would be exposed. An evenhanded intelligence “assessment” would have included these counter-arguments even if in the end they were cast aside. But the Jan. 6 report offered no such context or balance.

A View from Moscow

However, from my perspective – having participated in some of the leading Russian public affairs programs in 2016 – I heard Russian insiders close to President Putin expressing grave doubts about whether a Trump presidency would be good for Russia.

Political talk shows are a very popular component of Russian television programming on all channels, both state-run and commercial channels. They are mostly carried on prime time in the evening but also are showing up in mid-afternoon where they have displaced soap operas and cooking lessons as entertainment for housewives and pensioners.

The shows are broadcast live either to the Moscow time zone or to the Far East time zone. Given the fact that Russia extends over nine time zones, they are also video recorded and reshowed locally at prime time. In the case of the highest quality and most watched programs produced by Vesti 24 for the Rossiya One channel, they also are posted in their entirety and in the original Russian on Youtube.

The panelists come from a rather small pool of Russian legislators, including chairmen of the relevant committees of the Duma (lower house) and Federation Council (upper house); leading journalists; think tank professors; and retired military brass. The politicians are drawn from among the most visible and colorful personalities in the Duma parties, but also extend to Liberal parties such as Yabloko, which failed to cross the five-percent threshold in legislative elections and thus received no seats in parliament.

(Since I live in Brussels, I was flown by the various channels who paid airfare and hotel accommodation in Moscow. That is to say, my expenses were covered but there was no honorarium. I make this explicit acknowledgement to rebut in advance any notion that I and other outside panelists were in any way “paid by the Kremlin” or restricted in our freedom of speech on air.)

During the period under review, I appeared on both state channels, Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, as well as on the major commercial television channel, NTV. My debut on the No. 1 talk show in Russia, "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev," on Sept. 11, 2016, was particularly useful because I had a chance to speak with the host, Vladimir Soloviev, for five minutes before the program.

I put to him the question that interested me the most: whom did he want to see win the U.S. presidential election. Without hesitation, Soloviev told me that he did not want to see Trump win because the celebrity businessman was volatile, unpredictable – and weak. Soloviev added that he and other politically knowledgeable Russians did not expect improved relations with the U.S. regardless of who won. He rejected the notion that Trump's tossing the neocons out of government would be a great thing in and of itself.

The Devil You Know

Soloviev's resistance to the idea that Trump could be a good thing was not just an example of Russians' prioritizing stability, the principle "better the devil you know," meaning Hillary Clinton. During a chat with a Russian ambassador, someone also close to power, I heard the firm belief that the United States is like a big steamship which has its own inertia and cannot be turned around, that presidents come and go but American foreign policy remains the same.

This view may be called cynical or realistic, depending on your taste, but it is reflective of the thinking that came out from many of the panelists in the talk shows.

To appreciate what weight the opinions of Vladimir Soloviev carry, you have to consider just who he is – that his talk show is the most professional from among numerous rival shows and attracts the most important politicians and expert guests. But even more to the point, he is as close to Putin as journalists can get and is familiar with the President's thinking.

In April 2015, Soloviev conducted a two-hour interview with Putin that was aired on Rossiya 1 under the title "The President." In early January 2016, the television documentary "World Order," co-written and directed by Soloviev, set out in forceful terms Putin's views on American and Western attempts to stamp out Russian sovereignty that first were spoken at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 and have evolved and become ever more frank since.

Soloviev has a Ph.D. in economics from the Institute of World Economics and International Relations of the USSR Academy of Sciences. He was an active entrepreneur in the 1990s and spent some time back then in the U.S., where his activities included teaching economics at the University of Alabama. He is

fluent in English and has been an unofficial emissary of the Kremlin to the U.S. at various times.

For all of these reasons, I believe it is safe to say that Vladimir Soloviev represents the thinking of Russian elites close to Putin, if not the views of Putin himself.

I encountered similar skepticism about Trump elsewhere as well. On Sept. 27, 2016, I took part in the “Sixty Minutes” talk show on Rossiya 1 that presented a post-mortem of the first Trump-Clinton debate the day before.

Presenter Yevgeny Popov and his wife and co-presenter Olga Skabeyeva made a point that was largely missing in Western news coverage – that the Democrats and Republicans had largely switched positions on the use of military force, with Clinton taking the more hawkish position and Trump the more dovish stance.

Doubting Trump

Yet, Russian politicians and journalists on the panel were split down the middle on whether Trump or Clinton was their preferred next occupant of the Oval Office. The Trump skeptics noted that he was impulsive and could not be trusted to act with prudence if there was some crisis or accidental clash between U.S. and Russian forces in the field, for example.

They took the cynical view that the more dovish positions that Trump took earlier were purely tactical, to differentiate himself from his Republican competitors and then Clinton. Thus, these analysts felt that Trump could turn out to be no friend of Russia on the day after the elections.

One Trump doubter called Trump a “non-systemic” politician – or anti-establishment. But that is not a compliment in the Russian context. It has the odious connotation applied to Alexei Navalny and some members of the U.S.- and E.U.-backed Parnas political movement, suggesting seditious intent.

The Oct. 20 program “Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” which I watched on television from abroad, was devoted to the third Clinton-Trump debate. My main takeaway from the show was that there was a bemused unanimity on the very diverse panel that the U.S. presidential campaign was awful, with both candidates having serious weaknesses of character and/or careers. Particular attention was devoted to the very one-sided position of the U.S. mass media and the centrist establishments of both parties favoring Hillary Clinton.

Though flamboyant in his language, nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy,

leader of the LDPR Party, touched on a number of core concerns:

“The debates were weak. The two cannot greet one another on stage, cannot say goodbye to one another at the end. They barely can get out the texts that have been prepared for them by their respective staffs. Repeating on stage what one may have said in the locker room. Billions of people around the world conclude with one word: disgrace! This is the worst electoral campaign ever.

“And mostly what we see is the style of the campaign. However much people criticize the USSR – the old fogies who ran it, one and the same, supposedly the conscience of the world. Now we see the same thing in the USA: the exceptional country – the country that has bases everywhere, soldiers everywhere, is bombing everywhere in some city or other. ...

“Hillary has some kind of dependency. A passion for power – and that is dangerous for the person who will have her finger on the nuclear button. If she wins, on November 9th the world will be at the brink of a big war.”

Zhirinovsky made no secret of his partiality for Trump, calling him “clean” and “a good man” whereas Clinton has “blood on her hands” for the deaths of hundreds of thousands due to her policies as Secretary of State. But then again, Zhirinovsky has made his political career over more than 30 years precisely by making outrageous statements that run up against what the Russian political establishment says aloud.

Zhirinovsky had been the loudest voice in Russian politics in favor of Turkey and its president Erdogan, a position which he came to regret when the Turks shot down a Russian jet at the Syrian border, causing a rupture in bilateral relations.

The final word on Russia’s electoral preferences during the Oct. 20 show was given by the moderator, Vladimir Soloviev: “There can be no illusions. Both Trump and Clinton have a very bad attitude toward Russia. What Trump said about us and Syria was no compliment at all. The main theme of American political life right now is McCarthyism and anti-Russian hysteria.”

This being Russia, one might assume that the deeply negative views of the ongoing presidential election reflected a general hostility toward the United States as a country. But nothing of the sort came out from the discussion. To be sure, there was the odd outburst from Zhirinovsky. But otherwise the panelists, including Zhirinovsky, displayed informed respect and even admiration for what the U.S. has achieved and represents as a country. But the panelists concluded that the U.S. has a political leadership at the national level that is unworthy and inappropriate to its position in the world.

Yet, back in the U.S., the ongoing hysteria over Russia-gate and the perceived threat that Russia poses to U.S. national interests, risks tilting the world into nuclear war.

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Trump's Misuse of Intelligence on Iran

Bowing to Israeli-Saudi desires, the Trump administration is abusing the U.S. intelligence process to whip up a war fever against Iran, much like George W. Bush did on Iraq, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The most widely remembered episode of a U.S. administration using an intelligence-based public presentation to stir up hostility toward a country with which it was intent on picking a fight was Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation on Iraq to the United Nations Security Council in February 2003.

That presentation and the Bush administration's year-long campaign, of which Powell's speech was a part, to sell the U.S. invasion of Iraq represented a misuse of intelligence – less because of the substance than because of the whole nature and purpose of the exercise. Instead of using intelligence for its proper purpose of informing policy decisions yet to be made, this campaign was instead a selective and tendentious use of intelligence to sell a decision already made.

There was substantive misrepresentation, to be sure. The portion of the speech about terrorist ties was designed to foment a belief about supposed alliances that was contrary to the judgments of the U.S. intelligence community.

But even if everything in the speech about weapons of mass destruction has been valid, the speech missed the most important questions about U.S. policy toward Iraq. These questions included what would warrant the launching by the United States of a major war of aggression, and what the ensuing mess and repercussions would be, in Iraq and in the region, after Saddam Hussein was ousted, WMD or no WMD.

Now Nikki Haley has provided the closest replication yet of the notorious show-and-tell from 2003. She has tendentiously and selectively brandished pieces, including physical pieces, of intelligence to stir up hostility toward Iran, with which the Trump administration seems intent on picking a fight.

The featured piece consisted of remnants of a missile fired from Yemen in the direction of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Haley and the Trump administration have gone beyond Powell and the Bush administration in dragging U.S. intelligence agencies into their hostility-selling campaign.

For Powell's speech, the imprimatur of the intelligence community was symbolized by Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet sitting in the camera frame right behind Powell. Although Haley is the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, such an image in the Security Council chamber evidently wasn't enough. Instead, she did her show-and-tell at the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington. And rather than a small vial that Powell used as a prop in talking about a biological weapon, she displayed a warehouse full of wrecked hardware, including the missile remnants.

Distorting Reality

Just as in 2003, the show missed the fundamental issues involved in the relevant Middle Eastern mayhem. The missile fired at Riyadh was a rather feeble and ineffective response to the continuing air assault on Yemen by a Saudi-led coalition that has turned a civil war sparked by tribal disgruntlement into one of the world's biggest current humanitarian disasters.



