

# PBS' Anti-Russia Propaganda Series

PBS has joined the anti-Russia propaganda stampede with a five-part documentary series that recycles the false and deceptive claims that have become Official Washington's dangerous new groupthink, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The U.S.-government-supported Public Broadcasting System (PBS) recently ran a five-part series dubbed "Inside Putin's Russia". With a different theme each night, it purports to give a realistic look at Russia today. The image conveyed is of a Russia that is undemocratic with widespread state repression, violence and propaganda. Following are significant distortions and falsehoods in the five-part documentary.

## **Episode 1: "How Putin Redefined what it means to be Russian"**

In this episode, the documentary:

**-Claims that Russian identity is based on "projection of power."** In reality, "projection of power" characterizes the U.S. much more than Russia. For the past two centuries the United States has expanded across the continent and globe. The last century is documented in the book *Overthrow: American's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*. The U.S. currently has nearly 800 foreign military bases in over 70 countries. In contrast, Russia has military bases in only two countries beyond the former Soviet Union: Syria and Vietnam.

**-Ignores crucial information about events in Ukraine.** Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine and Crimea are presented as examples of "projection of power." But basic facts are omitted from the documentary. There is no mention of the violent February 2014 coup in Kiev nor the involvement of neoconservatives such as Sen. John McCain and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland in supporting and encouraging the overthrow of Ukraine's elected government. In a December 2013 speech, Nuland outlined her intense involvement in Ukraine including U.S. insistence that Ukraine choose a "European future" since the U.S. had "invested \$5 billion to assist." Days before the coup in February 2014, Nuland was captured on audio planning the composition of the coup leadership.

**-Ignores Crimea's historic connections with Russia and the Ukrainian violence.** The documentary says, "In 2014 in Crimea, Russia helped install separatist leaders who rushed through a referendum that led to Crimea's annexation." This gives the misleading impression the decision was Russian, not Crimean.

Even the New York Times report on March 16, 2014, acknowledged that, "The

outcome, in a region that shares a language and centuries of history with Russia, was a foregone conclusion even before exit polls showed more than 93 percent of voters favoring secession.”

The documentary fails to mention the fear of violence after Crimean travelers to Kiev were beaten and killed by Ukrainian hyper-nationalists. One of the first decisions of the Kiev coup government was to declare that Russian would no longer be an official language. A good overview including video interviews with Crimeans is in this video, contrasting sharply with the implications of the PBS documentary.

**–Trivializes Russian opposition to NATO expansion.** The documentary suggests Russians feel “humiliated” by NATO expanding to their borders. This distorts a serious military concern into a subjective, emotional issue. In 2002, the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and started construction of missile defense systems which could be used in tandem with a nuclear first strike. In recent years, NATO troops and missiles have been installed at Russia’s borders. Imagine the response if Russian troops and missiles were placed at the U.S. border in Canada and Mexico.

**–Falsely claims that coup violence in Odessa was “exaggerated.”**

The documentary says that Russians who went to help defend civilians in eastern Ukraine were convinced by Russian “propaganda” where “dozens of pro-Russian separatists died in Odessa, Ukraine” but “Russian media exaggerated the attack.” In reality, the Odessa attack killed at least 42 people and injured 100. This video shows the sequence of events with the initial attack on peaceful protesters followed by fire-bomb attacks in the building. Fire trucks were prevented from reaching the building to put out the fire and rescue citizens inside.

**Episode 2: “Inside Russia’s Propaganda Machine.”**

In this episode, the documentary:

**–Suggests Russians are aggressive and threatening.** The documentary highlights a Russian TV broadcaster who is translated to say, “Russia is the only country in the world that is realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash.” And later, “If you can persuade a person, you don’t need to kill him ... if you aren’t able to persuade, then you will have to kill.” We do not know the context or accuracy of these translated statements. However on the basis of my own travels in Russia and the experience of many other Americans, these statements are strange and uncharacteristic.

At the popular and government level, Russians are typically at pains to call the

U.S. a “partner” and to wish for peace and better relations. With 27 million killed in World War 2, most Russians are very conscious of the consequences of war and deeply want peace. Russians vividly recall the Russia-U.S. alliance during WW2 and seek a return to friendly collaboration. The film producers must have heard this message and desire for peace expressed by many Russians many times. But the documentary only presents this uncharacteristic aggressive message.

**–Inaccurately suggests that producers of a private TV network received angry public messages because they were exposing corruption.** In reality, the angry public response was because the TV station ran a poll asking viewers if the Soviet Union should have surrendered to Nazi Germany to save lives during the siege of Leningrad.

**–Falsely suggests that RT (Russia Today TV) typically features Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis.** This is a grotesque distortion Anyone who watches RT will know that American personalities such as Chris Hedges, Larry King and Ed Schultz are regulars on RT. Interviewees on international affairs generally come from the left side of the political spectrum – the opposite of what is suggested.

**–Uncritically repeats the conspiracy theory that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton emails.** The findings have been disputed by the publisher of the emails, Julian Assange of Wikileaks , as well as Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. A recent forensic examination confirms that this was a leak not a hack (inside job done by local data transfer NOT a hack over the internet) and points to “Guccifer 2.0”, the presumptive “hacker,” being a hoax intentionally created to implicate Russia.