According to the United Nations and other sources, more than 5,000 civilians have been killed, along with the thousands of injuries and other deaths as well

as related consequences such as a cholera epidemic that has killed thousands more. The Saudi-led air war is clearly the biggest source of the carnage.

The United States aids that air war. The exact nature and extent of the assistance are unclear, but what is publicly acknowledged includes U.S. provision of targeting information and refueling of Saudi warplanes. The Trump administration reportedly has considered increasing the military assistance to Saudi Arabia, including possible resumption of shipments of guided missiles that the Obama administration had suspended because of the indiscriminate Saudi targeting of civilians.

It is both misguided policy and morally offensive for Haley to try to focus attention on Iranian-related markings on a missile fragment while her own government abets far more suffering and destruction in the same war of which that missile was a part.

On the very day that Haley was showcasing Iran-related munitions came news that one of the latest aerial attacks by the Saudi-led coalition destroyed a prison in the capital Sanaa and killed at least 30 people, most of whom were detainees in the prison. And on the day that Haley was drawing attention to her warehouse full of arms that, in her words, “include parts made in Iran, some by Iran’s government-run defense industry” came reports of how many U.S.- and Saudi-supplied arms wound up in the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS). Evidently a factory marking on a munition is supposed to constitute a case for condemnation of the country of manufacture when Iran is involved, but not when another state is, or at least when the United States or Saudi Arabia is.

Haley’s remarks at the show-and-tell did nothing to explain how the munitions displayed around her demonstrate anything about either Iranian policies or the drivers of conflict and instability in the Middle East, much less about implications for U.S. policy. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had handed over the materiel, and U.S. officials either would not or could not say where much of it had been recovered. Nor could they say when the weapons had been supplied or when they were used. To use such military detritus as a basis for conclusions about what Iran is or is not contributing to violence in the Middle East makes little more sense than holding Mikhail Kalashnikov responsible for all attacks in which AK-47s have been used.

Dirty U.S. Hands

Officials of the United States – the world’s leading exporter of arms – ought to be especially careful about suggesting that factory markings on munitions equate to evidence about a country’s foreign policy, given how U.S.-origin arms have been used even by the likes of ISIS.

Haley's comments were more telling about the nature of what the Trump administration is trying to do with such displays. She talked about going to "great lengths" to declassify "evidence" and said, "As you know, we do not often declassify this type of military equipment recovered from these attacks."

That's right, we do not. And the administration's upending of normal procedures for the sake of the public hostility-stoking campaign shows how far removed any of this is from a healthy and proper use of intelligence services.

Haley grossly mischaracterized a new United Nations report on implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231, which is the international community's official endorsement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program. She made it sound as if there were united international backing for her blame-everything-on-Iran message, saying, "In its strongest language yet, the Secretary-General's report describes violation after violation of weapons transfers and ballistic missile activity."

Haley knows well that the only obligations that Iran undertook in either the JCPOA or the U.N. resolution that endorsed the agreement concern nuclear activities. The reference in Resolution 2231 to missiles was intentionally and carefully worded as a "call" that entails no additional obligation.

The Secretary-General's report, like most such U.N. documents, is more a compilation of reports and assertions by member countries than the reaching of any grand conclusion. A U.N. monitoring committee did investigate missile firings by the Houthi forces in Yemen earlier this year and expressed agnosticism about who was involved in supplying the weapons, even though they appeared to be of Iranian design and manufacture.

The monitors also stated they saw no evidence of something else Haley has suggested, which was a presence of Iranian missile specialists within Yemen. In the international scrutiny that matters most in assessing Iran's compliance with its obligations, the International Atomic Energy Agency continues to certify that Iran is meeting its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who must have cringed when seeing Haley's remarks, spoke to some of the same subjects on the day of Haley's presentation. Guterres repeated his endorsement of the JCPOA as "the best way" to ensure that Iran's nuclear program stays peaceful, while expressing concern about how President Trump's withholding of certification to Congress in October had created "considerable uncertainty" about the future of the agreement.

Scare tactics were a big part of the Bush administration's campaign of selling its war, with the brandishing of things like vials we were told to imagine might

be filled with anthrax spores. Haley got fully into the same mode when she said about the missile that hit close to the Riyadh airport, “Just imagine if this missile had been launched at Dulles Airport or JFK, or the airports in Paris, London, or Berlin. That’s what we’re talking about here. That’s what Iran is actively supporting.”

No, Iran isn’t supporting that at all. There is zero evidence of any Iranian move toward obtaining a weapon with intercontinental reach. There is no evidence that Iranian military development and procurement are proceeding with anything in mind other than responding to what Iran sees as threats and rivals within its own region.

The heads of the Iranian military and Revolutionary Guard Corps have talked publicly about 2,000 kilometers being a sufficient range for Iranian weapons to meet that need. Such a range is not just talk and is consistent with the larger strategic logic of Iran’s defense posture.

It is a harmful waste of the time and attention not only of the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, but also of all the intelligence officers who were involved in putting together that display at DIA, to be hyping an imaginary intercontinental threat when the United States faces a real one from North Korea.

We still don’t know exactly where Trump, Haley, or anyone else in the current administration wants or expects to go with their campaign of stoking maximum tension with, and hostility toward, Iran. But more and more of their campaign sounds a lot like what the Bush administration and neoconservatives were saying about Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Add to the other similarities a perversion of the relationship between policy and intelligence.

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Protecting the Shaky Russia-gate Narrative

Exclusive: The New York Times continues its sorry pattern of falsifying the record on Russia-gate, giving its readers information that the newspaper knows not to be true, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If Russia-gate is the massive scandal that we are told it is by so many Important People – across the U.S. mainstream media and the political world – why do its proponents have to resort to lies and exaggerations to maintain the pillars supporting the narrative?

A new example on Thursday was The New York Times' statement that a Russian agency "spent \$100,000 on [Facebook's] platform to influence the United States presidential election last year" – when the Times knows that statement is not true.

According to Facebook, only 44 percent of that amount appeared *before* the U.S. presidential election in 2016 (i.e., \$44,000) and few of those ads addressed the actual election. And, we know that the Times is aware of the truth because it was acknowledged in a Times article in early October.

As part of that article, Times correspondents Mike Isaac and Scott Shane reported that the ads also covered a wide range of other topics: "There was even a Facebook group for animal lovers with memes of adorable puppies that spread across the site with the help of paid ads."

As nefarious as the Times may think it is for Russians to promote a Facebook page about "adorable puppies," the absurdity of that concern – and the dishonesty of the Times then "forgetting" what it itself reported just two months ago about the timing and contents of these "Russian-linked ads" – tells you a great deal about Russia-gate.

On Thursday, the Times chose to distort what it already knew to be true presumably because it didn't want to make the \$100,000 ad buy (which is not a particularly large sum) look even smaller and less significant by acknowledging the pre-election total was less than half that modest amount – and even that total had little to do with the election.

Why would the Times lie? Because to tell the truth would undercut the narrative of evil Russians defeating Hillary Clinton and putting Donald Trump in the White House – the core narrative of Russia-gate.

Another relevant fact is that Facebook failed to find any "Russian-linked" ads during its first two searches and only detected the \$100,000 after a personal visit from Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a leading legislator on Internet regulation.

In other words, Facebook's corporate executives dredged up something to appease Warner. That way, Warner and the Democrats could blame Russia for the Trump

presidency, sparing further criticism of Clinton's dreadful campaign (in which she labeled half of Trump's voters "deplorables") and her neo-liberal economic policies (and neo-conservative foreign policies) that have alienated much of America's working class as well as many progressives.

Leaving Out Context

The Times also might have put the \$100,000 in "Russian-linked" ads over a two-year period in the context of Facebook's \$27 billion in annual revenue, but the Times didn't do that – apparently because it would make even the full \$100,000 look like a pittance.

Trimming the total down to \$44,000 and admitting that only a few of those ads actually dealt with Clinton and Trump would be even worse for the Russia-gate narrative.

Ironically, the Times' latest false depiction of the \$100,000 in ads as designed "to influence" the 2016 election appeared in an article about Facebook determining that other Russian-linked ads, which supposedly had a powerful effect on Great Britain's Brexit vote, totaled just three ads at the cost of 97 cents. (That is not a misprint.)

According to Facebook, the three ads, which focused on immigration, were viewed some 200 times by Britons over four days in May 2016. Of course, the response from British parliamentarians who wanted to blame the Brexit vote on Moscow was to assert that Facebook must have missed something. It couldn't be that many Britons had lost faith in the promise of the European Union for their own reasons.

We have seen a similar pattern with allegations about Russian interference in German and French elections, with the initial accusations being widely touted but not so much the later conclusions by serious investigations knocking down the claims. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "German Intel Clears Russia on Interference."]

The only acceptable conclusion, it seems, is "Russia Guilty!"

These days in Official Washington, it has become almost forbidden to ask for actual evidence that would prove the original claim that Russia "hacked" Democratic emails, even though the accusation came from what President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged were "hand-picked" analysts from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

These "hand-picked" analysts produced the evidence-lite Jan. 6 "assessment" about Russia "hacking" the emails and slipping them to WikiLeaks – a scenario

denied by both WikiLeaks and Russia.

When that “assessment” was released almost a year ago, even the Times’ Scott Shane noticed the lack of proof, writing: “What is missing from the [the Jan. 6] public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

But the Times soon “forgot” what Shane had inconveniently noted and began reporting the Russian “hacking” as accepted wisdom.

The 17-Agencies Canard

Whenever scattered expressions of skepticism arose from a few analysts or non-mainstream media, the doubts were beaten back by the claim that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” concurred in the conclusion that Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered the hacking to hurt Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump. And what kind of nut would doubt the collective judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies!

Though the 17-agency canard was never true, it served an important purpose in establishing the Russia-gate groupthink. Wielding the “all 17 intelligence agencies” club, the U.S. mainstream media pounded politicians and policymakers into line, making any remaining skeptics seem more out of step and crazy.

So, in May 2017, when Clapper (along with former CIA Director John Brennan) admitted in congressional testimony that it wasn’t true that all 17 agencies concurred in the Russian hacking conclusion, those statements received very little attention in the mainstream media.

The New York Times among other major news outlets just continued asserting the 17-agency falsehood until the Times was finally pressured to correct its lie in late June, but that only led to the Times shifting to slightly different but still misleading wording, citing a “consensus” among the intelligence agencies without mentioning a number or by simply stating the unproven hacking claim as flat fact.

Even efforts to test the Russian-hack claims through science were ignored or ridiculed. When former NSA technical director William Binney conducted experiments that showed that the known download speed of one batch of DNC emails could not have occurred over the Internet but matched what was possible for a USB-connected thumb drive – an indication that a Democratic insider likely downloaded the emails and thus that there was no “hack” – Binney was mocked as a “conspiracy theorist.”

Even with the new disclosures about deep-seated anti-Trump bias in text messages exchanged between two senior FBI officials who played important early roles in the Russia-gate investigation, there is no indication that Official Washington is willing to go back to the beginning and see how the Russia-gate story might have been deceptively spun.

In a recently released Aug. 15, 2016 text message from Peter Strzok, a senior FBI counterintelligence official, to his reputed lover, senior FBI lawyer Lisa Page, Strzok referenced an apparent plan to keep Trump from getting elected before suggesting the need for “an insurance policy” just in case he did. A serious investigation into Russia-gate might want to know what these senior FBI officials had in mind.

But the Times and other big promoters of Russia-gate continue to dismiss doubters as delusional or as covering up for Russia and/or Trump. By this point – more than a year into this investigation – too many Important People have bought into the Russia-gate narrative to consider the possibility that there may be little or nothing there, or even worse, that it is the “insurance policy” that Strzok envisioned.

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

The Scary Void Inside Russia-gate

Despite a lack of evidence at its core – and the risk of nuclear conflagration as its by-product – Russia-gate remains the go-to accusation for “getting” the Trump administration, explains Russia scholar Stephen F. Cohen.

By Stephen F. Cohen

The foundational accusation of Russia-gate was, and remains, charges that Russian President Putin ordered the hacking of Democratic National Committee e-mails and their public dissemination through WikiLeaks in order to benefit Donald Trump and undermine Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, and that Trump and/or his associates colluded with the Kremlin in this “attack on American democracy.”

As no actual evidence for these allegations has been produced after nearly a

year and a half of media and government investigations, we are left with Russia-gate without Russia. (An apt formulation perhaps first coined in an e-mail exchange by *Nation* writer James Carden.) Special counsel Mueller has produced four indictments: against retired Gen. Michael Flynn, Trump's short-lived national-security adviser, and George Papadopolous, a lowly and inconsequential Trump "adviser," for lying to the FBI; and against Paul Manafort and his partner Rick Gates for financial improprieties. None of these charges has anything to do with improper collusion with Russia, except for the wrongful insinuations against Flynn.

Instead, the several investigations, desperate to find actual evidence of collusion, have spread to "contacts with Russia" – political, financial, social, etc. – on the part of a growing number of people, often going back many years before anyone imagined Trump as a presidential candidate. The resulting implication is that these "contacts" were criminal or potentially so.

This is unprecedented, preposterous, and dangerous, potentially more so than even Joe McCarthy's search for "Communist" connections. It would suggest, for example, that scores of American corporations doing business in Russia today are engaged in criminal enterprise.

More to the point, advisers to U.S. policy-makers and even media commentators on Russia must have many and various contacts with Russia if they are to understand anything about the dynamics of Kremlin policy-making. I myself, to take an individual example, was an adviser to two (unsuccessful) presidential campaigns, which considered my wide-ranging and longstanding "contacts" with Russia to be an important credential, as did the one sitting president whom I advised.

To suggest that such contacts are in any way criminal is to slur hundreds of reputations and to leave U.S. policy-makers with advisers laden with ideology and no actual expertise. It is also to suggest that any quest for better relations with Russia, or détente, is somehow suspicious, illegitimate, or impossible, as expressed recently by Andrew Weiss in *The Wall Street Journal* and by *The Washington Post*, in an editorial. This is one reason why I have, in a previous commentary, argued that Russia-gate and its promoters have become the gravest threat to American national security.

Russia-gate began sometime prior to June 2016, not after the presidential election in November, as is often said, as an anti-Trump political project. (Exactly why, how, and by whom remain unclear, and herein lies the real significance of the largely bogus "dossier" and the still murky role of top U.S. intel officials in the creation of that document.)

That said, the mainstream American media have been largely responsible for

inflating, perpetuating, and sustaining the sham Russia-gate as the real political crisis it has become, arguably the greatest in modern American presidential and thus institutional political history. The media have done this by increasingly betraying their own professed standards of verified news reporting and balanced coverage, even resorting to tacit forms of censorship by systematically excluding dissenting reporting and opinions.

(For inventories of recent examples, see [Glenn Greenwald at *The Intercept*](#) and [Joe Lauria at *Consortiumnews*](#). Anyone interested in exposures of such truly “fake news” should visit these two sites regularly, the latter the product of the inestimable veteran journalist Robert Parry.)

Still worse, this mainstream malpractice has spread to some alternative-media publications once prized for their journalistic standards, where expressed disdain for “evidence” and “proof” in favor of allegations without any actual facts can sometimes be found. Nor are these practices merely the ordinary occasional mishaps of professional journalism.

As Greenwald points out, all of the now retracted stories, whether by print media or cable television, were zealous promotions of Russia-gate and virulently anti-Trump. They, too, are examples of Russia-gate without Russia.

Flynn and the FBI

Leaving aside possible financial improprieties on the part of General Flynn, his persecution and subsequent prosecution is highly indicative. Flynn pled guilty to having lied to the FBI about his communications with the Russian ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, on behalf of the incoming Trump administration, discussions that unavoidably included some references, however vague, to sanctions imposed on Russia by President Obama in December 2016, just before leaving office.

Those sanctions were highly unusual – last-minute, unprecedented in their seizure of Russian property in the United States, and including a reckless veiled threat of unspecified cyber-attacks on Russia. They gave the impression that Obama wanted to make even more difficult Trump’s professed goal of improving relations with Moscow.

Still more, Obama’s specified reason was not Russian behavior in Ukraine or Syria, as is commonly thought, but Russia-gate – that is, Putin’s “attack on American democracy,” which Obama’s intel chiefs had evidently persuaded him was an entirely authentic allegation. (Or which Obama, who regarded Trump’s victory over his designated successor, Hillary Clinton, as a personal rebuff, was eager to believe.)

But Flynn’s discussions with the Russian ambassador – as well as other Trump

representatives' efforts to open "back-channel" communications with Moscow – were anything but a crime. As I pointed out in another commentary, there were so many precedents of such overtures on behalf of presidents-elect, it was considered a normal, even necessary practice, if only to ask Moscow not to make relations worse before the new president had a chance to review the relationship.

When Henry Kissinger did this on behalf of President-elect Nixon, his boss instructed him to keep the communication entirely confidential, not to inform any other members of the incoming administration. Presumably Flynn was similarly secretive, thereby misinforming Vice President Pence and finding himself trapped – or possibly entrapped – between loyalty to his president and an FBI agent. Flynn no doubt would have been especially guarded with a representative of the FBI, knowing as he did the role of Obama's Intel bosses in Russia-gate prior to the election and which had escalated after Trump's surprise victory.

In any event, to the extent that Flynn encouraged Moscow not to reply in kind immediately to Obama's highly provocative sanctions, he performed a service to U.S. national security, not a crime. And, assuming that Flynn was acting on the instructions of his president-elect, so did Trump. Still more, if Flynn "colluded" in any way, it was with Israel, not Russia, having been asked by that government to dissuade countries from voting for an impending anti-Israel U.N. resolution.

Removing Tillerson

Finally, and similarly, there is the ongoing effort by the political-media establishment to drive Secretary of State Rex Tillerson from office and replace him with a fully neocon, anti-Russian, anti-détente head of the State Department. Tillerson was an admirable appointee by Trump – widely experienced in world affairs, a tested negotiator, a mature and practical-minded man.

Originally, his role as the CEO of Exxon Mobil who had negotiated and enacted an immensely profitable and strategically important energy-extraction deal with the Kremlin earned him the slur of being "Putin's pal." This preposterous allegation has since given way to charges that he is slowly restructuring, and trimming, the long bloated and mostly inept State Department, as indeed he should do. Numerous former diplomats closely associated with Hillary Clinton have raced to influential op-ed pages to denounce Tillerson's undermining of this purportedly glorious frontline institution of American national security. Many news reports, commentaries, and editorials have been in the same vein. But who can recall a major diplomatic triumph by the State Department or a Secretary of State in recent years?

The answer might be the Obama administration's multinational agreement with Iran to curb its nuclear-weapons potential, but that was due no less to Russia's president and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which provided essential guarantees to the sides involved. Forgotten, meanwhile, are the more than 50 career State Department officials who publicly protested Obama's rare attempt to cooperate with Moscow in Syria. Call it by what it was: the sabotaging of a president by his own State Department.

In this spirit, there are a flurry of leaked stories that Tillerson will soon resign or be ousted. Meanwhile, however, he carries on. The ever-looming menace of Russia-gate compels him to issue wildly exaggerated indictments of Russian behavior while, at the same time, calling for a "productive new relationship" with Moscow, in which he clearly believes. (And which, if left unencumbered, he might achieve.)

Evidently, Tillerson has established a "productive" working relationship with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, the two of them having just announced North Korea's readiness to engage in negotiations with the United States and other governments involved in the current crisis.

Tillerson's fate will tell us much about the number-one foreign-policy question confronting America: cooperation or escalating conflict with the other nuclear superpower, a détente-like diminishing of the new Cold War or the growing risks that it will become hot war. Politics and policy should never be over-personalized; larger factors are always involved. But in these unprecedented times, Tillerson may be the last man standing who represents the possibility of some kind of détente. Apart, that is, from President Trump himself, loathe him or not. Or to put the issue differently: Will Russia-gate continue to gravely endanger American national security?

Stephen F. Cohen is a professor emeritus of Russian studies and politics at New York University and Princeton University and a contributing editor of *The Nation*, where a version of this article first appeared.

Lavishing Money on the Pentagon

Exclusive: It seems like it's always Christmastime at the Pentagon where the stockings are full and budget-cutting is for those domestic social-program guys, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

Wise parents who celebrate Christmas advise their young children not to make unreasonably grandiose requests of Santa. After all, he has to squeeze down a rather narrow chimney to deliver their presents.

But as Christmas approaches this year, leaders of Congress, the Pentagon, and the Trump White House seem to have forgotten that lesson. Their wish list for the U.S. military, if taken seriously, will bust the federal budget at the very time Republicans are ramming through tax legislation that will shrink Uncle Sam's savings account by more than a trillion dollars over the next decade.

President Trump this week signed into law a \$700 billion blueprint for military spending in the current fiscal year. The 2018 National Defense Authorization Act includes funding for more troops, more weapons, more interventions abroad, and more active wars, with Trump's enthusiastic blessing. "We need our military," he declared at a White House signing ceremony.

In addition to lavish spending on new weapons – like \$10 billion for purchases of the disastrous F-35 Joint Strike Fighter – this Christmas legislation for the military includes all sorts of smaller presents, including billions of dollars to fund NATO's European Deterrence Initiative (whatever happened to Trump's demand that our allies pay for their own defense?), missile defense systems of doubtful efficacy, and development of a new cruise missile that would violate the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty with Russia.

The bill also earmarks \$350 million for military aid to Ukraine, including lethal weaponry – a highly provocative measure that Arizona Senator John McCain has long promoted. Independent analysts, including prominent conservative foreign policy experts, warn that such lethal aid would be destabilizing, provocative, and "extraordinarily foolish."

Under the arcane rules of Congress, the House and Senate must still translate this blueprint into actual budget appropriations. Therein lies the rub. Back in the days when Republicans still claimed to believe in balanced budgets, they led the way in enacting limits on federal spending.

Current law caps core defense spending at \$549 billion in fiscal year 2018. The defense authorization bill, in contrast, pegs the request for core Pentagon operations at \$634 billion, with another \$66 billion to fight ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other hot spots. The latter funds are not subject to budget caps.

At his signing ceremony, Trump called on Congress to overturn its spending cap on the military. Many Republicans would be amenable, but Democrats may demand a

parallel relaxation of budget limits on domestic spending, a non-starter for conservatives.

Supporters of increased military spending, led by the Pentagon, point to how overworked the armed services are in today's world environment.

"We aren't big enough to do everything we're being tasked to do," complained Admiral William Moran, vice chief of naval operations, in recent congressional testimony.

Policing the World

Moran was right: it's a lot harder to police the world with 300 ships than it was several decades ago with nearly 600 vessels and only one serious foe.

Seen another way, however, budgetary realities might be sending us a message that it's no longer feasible, or in the national interest, to maintain nearly a quarter million troops in more than 170 countries and territories abroad.

Nor is it necessary for our defense to carry out vast military exercises from the Baltic States to the Sea of Japan in order to maintain dominance in Central Europe, the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, North Africa, and any number of other locations – all while conducting live military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Niger, and other war zones.

Those who can't see their way to setting limits on runaway military spending should reflect on the fact that the roughly \$65 billion a year the Pentagon spends on active war-fighting, through the "Overseas Contingency Operations" fund, is roughly equal to Russia's entire military budget. Only China spends more than that amount. And after those two countries, the next 15 biggest military spenders are all U.S. allies or reasonably friendly toward the United States.

Where Does the Money Go?

Taxpayers should also reflect on the fact that the Pentagon has never passed a full audit and has only a foggy idea of where all its money goes.

"The United States Army's finances are so jumbled it had to make trillions of dollars of improper accounting adjustments to create an illusion that its books are balanced," Reuters reported last year.

"The Defense Department's Inspector General . . . said the Army made \$2.8 trillion in wrongful adjustments to accounting entries in one quarter alone in 2015, and \$6.5 trillion for the year. Yet the Army lacked receipts and invoices

to support those numbers or simply made them up. . .

“For years, the Inspector General – the Defense Department’s official auditor – has inserted a disclaimer on all military annual reports. The accounting is so unreliable that ‘the basic financial statements may have undetected misstatements that are both material and pervasive.’”

We may not know for sure where the money goes, but we know it amounts to a vast sum every year. Since 9/11, Americans have paid nearly \$5 *trillion* for its foreign wars, according to Brown University’s Cost of War project – or about \$25,000 per taxpayer. If Congress really wants to ease the tax burden on middle-class Americans, putting an end to our permanent state of war would be a good place to start.

Jonathan Marshall writes frequently on Pentagon programs, including “US Arms Makers Invest in a New Cold War,” “New Navy Ship Leaking Tax Dollars,” “Trump Adds to Washington’s ‘Swamp’,” “Learning to Love – and Use – the Bomb,” and “Rising Budget Stakes for Space Warfare.”

What’s at Stake in Honduran Election

Protests continue over the disputed Honduran presidential election after a solid lead by a progressive was wiped out amid gross irregularities and the right-wing incumbent was declared the winner, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

For seven months in 1969, I hitch-hiked around the U.S., Mexico and Central America with my best friend from high school. Some class-mates from our school in Vancouver Canada saved their money then travelled to Europe or Australia but Ollie and I headed south. It was an eye-opening experience for two middle-class Canadians.

We had a lot of learning experiences in the U.S., but today I want to talk about Honduras because it is in crisis as I write this: the Honduran election took place on Nov. 26 yet the results are still in contention. Will the current right-wing government manage to retain power?

When we visited the capital Tegucigalpa in 1969 we went to the university campus to meet and hang out with young Hondurans. They told us about the recent visit

of President Richard Nixon who had taken office a few months before and then travelled to Latin America. The Vietnam War was still raging in 1969 and people protested against the war and Nixon wherever he went.

The young Hondurans told us that when Nixon visited Tegucigalpa there had been a big protest. Several students who had been protesting from the top of a university building had been shot dead. It made an impression as did the warm and friendly people we met, some living in shacks along the banks of the Choluteca River running through the capital.

In Nicaragua, we heard more eye-opening stories from the youth there. They told us about the Somoza family dictatorship, how corrupt it was, and how they came to power through U.S. Marines. They also told us about the death of Cesar Sandino who fought for Nicaraguan independence but was killed by Somoza's National Guard in 1934. The Nicaraguan youth told us that when the U.S. asked for proof of Sandino's death, Somoza shipped Sandino's head in a box to Washington.

Those and many other experiences changed my life. Over the coming decades I kept an interest in Central America.

In 1979, when Nicaraguans overthrew the Somoza dictatorship, it seemed like a good thing. But President Ronald Reagan did not like an independent Nicaragua. Violating international law, the U.S. organized a mercenary army called the "Contras" to destabilize and upend the Sandinista government. The mercenaries were trained in Honduras with U.S. funding, supplies and weapons.

The U.S. Ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, oversaw the mercenary army attacking Nicaragua and the emergence of death squads in El Salvador. Tens of thousands of peasants and opposition activists were killed with impunity. In Honduras itself, there was widespread repression and murder of those challenging the status quo.

In 1998, Honduras was hit by Hurricane Mitch. The second worst Atlantic hurricane ever recorded caused huge destruction and death, especially in poor communities with weak infrastructure. The shacks and modest dwellings along the river bank in Tegucigalpa were all ripped and washed away. Over 7,000 Hondurans died, including people we had met three decades before.

Six years later, in 2004, I was again reminded of the U.S. role in Honduras when the same John Negroponte who had overseen the Contra operations went to Baghdad to take over management of the Iraq occupation. Newsweek magazine said he was coming with a new strategy, which they dubbed the "Salvador option."

Over the next year, sectarian death squads emerged to provoke sectarian

bloodshed. Negroponte's right-hand man in Iraq, Robert S. Ford, was later appointed as U.S. Ambassador to Syria in 2010 where he helped fuel the uprisings in that country. Thus there is direct connection between U.S. interference and aggression in Central America and the Middle East.

Honduran Control

For decades Honduras was alternately ruled by two political parties representing different branches of the country's oligarchy. They traded power back and forth, effectively preventing alternative perspectives.

But things began to change in Honduras in 2006. President Manuel Zelaya came from the oligarchy but started to initiate changes benefiting the poor. He called for real land reform, raising the minimum wage and he questioned the need for US military bases. That was too much. In June 2009, President Zelaya was kidnapped in the middle of the night and flown from the capital to the U.S. military air base called Soto Cano, only 48 miles away. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had been in Honduras just weeks before. She disapproved of Zelaya and his policies. The coup went ahead.

After the 2009 coup, conditions in Honduras deteriorated rapidly. Tegucigalpa became the homicide capital of the world. Tens of thousands of youth have fled the country as it has been wracked by drug wars, corruption, and police or paramilitary repression. Alongside this, there has been widespread popular resistance.

In 2011, I returned to Honduras to see the conditions first hand. With a delegation organized by Alliance for Global Justice and Task Force on the Americas, I visited peasants in the fertile Aguan Valley, indigenous communities in the mountains and workers and church activists in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

We talked with a hard-working activist named Berta Caceres (who was assassinated five years later) and others in her indigenous organization COPINH. We learned that these communities were still actively resisting the coup and forming a new political party to challenge the right-wing coup government not with guns but with votes.

In 2013, I returned again to Honduras, this time as an election observer. In the contest, the new LIBRE party surpassed the traditional Liberal Party and made a strong challenge to the right-wing National Party. There were many examples of election malfeasance but Juan Orlando Hernandez of the right-wing National Party was anointed as the new President.

Since then social and economic conditions have not changed. The Hernandez regime

governs to the benefit of rich Hondurans and international corporations. He has a strong military alliance with the U.S. military and is very friendly with President Trump's Chief of Staff, retired Marine Gen. John Kelly.

Wiping Out a Lead

That has set the stage for the most recent events. Days before the election. The Economist ran an article describing a National Party training session in cheating techniques. The election was held on Sunday, Nov. 26. On election night, with 57 percent of the votes counted, the opposition challenger was ahead by over 5 percentage points.

Then strange things began to happen. The election commission stopped updating the vote tally for 36 hours. The head of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal said on Monday they were still missing 6,000 tally sheets from different polling places. A few hours later, he said they were missing 7500 tally sheets. When the vote count resumed on Tuesday, the existing President Hernandez was gaining votes, cutting the opposition lead and then winning. It all looked very fishy, even to the OAS monitors.

The situation is rapidly coming to a head. Initially, the opposition demanded a full and complete review of all the 18,000 tally sheets. Now they are calling for the annulment of the election and a new election under international supervision.

The Honduran government is either stonewalling or is paralyzed. Hundreds of thousands of Hondurans have protested in the streets, with at least 12 protesters killed. However in a dramatic change, the elite paramilitary COBRA security forces have started to refuse orders, saying their job is not to repress their own communities.

The repercussions of what happens in Honduras could also reach across Latin America. Just as the 2009 coup in Honduras was a setback for the entire region, the outcome of the current crisis will have wide-reaching consequences, too. As reported in Foreign Policy magazine, "The US has a lot riding on the Honduran election"; the U.S. foreign policy establishment wants the continuation of the government of Juan Orlando Hernandez.

Despite all the indications of electoral malfeasance and human rights abuses, the Trump Administration has praised the conservative government. Meanwhile, some North American reporters, analysts and activists are doing what they can to support Honduran popular forces and to stop the theft of the Honduran election.

The coming days may be momentous. I have explained why it personally matters to me. But this is more important than one person's connection to a country. It

should matter to anyone concerned with progress, justice, respect and international law. .

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The Foundering Russia-gate ‘Scandal’

Exclusive: Taking on water from revealed FBI conflicts of interest, the foundering Russia-gate probe – and its mainstream media promoters – are resorting to insults against people who note the listing ship, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The disclosure of fiercely anti-Trump text messages between two romantically involved senior FBI officials who played key roles in the early Russia-gate inquiry has turned the supposed Russian-election-meddling “scandal” into its own scandal, by providing evidence that some government investigators saw it as their duty to block or destroy Donald Trump’s presidency.

As much as the U.S. mainstream media has mocked the idea that an American “deep state” exists and that it has maneuvered to remove Trump from office, the text messages between senior FBI counterintelligence official Peter Strzok and senior FBI lawyer Lisa Page reveal how two high-ranking members of the government’s intelligence/legal bureaucracy saw their role as protecting the United States from an election that might elevate to the presidency someone as unfit as Trump.

In one Aug. 6, 2016 text exchange, Page told Strzok: “Maybe you’re meant to stay where you are because you’re meant to protect the country from that menace.” At the end of that text, she sent Strzok a link to a David Brooks [column](#) in The New York Times, which concludes with the clarion call: “There comes a time when neutrality and laying low become dishonorable. If you’re not in revolt, you’re in cahoots. When this period and your name are mentioned, decades hence, your grandkids will look away in shame.”

Apparently after reading that stirring advice, Strzok replied, “And of course I’ll try and approach it that way. I just know it will be tough at times. I can protect our country at many levels, not sure if that helps.”

At a House Judiciary Committee hearing on Wednesday, Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio,

criticized Strzok's boast that "I can protect our country at many levels." Jordan said: "this guy thought he was super-agent James Bond at the FBI [deciding] there's no way we can let the American people make Donald Trump the next president."

In the text messages, Strzok also expressed visceral contempt for working-class Trump voters, for instance, writing on Aug. 26, 2016, "Just went to a southern Virginia Walmart. I could SMELL the Trump support. ... it's scary real down here."

Another text message suggested that other senior government officials – alarmed at the possibility of a Trump presidency – joined the discussion. In an apparent reference to an August 2016 meeting with FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, Strzok wrote to Page on Aug. 15, 2016, "I want to believe the path you threw out for consideration in Andy's office – that there's no way he gets elected – but I'm afraid we can't take that risk."

Strzok added, "It's like an insurance policy in the unlikely event that you die before you're 40."

It's unclear what strategy these FBI officials were contemplating to ensure Trump's defeat, but the comments mesh with what an intelligence source told me after the 2016 election, that there was a plan among senior Obama administration officials to use the allegations about Russian meddling to block Trump's momentum with the voters and – if elected – to persuade members of the Electoral College to deny Trump a majority of votes and thus throw the selection of a new president into the House of Representatives under the rules of the Twelfth Amendment.

The scheme involved having some Democratic electors vote for former Secretary of State Colin Powell (which did happen), making him the third-place vote-getter in the Electoral College and thus eligible for selection by the House. But the plan fizzled when enough of Trump's electors stayed loyal to their candidate to officially make him President.

After that, Trump's opponents turned to the Russia-gate investigation as the vehicle to create the conditions for somehow nullifying the election, impeaching Trump, or at least weakening him sufficiently so he could not take steps to improve relations with Russia.

In one of her text messages to Strzok, Page made reference to a possible Watergate-style ouster of Trump, writing: "Bought all the president's men. Figure I needed to brush up on watergate."

As a key feature in this oust-Trump effort, Democrats have continued to lie by claiming that "all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred" in the assessment

that Russia hacked the Democratic emails last year on orders from President Vladimir Putin and then slipped them to WikiLeaks to undermine Hillary Clinton's campaign.

That canard was used in the early months of the Russia-gate imbroglio to silence any skepticism about the "hacking" accusation, and the falsehood was repeated again by a Democratic congressman during Wednesday's hearing of the House Judiciary Committee.

But the "consensus" claim was never true. In May 2017 testimony, President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged that the Jan. 6 "Intelligence Community Assessment" was put together by "hand-picked" analysts from only three agencies: the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

Biased at the Creation

And, the new revelations of high-level FBI bias puts Clapper's statement about "hand-picked" analysts in sharper perspective, since any intelligence veteran will tell you that if you hand-pick the analysts you are effectively hand-picking the analysis.

Although it has not yet been spelled out exactly what role Strzok and Page may have had in the Jan. 6 report, I was told by one source that Strzok had a direct hand in writing it. Whether that is indeed the case, Strzok, as a senior FBI counterintelligence official, would almost surely have had input into the selection of the FBI analysts and thus into the substance of the report itself. [For challenges from intelligence experts to the Jan. 6 report, see Consortiumnews.com's "More Holes in the Russia-gate Narrative."]

If the FBI contributors to the Jan. 6 report shared Strzok's contempt for Trump, it could explain why claims from an unverified dossier of Democratic-financed "dirt" on Trump, including salacious charges that Russian intelligence operatives videotaped Trump being urinated on by prostitutes in a five-star Moscow hotel, was added as a classified appendix to the report and presented personally to President-elect Trump.

Though Democrats and the Clinton campaign long denied financing the dossier – prepared by ex-British spy Christopher Steele who claimed to rely on second- and third-hand information from anonymous Russian contacts – it was revealed in October 2017 that the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign shared in the costs, with the payments going to the "oppo" research firm, Fusion GPS, through the Democrats' law firm, Perkins Coie.

That discovery helped ensnare another senior Justice Department official, Associate Attorney General Bruce Ohr, who talked with Steele during the campaign

and had a post-election meeting with Fusion GPS co-founder Glenn Simpson. Recently, Simpson has acknowledged that Ohr's wife, Nellie Ohr, was hired by Fusion GPS last year to investigate Trump.

Bruce Ohr has since been demoted and Strzok was quietly removed from the Russia-gate investigation last July although the reasons for these moves were not publicly explained at the time.

Still, the drive for "another Watergate" to oust an unpopular – and to many insiders, unfit – President remains at the center of the thinking among the top mainstream news organizations as they have scrambled for Russia-gate "scoops" over the past year even at the cost of making serious reporting errors.

For instance, last Friday, CNN – and then CBS News and MSNBC – trumpeted an email supposedly sent from someone named Michael J. Erickson on Sept. 4, 2016, to Donald Trump Jr. that involved WikiLeaks offering the Trump campaign pre-publication access to purloined Democratic National Committee emails that WikiLeaks published on Sept. 13, nine days later.

Grasping for Confirmation

Since the Jan. 6 report alleged that WikiLeaks received the "hacked" emails from Russia – a claim that WikiLeaks and Russia deny – the story seemed to finally tie together the notion that the Trump campaign had at least indirectly colluded with Russia.

This new "evidence" spread like wildfire across social media. As The Intercept's Glenn Greenwald wrote in an article critical of the media's performance, some Russia-gate enthusiasts heralded the revelation with graphics of cannons booming and nukes exploding.

But the story soon collapsed when it turned out that the date on the email was actually Sept. 14, 2016, i.e., the day *after* WikiLeaks released the batch of DNC emails, not Sept. 4. It appeared that "Erickson" – whoever he was – had simply alerted the Trump campaign to the public existence of the WikiLeaks disclosure.

Greenwald noted, "So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all."

Yet, despite the cascade of errors and grudging corrections, including some belated admissions that there was no "17-intelligence-agency consensus" on Russian "hacking" – The New York Times made a preemptive strike against the new documentary evidence that the Russia-gate investigation was riddled with conflicts of interest.

The Times' lead editorial on Wednesday mocked reporters at Fox News for living in an "alternate universe" where the Russia-gate "investigation is 'illegitimate and corrupt,' or so says Gregg Jarrett, a legal analyst who appears regularly on [Sean] Hannity's nightly exercise in presidential ego-stroking."

Though briefly mentioning the situation with Strzok's text messages, the Times offered no details or context for the concerns, instead just heaping ridicule on anyone who questions the Russia-gate narrative.

"To put it mildly, this is insane," the Times declared. "The primary purpose of Mr. Mueller's investigation is not to take down Mr. Trump. It's to protect America's national security and the integrity of its elections by determining whether a presidential campaign conspired with a foreign adversary to influence the 2016 election – a proposition that grows more plausible every day."

The Times fumed that "roughly three-quarters of Republicans still refuse to accept that Russia interfered in the 2016 election – a fact that is glaringly obvious to everyone else, including the nation's intelligence community." (There we go again with the false suggestion of a consensus within the intelligence community.)

The Times also took to task Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, for seeking "a Special Counsel to investigate ALL THINGS 2016 – not just Trump and Russia." The Times insisted that "None of these attacks or insinuations are grounded in good faith."

But what are the Times editors so afraid of? As much as they try to insult and intimidate anyone who demands serious evidence about the Russia-gate allegations, why shouldn't the American people be informed about how Washington insiders manipulate elite opinion in pursuit of reversing "mistaken" judgments by the unwashed masses?

Do the Times editors really believe in democracy – a process that historically has had its share of warts and mistakes – or are they just elitists who think they know best and turn away their noses from the smell of working-class people at Walmart?

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

Trump's Illegal Syrian Mission Creep

Even as the Islamic State's "caliphate" in Syria collapses, the U.S. government is keeping about 2,000 soldiers in-country despite lacking any legal right to be there, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar discusses.

By Paul R. Pillar

The other day we learned that there are four times more U.S. troops in Syria than any earlier official figure had acknowledged. The discrepancy did not get much public attention, perhaps because the numbers are small compared to some other U.S. military deployments: about 2,000 troops in Syria, with the earlier official figure being 500.

The incomplete count evidently had omitted personnel on short-term assignments and some others performing sensitive missions. A Pentagon spokesman said that release of the newer, more complete figure is part of an effort by Secretary of Defense James Mattis to be more transparent.

Less transparent than the new data about numbers of U.S. troops is the reason any of those troops are staying in Syria. The one uncontested rationale for the deployment in Syria has been to combat the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which is an unconventional non-state actor but presented conventional sorts of military targets when it established a state-like entity occupying significant territory in Syria and Iraq.

The ISIS mini-state is now all but eliminated. Nonetheless, the U.S. military presence in Syria, although down from its peak strength, shows no sign of ending. Mattis has said that the United States "won't just walk away" from its efforts in Syria.

Signs of Mission Creep

The United States is exhibiting mission creep in Syria, with new rationales being spun to replace the mission of armed combat against the ISIS caliphate. Underlying the mission creep are some familiar patterns of thinking that have been behind other U.S. military expeditions as well. Donald Trump did not originate these patterns but his administration has slid into them.

Mattis's comment about not walking away from where the United States already has been involved points to one of those American habits of thought, which is to believe that the United States is best equipped, and should be most responsible, for setting right any troubled country in which the United States has had more

than a passing interest. To believe this about Syria goes well beyond the mission of combating ISIS and gets into pacification and even some elements of nation-building.

Other patterns of thinking about the Syrian case entail amnesia about recent relevant experiences and the lessons that should have been drawn from them but evidently weren't. American attitudes toward ISIS, the Syrian regime, and Syria's Russian and Iranian allies are all involved.

The dominant American perspective toward counterterrorism, and thus toward ISIS, has been a heavily militarized one inherent in the notion of a "war on terror." Use of the military instrument has been appropriate insofar as ISIS, as a mini-state, presented military targets. But ISIS, which lives on as more of a clandestine movement and ideology, no longer presents many such targets. Non-military counterterrorist instruments are now relatively more important.

Too often forgotten is how much war itself, and specifically the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, was a boon to ISIS. Also too often forgotten is how much the collateral casualties and damage that are almost unavoidable byproducts of U.S. military action in complicated conflicts tend to boost rather than reduce anti-U.S. extremism, including extremism that takes the form of international terrorism.

'Regime Change' Dreams

One habitual thought about ISIS has been that Assad must be toppled if there is to be any hope of killing off ISIS. Max Abrahms and John Glaser catalog the many iterations, voiced over the past two years, of the theme that defeating ISIS would require defeating Assad. Today's situation, with the ISIS caliphate extinguished while Assad remains ensconced in Damascus, demonstrates how erroneous that argument was.

Many who propounded the argument are among those now pushing for continuation and expansion of the U.S. military expedition in Syria, with no acknowledgment of how wrong was their earlier assessment. This demonstrates anew how little accountability there is for faulty policy analysis among the Washington chattering classes.

The dream of felling Assad does not die, even though with the help of his friends he does not appear to be going anywhere in the foreseeable future. Persistence of the dream involves more amnesia, in at least two respects. One is to forget the consequences of earlier U.S. or U.S.-backed efforts at regime change in the region. These include the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which gave birth to the group that we later came to know as ISIS, and the

chaos-fomenting ouster of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

There also seems to be forgetfulness of how long the Assads – including the father Hafez, who put down internal opposition at least as brutally as his son Bashar – have been in power. Forty-seven years, to be exact. Anyone arguing that continuation of Bashar Assad in power is intolerable needs to answer the question “why now?” and to explain how the world and U.S. interests somehow have survived nearly a half century of the Assads.

As for Bashar Assad’s Russian and Iranian friends, the dominant American perspective is the zero-sum assumption that any presence or influence of either Iran or Russia is *ipso facto* bad and contrary to U.S. interests. This perspective makes no effort to sort out the respects in which Russian or Iranian actions conflict with U.S. interests, parallel U.S. interests, or are irrelevant to those interests.

This absence of effort persists despite the glaring example (not just in Syria, but also in Iraq and beyond), of the fight against ISIS as a parallel interest. Joined to this habitual perspective is the also habitual use of the misleading vacuum metaphor, according to which not just U.S. involvement but physical and preferably military involvement to fill a space is needed to counter bad-by-definition Iranian or Russian influence in that same space.

These habits of thinking, taken together, close off an escape route from Syria. They imply no end to the U.S. military expedition there. They preclude declaring victory (that is, a military victory against ISIS) and going home. Vladimir Putin, more conscious than most American pundits are of the hazards of indefinitely being stuck in Syria, is doing that now.

Thus Syria is becoming one more place, like Afghanistan, in which the United States endlessly wages a war. Meanwhile the Russians will keep reminding everyone that they were there at the invitation of the incumbent government and the United States is not. The Turks will keep getting angry about U.S. tactical cooperation with Kurds. Sunni extremists will keep exploiting for propaganda and recruitment any damage done by the United States or its local clients. And the Pentagon may or may not tell us how many U.S. troops are actually there.

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Silencing of Courageous Documentaries

Historically, documentaries have told important truth in powerful ways and often challenging powerful groupthinks, but such brave films are becoming an endangered species, explains John Pilger.

By John Pilger

I first understood the power of the documentary during the editing of my first film, *The Quiet Mutiny*. In the commentary, I make reference to a chicken, which my crew and I encountered while on patrol with American soldiers in Vietnam.

"It must be a Vietcong chicken – a communist chicken," said the sergeant. He wrote in his report: "enemy sighted." The chicken moment seemed to underline the farce of the war – so I included it in the film. That may have been unwise.

The regulator of commercial television in Britain – then the Independent Television Authority or ITA – had demanded to see my script. What was my source for the political affiliation of the chicken? I was asked. Was it really a communist chicken, or could it have been a pro-American chicken?

Of course, this nonsense had a serious purpose; when *The Quiet Mutiny* was broadcast by ITV in 1970, the U.S. ambassador to Britain, Walter Annenberg, a personal friend of President Richard Nixon, complained to the ITA. He complained not about the chicken but about the whole film. "I intend to inform the White House," the ambassador wrote. Gosh.

The Quiet Mutiny had revealed that the U.S. Army in Vietnam was tearing itself apart. There was open rebellion: drafted men were refusing orders and shooting their officers in the back or "fragging" them with grenades as they slept. None of this had been news. What it meant was that the war was lost; and the messenger was not appreciated.

The Director-General of the ITA was Sir Robert Fraser. He summoned Denis Foreman, then Director of Programmes at Granada TV, and went into a state of apoplexy. Spraying expletives, Sir Robert described me as a "dangerous subversive."

What concerned the regulator and the ambassador was the *power* of a single documentary film: the power of its facts and witnesses: especially young soldiers speaking the truth and treated sympathetically by the film-maker.

I was a newspaper journalist. I had never made a film before and I was indebted

to Charles Denton, a renegade producer from the BBC, who taught me that facts and evidence told straight to the camera and to the audience could indeed be subversive.

This subversion of official lies is the power of documentary. I have now made 60 films and I believe there is nothing like this power in any other medium.

Nuclear Warning

In the 1960s, a brilliant young film-maker, Peter Watkins, made *The War Game* for the BBC. Watkins reconstructed the aftermath of a nuclear attack on London. *The War Game* was banned.



“The effect of this film,” said the BBC, “has been judged to be too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting.”

The then chairman of the BBC’s Board of Governors was Lord Normanbrook, who had been Secretary to the Cabinet. He wrote to his successor in the Cabinet, Sir Burke Trend: “*The War Game* is not designed as propaganda: it is intended as a purely factual statement and is based on careful research into official material ... but the subject is alarming, and the showing of the film on television might have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent.”

In other words, the power of this documentary was such that it might alert people to the true horrors of nuclear war and cause them to question the very existence of nuclear weapons. The Cabinet papers show that the BBC secretly colluded with the government to ban Watkins’s film. The cover story was that the BBC had a responsibility to protect “the elderly living alone and people of limited mental intelligence.”

Most of the press swallowed this. The ban on *The War Game* ended the career of Peter Watkins in British television at the age of 30. This remarkable film-maker left the BBC and Britain, and angrily launched a worldwide campaign against censorship. Telling the truth, and dissenting from the *official* truth, can be

hazardous for a documentary film-maker.

In 1988, Thames Television broadcast *Death on the Rock*, a documentary about the war in Northern Ireland. It was a risky and courageous venture. Censorship of the reporting of the so-called Irish Troubles was rife, and many of us in documentaries were actively discouraged from making films north of the border. If we tried, we were drawn into a quagmire of compliance.

The journalist Liz Curtis calculated that the BBC had banned, doctored or delayed some 50 major TV programs on Ireland. There were, of course, honorable exceptions, such as John Ware

Roger Bolton, the producer of *Death on the Rock*, was another. *Death on the Rock* revealed that the British Government deployed SAS death squads overseas against the IRA, murdering four unarmed people in Gibraltar. A vicious smear campaign was mounted against the film, led by the government of Margaret Thatcher and the Murdoch press, notably the *Sunday Times*, edited by Andrew Neil.

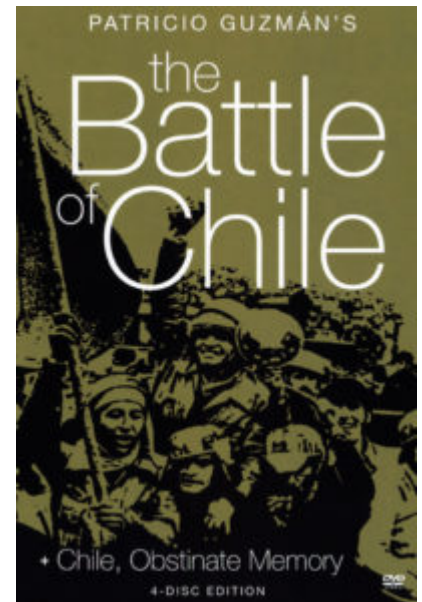
It was the only documentary ever subjected to an official inquiry – and its facts were vindicated. Murdoch had to pay up for the defamation of one of the film's principal witnesses. But that wasn't the end of it. Thames Television, one of the most innovative broadcasters in the world, was eventually stripped of its franchise in the United Kingdom.

Did Prime Minister Thatcher exact her revenge on ITV and the film-makers, as she had done to the miners? We don't know. What we do know is that the power of this one documentary stood by the truth and, like *The War Game*, marked a high point in filmed journalism.

Artistic Heresy

I believe great documentaries exude an artistic heresy. They are difficult to categorize. They are not like great fiction. They are not like great feature

movies. Yet, they can combine the sheer power of both.



The Battle of Chile: the fight of an unarmed people, is an epic documentary by Patricio Guzman. It is an extraordinary film: actually a trilogy of films. When it was released in the 1970s, the *New Yorker* asked: “How could a team of five people, some with no previous film experience, working with one Éclair camera, one Nagra sound-recorder, and a package of black and white film, produce a work of this magnitude?”

Guzman’s documentary is about the overthrow of democracy in Chile in 1973 by fascists led by General Augusto Pinochet and directed by the CIA. Almost everything is filmed hand-held, on the shoulder. And remember this is a *film* camera, not video. You have to change the magazine every ten minutes, or the camera stops; and the slightest movement and change of light affects the image.

In the *Battle of Chile*, there is a scene at the funeral of a naval officer, loyal to President Salvador Allende, who was murdered by those plotting to destroy Allende’s reformist government. The camera moves among the military faces: human totems with their medals and ribbons, their coiffed hair and opaque eyes. The sheer menace of the faces says you are watching the funeral of a whole society: of democracy itself.

There is a price to pay for filming so bravely. The cameraman, Jorge Muller, was arrested and taken to a torture camp, where he “disappeared” until his grave was found many years later. He was 27. I salute his memory.

In Britain, the pioneering work of John Grierson, Denis Mitchell, Norman Swallow, Richard Cawston and other film-makers in the early Twentieth Century crossed the great divide of class and presented another country. They dared put cameras and microphones in front of ordinary Britons and allowed them to talk in their own language.

John Grierson is said by some to have coined the term “documentary.” “The drama is on your doorstep,” he said in the 1920s, “wherever the slums are, wherever there is malnutrition, wherever there is exploitation and cruelty.”

Speaking from Below

These early British film-makers believed that the documentary should speak from below, not from above: it should be the medium of people, not authority. In other words, it was the blood, sweat and tears of ordinary people that gave us the documentary.



Denis Mitchell was famous for his portraits of a working-class street. “Throughout my career,” he said, “I have been absolutely astonished at the quality of people’s strength and dignity.”

When I read those words, I think of the survivors of Grenfell Tower, most of them still waiting to be re-housed, all of them still waiting for justice, as the cameras move on to the repetitive circus of a royal wedding.

The late David Munro and I made *Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia* in 1979. This film broke a silence about a country subjected to more than a decade of bombing and genocide, and its power involved millions of ordinary men, women and children in the rescue of a society on the other side of the world.

Even now, *Year Zero* puts the lie to the myth that the public doesn’t care, or that those who do care eventually fall victim to something called “compassion fatigue.” *Year Zero* was watched by an audience greater than the audience of the current, immensely popular British “reality” program *Bake Off*. It was shown on mainstream TV in more than 30 countries, but not in the United States, where PBS rejected it outright, fearful, according to an executive, of the reaction of the new Reagan administration.

In Britain and Australia, it was broadcast without advertising – the only time, to my knowledge, this has happened on commercial television. Following the British broadcast, more than 40 sacks of post arrived at ATV’s offices in Birmingham, 26,000 first-class letters in the first post alone. Remember this was a time before email and Facebook.

In the letters was £1 million – most of it in small amounts from those who could least afford to give.

“This is for Cambodia,” wrote a bus driver, enclosing his week’s wages. Pensioners sent their pension. A single mother sent her savings of £50. People came to my home with toys and cash, and petitions for Thatcher and poems of indignation for Pol Pot and for his collaborator, President Richard Nixon, whose bombs had accelerated the fanatic’s rise.

For the first time, the BBC supported an ITV film. The *Blue Peter* program asked children to “bring and buy” toys at Oxfam shops throughout the country. By Christmas, the children had raised the astonishing amount of £3,500,000.

Across the world, *Year Zero* raised more than \$55 million, mostly unsolicited, and which brought help directly to Cambodia: medicines, vaccines and the installation of an entire clothing factory that allowed people to throw away the black uniforms they had been forced to wear by Pol Pot. It was as if the audience had ceased to be onlookers and had become participants.

Murrow’s Message

Something similar happened in the United States when CBS Television broadcast Edward R. Murrow’s film, *Harvest of Shame*, in 1960. This was the first time that many middle-class Americans glimpsed the scale of poverty in their midst.

Harvest of Shame is the story of migrant agricultural workers who were treated little better than slaves. Today, their struggle has such resonance as migrants and refugees fight for work and safety in foreign places. What seems extraordinary is that the children and grandchildren of some of the people in this film will be bearing the brunt of the abuse and strictures of President Trump.

In the United States today, there is no equivalent of Edward R. Murrow. His eloquent, unflinching kind of American journalism has been abolished in the so-called mainstream and has taken refuge in the Internet.

Britain remains one of the few countries where documentaries are still shown on mainstream television in the hours when most people are still awake. But documentaries that go against the received wisdom are becoming an endangered species, at the very time we need them perhaps more than ever.

In survey after survey, when people are asked what they would like more of on television, they say documentaries. I don’t believe they mean a type of current affairs program that is a platform for politicians and “experts” who affect a specious balance between great power and its victims. Observational

documentaries are popular; but films about airports and motorway police do not make sense of the world. They entertain.

David Attenborough's brilliant programs on the natural world are making sense of climate change – belatedly. The BBC's Panorama is making sense of Britain's secret support of jihadism in Syria – belatedly. But why is Trump setting fire to the Middle East? Why is the West edging closer to war with Russia and China?

Mark the words of the narrator in Peter Watkins's *The War Game*: "On almost the entire subject of nuclear weapons, there is now practically total silence in the press, and on TV. There is hope in any unresolved or unpredictable situation. But is there real hope to be found in this silence?"

In 2017, that silence has returned. It is not news that the safeguards on nuclear weapons have been quietly removed and that the United States is now spending \$46 million per hour on nuclear weapons: that's \$46 million every hour, 24 hours a day, every day. Who knows that?

The Coming War on China, which I completed last year, has been broadcast in the United Kingdom but not in the United States – where 90 per cent of the population cannot name or locate the capital of North Korea or explain why Trump wants to destroy it. China is next door to North Korea.

According to one "progressive" film distributor in the U.S., the American people are interested only in what she calls "character-driven" documentaries. This is code for a "look at me" consumerist cult that now consumes and intimidates and exploits so much of our popular culture, while turning away film-makers from a subject as urgent as any in modern times.

"When the truth is replaced by silence," wrote the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "the silence is a lie."

Whenever young documentary film-makers ask me how they can "make a difference," I reply that it is really quite simple. They need to break the silence.

This is an edited version of an address John Pilger gave at the British Library on Dec. 9 as part of a retrospective festival, "The Power of the Documentary," held to mark the Library's acquisition of Pilger's written archive. www.johnpilger.com

North Korea's Understandable Fears

By escalating threatening rhetoric – and staging provocative military maneuvers – President Trump may believe he can intimidate North Korea into capitulation but history would tell you something else, writes David William Pear.

By David William Pear

Like Pavlov's dog, the mainstream media slobbers predicable reactions every time North Korea launches another test missile. Listening to the blather one would think that once Kim Jong Un has a missile capable of reaching the U.S., he is going to use it in an unprovoked nuclear attack on the U.S. mainland killing millions of Americans.

However, for Kim to attack the U.S., he would have to be insane, paranoid, and suicidal. Top officials in the U.S. intelligence agencies say he is not. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats has said publicly that Kim is acting very rationally; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says that Kim is "not insane"; the CIA deputy director of the Korea Mission Center, Yong Suk Lee, says that Kim is not suicidal, either.

So we can rest fairly assured that Kim Jong Un is highly unlikely to wake up one morning and nuke America because he can. According to Yong, Kim "wants to rule for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed."[CNN, October 6, 2017]. Everyone in the mainstream media knows this or should.

And, North Korea has long had more reasons to fear the U.S. than vice versa. North Korea is not an existential threat to the U.S. national security; but the opposite is not the case – and the U.S. government is not shy about reminding North Korea of that fact. The U.S. regularly practices nuclear attacks on North Korea by air, land and sea, which draw the predictable response from Kim.

Yet, North Korea has offered to stop testing nuclear bombs, if the U.S. would stop playing nuclear war games on its border [The Guardian]. The reality is that the U.S. has been threatening North Korea for over 70 years.

While the U.S. mainstream media excites the U.S. public with warnings about "crazy" Kim Jong Un, what should frighten the American people is the long history of U.S. crazies who seriously contemplated and/or implicitly threatened to start a nuclear war with a variety of countries. President Trump is not the first president who cannot be trusted with the nuclear button. It is only by sheer luck that the world has escaped a nuclear war or a cataclysmic nuclear accident. There have been many close calls, and one day there may be one too

many.

The U.S. keeps gambling with nuclear roulette, threatening North Korea, Iran, Russia, and the enemy *du jour*. One of the favorite U.S. verbal threats is to say that “all options are on the table,” which adversaries understand to include the nuclear option. The U.S. has even used nuclear bombs twice against civilian populations in 1945, and according to many historians unnecessarily, because Japan had already offered to surrender. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese died mostly so that President Harry Truman could impress Soviet leader Josef Stalin with a terrifying show of U.S. military might.

During the Korean War (1950 to 1953). President Truman publicly threatened to use the atomic bomb, and the military planned, practiced and shipped nuclear bombs to Asia to be dropped on North Korea. General Douglas MacArthur wanted to use 26 nuclear bombs and start a war with China, too [[History News Network](#)].

Truman gave General Matthew Ridgeway pre-authorization to use nuclear bombs, even after MacArthur was relieved of his command. Instead, the [U.S. chose to destroy North Korea](#) with conventional bombs and napalm, killing an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of the population.

The Korean War is called the “Forgotten War” for a number of reasons, including that the U.S. military suffered what amounted to a humiliating defeat with some 37,000 American soldiers killed while they were being used essentially as negotiating chips. They “died for a tie,” where to draw the Military Demarcation Line between the North and South; and South Korea, too, was largely “destroyed to save it” from communism.

The South Koreans deserve a lot of credit for rebuilding a modern highly advanced society in all categories such as education, healthcare, technology, and their standard of living. But contrary to propaganda mythology, they did not develop under capitalist free-trade and democracy. The South Korean “miracle on the Han River” was achieved under a U.S.-backed military dictatorship, a highly planned economy, and billions of dollars from U.S. aid, loans and direct investment. [[“Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism”](#), by Ha-Joon Chang].

Very Good Reasons

So, Kim Jong Un has very good reasons to fear U.S. threats. He knows that the U.S. is ruthless enough to kill millions of his people and destroy his country (along with gruesomely dispatching its leaders), much like the U.S. did in Iraq and Libya.

Sen. John McCain’s daughter Meghan McCain said on Fox News that the U.S. should

assassinate the "Crazy Fat Kid". Words like that along with Trump's insults ("Little Rocket Man"), threats and nuclear war games are sure to draw bombastic verbal reactions by Kim Jong Un and cause him to redouble his nuclear and missile programs. [The Nation].

While the U.S. constantly talks about a denuclearized Korean peninsula, it is the U.S. that first nuclearized it, starting with President Harry Truman's threats in 1951. Then in July 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower unilaterally withdrew from section 13(d) of the 1953 Armistice Agreement, which made the introduction of any new weapon systems in the Korean peninsula forbidden to both sides. The U.S. broke the promise so that it could "equip U.S. forces in Korea with modern weapons;" dual capability (nuclear-conventional) weapons, such as the Honest John and the 280 mm. cannon, i.e. tactical nuclear weapons [National Security Council Report].

All during the rest of the Cold War the U.S. stationed at least 950 nuclear weapons in South Korea. The U.S. may have withdrawn its nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991 as it says, but it still has plenty in Guam and elsewhere that it uses to constantly threaten North Korea with a nuclear attack.

While the U.S. mainstream media ponders how to get North Korea to sit down at the negotiating table, it is the U.S. that refuses to talk. North Korea has often offered to sign a permanent peace treaty and non-aggression agreement, but the U.S. has consistently rebuffed the offers. The State Department has repeatedly said in news conferences that it will not negotiate with North Korea unless North Korean officials meet unspecified preconditions first [U.S. Department of State]. What is puzzling is what the preconditions are, and how to get the U.S. to sit down at the table. Yet, the U.S. and its media constantly say it is North Korea that refuses to talk.

Understandable Paranoia

Unless there is a diplomatic solution, Kim Jong Un is rationally following in his father's footsteps by developing a credible nuclear deterrent against threatened U.S. aggression.

In 2000, George W. Bush scoffed at President Clinton's nuclear agreement with North Korea, and then, as President in 2002, Bush intensified threats with his "Axis of Evil" speech, which put North Korea on an enemies list with Iraq and Iran. Bush followed that speech by invading Iraq in 2003 with "Shock and Awe," leaving the cradle of human civilization in ruins and later hanging Saddam Hussein.

Bush did not plan to stop with Iraq. Retired Gen. Wesley Clark says he was told

at the Pentagon that Bush planned to invade seven countries in five years: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran [YouTube].

It is the U.S. that has been paranoid, unpredictable and insane during the Twenty-first Century. And the problem did not start with Trump. After the initial U.S. invasion of Iraq, a smug-looking Bush got out of the passenger seat of a fighter jet that the pilot had landed on the USS Abraham Lincoln. He strutted over to the microphone in his flight suit and gave a premature "Mission Accomplished" speech.

Lisa Schiffren gushed in the Wall Street Journal that Bush's performance made him look hot and sexy in his flight suit, adding with admiration that Bush is "credible as a Commander in Chief." The mainstream media has been the cheerleader for all of the Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Obama, Clinton and Kerry wars. The media is now inciting the U.S. public with propaganda for war with North Korea, Iran and Russia.

What can be said of Trump is that he seems to take pride in acting even crazier than his predecessors. So, Kim Jong Un is not paranoid to be fearful of what the U.S. might do and he has been acting predictably. The U.S. has left him little choice other than to defend his country with the deterrent of nuclear weapons.

As part of the "Axis of Evil" strategy, President George W. Bush sabotaged the negotiated nuclear agreement that the U.S. and North Korea had made under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s. That is what precipitated North Korea withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and resuming its nuclear program.

Lessons Learned

Other countries tried submissive tactics to mollify Washington. For instance, in 2003, Bush persuaded Libya's Muammar Gaddafi to abandon his nuclear program. At the time, Bush encouraged North Korea to follow suit, saying "we want to have lessons learned, because we want Libya to be a model for other countries" to unilaterally disarm.

So, North Korea was paying close attention in 2011 when President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton backed a military campaign that exploited Libya's defenselessness, destroyed the country, and led to Gaddafi's torture-murder. In a TV interview, Clinton gloated "we came, we saw, he died!, hahaha!"

The lesson of Libya, according to Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, is that "unfortunately, if you have nukes, never give them up – if you don't have them, get them."

Based on that history, the North Koreans are not going to trust a U.S. agreement again. They will trust in themselves, as they did when Kim's grandfather Kim Il-sung led the guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. Korea's historical philosophy is based on the principle of self-sufficiency and resistance against foreign domination, especially in the North.

The North Koreans now call their historical philosophy "Juche." North Korea is determined to follow the principle of Juche to the "realization of independence in politics, self-sufficiency in the economy and self-reliance in national defence." [[official DPRK Juche link](#)].

Now, President Trump has slammed the door shut on negotiations with Kim Jong Un by threatening to totally destroy North Korea with "fire and fury" and insulting him as the "Little Rocket Man."

Kim takes it seriously when the U.S. repeatedly threatens to destroy his country. Trump's insults also caused Kim to "lose face ([kibun](#))," a very serious affront in Korean culture. The natural reaction for a Korean who has been disrespected is to become infuriated. It is predictable, and the U.S. knows it.

U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley's latest outburst that "if war comes, the North Korean regime will be utterly destroyed" is a further provocation, which the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called "a really bloodthirsty tirade."

But Lavrov added that "Moscow has been closely working with the U.S. on the North Korean issue, with several meetings being held between the countries' diplomats in the Russian capital, and other venues."

Vast Bloodshed

In the late Twentieth and early Twentieth-first centuries, U.S. wars and embargoes have killed millions of people around the planet, according to some estimates. Besides deploying devastating high-tech military weapons, the U.S. has interdicted food and medical supplies as part of total-war concepts.

As President Bill Clinton's U.N. Ambassador (and later Secretary of State) [Madeleine Albright](#) once said, [500,000 dead children in Iraq – victims of U.S. sanctions – were "worth it"](#) to punish the Iraqi government's behavior. That is what the U.S. sanctions are now doing to North Korea. But as Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) said, "North Korea will 'eat grass' before giving up nukes."

The Koreans know the history of U.S. war-making well. The U.S. first contact with Korea in the Nineteenth Century involved [a U.S. military expedition](#) in support of a U.S. trade mission that challenged Korea's isolation, self-

sufficiency and refusal to trade. The appearance of U.S. warships sparked a conflict that led to the Americans killing some 243 Koreans at the cost of three American lives. When Japan colonized and annexed Korea in 1910, the Western colonial powers including the U.S. cheered approval.

All Korea has ever wanted was to be left alone. During its 4,000-year history, Korea has not been an aggressive expansionist country. To the contrary, Korea has been invaded by China, Mongolia, Japan, Russia and the U.S. Historically, Korea has resisted contact with foreigners because foreigners had always brought invasions.

Like his Korean ancestors, Kim Jong Un wants North Korea to be left alone for the Korean people to determine their own future.

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