**–Falsely suggests that anti-Clinton social media messaging during 2016 was significantly caused by Russian government trolls.** Hillary Clinton was strongly opposed by significant portions of both the left and right. There were probably hundreds of thousands of Americans who shared anti-Clinton social media messages.

**–Claims that research showing a Google search engine bias in favor of Hillary Clinton was “quickly debunked.”** The documentary ignores the original article describing the potential effect of search-engine bias, which was published in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The author is Dr. Robert Epstein, former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* magazine. Contradicting the claim that this research was “debunked,” this academic article estimates the effect of the Google bias and how the bias went away AFTER the election. The response from Google and very shallow Snopes...”fact check” are effectively rebutted by the lead author here. In neo-McCarthyist style, the documentary smears the findings and claims they were “laundered” after being

published by the Russian "Sputnik" media.

**–Suggests the "idea that President Kennedy was killed by the CIA" was "planted" by the Soviet intelligence agency KGB.** Many impressive American books have been written supporting this contention, from New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's book to David Talbot's 2015 book *Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA and Deep State*. Claiming that this accusation is based on KGB "disinformation" is another grotesque distortion. It is not revealing disinformation; this is an example of disinformation.

### **Episode 3: "Why are so many from this Russian republic fighting for Isis?"**

In this episode, the documentary:

**–Rationalizes and almost justifies Russian Muslims traveling to join ISIS.** The documentary suggests that religious repression and discrimination is a cause of ISIS recruitment and that "Dagestanis who fought for ISIS continue a decades-old legacy here of radicalism and militancy."

**–Ignores the role of the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in promoting Islamist fundamentalism in Dagestan.** As described by Robert Dreyfus in the book *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*: "the Casey-ISI (CIA and Pakistan Secret Service) actions aided the growth of a significant network of right-wing, Islamist extremists who, to this day, plague the governments of the former Soviet republics ... In particular, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Liberation Party, the powerful Islamist groups in Chechnya and Dagestan."

**–Ignores the role of the US and allies in facilitating ISIS.** As journalist Patrick Cockburn has written, "In the 20 years between 1996 and 2016, the CIA and British security and foreign policy agencies have consistently given priority to maintaining their partnership with powerful Sunni states over the elimination of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Isis."

Journalist Nafeez Ahmed exposed the role of Turkey here, "A former senior counter-terrorism official in Turkey has blown the whistle on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's deliberate sponsorship of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a geopolitical tool to expand Turkey's regional influence and sideline his political opponents at home."

Elements of the U.S. military/intelligence suggested the establishment of ISIS to "isolate the Syrian regime." This was revealed in the classified 2012 report of the Defense Intelligence Agency that "THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING A DECLARED OR UNDECLARED SALAFIST PRINCIPALITY IN EASTERN SYRIA (HASAKA AND DER ZOR), AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE SUPPORTING POWERS TO THE

OPPOSITION WANT, IN ORDER TO ISOLATE THE SYRIAN REGIME”

In short, ISIS recruitment from Muslim communities in Russia and worldwide has been spurred by the policies and actions of the U.S. and allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This is what Dreyfus calls *The Devil’s Game*, but is ignored in the documentary.

#### **Episode 4: “The Deadly Risk of Standing up to Putin”**

**In this episode, the documentary:**

**–Suggests that critics of Putin and the Russian government face “consequences” including death.** These accusations are widespread in the West but largely based on the claims of different U.S.-supported “activists.” One of the most famous cases, and the one on which U.S. congressional sanctions against Russia are based, is that of Sergei Magnitsky. Magnitsky’s death was the subject of a documentary, which has been effectively banned in the U.S. In the course of researching what happened, the filmmaker learned that the truth was very different than has been told in the West and promoted by hedge-fund executive William Browder. Gilbert Doctorow outlines what happens in his review of the film [here](#):

“*Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes*’ is an amazing film which takes us through the thought processes, the evidence sorting of the well-known independent film maker Andrei Nekrasov as he approached an assignment that was at the outset meant to be one more public confirmation of the narrative Browder has sold to the US Congress and to the American and European political elites. That story was all about a 36 year old whistle-blower ‘attorney’ (actually a bookkeeper) named Sergei Magnitsky who denounced on Browder’s behalf the theft of Russian taxes to his boss’s companies amounting to \$230 million and who was rewarded for his efforts by arrest, torture and murder in detainment by the officials who perpetrated the theft. This shocking tale drove legislation that was a major landmark in the descent of US-Russian relations under President Barack Obama to a level rivaling the worst days of the Cold War.

“At the end of the film we understand that this story was concocted by William Browder to cover up his own criminal theft of the money in question, that Magnitsky was not a whistleblower, but on the contrary was likely an assistant and abettor to the fraud and theft that Browder organized, that he was not murdered by corrupt Russian police but died in prison from banal neglect of his medical condition.”

The PBS documentary quotes an opposition leader, Vladimir Kara-Murza, saying “We have no free and fair elections. We have censorship in the media. We have

political prisoners, more than 100 political prisoners now in Russia, today.” Kara-Murza now lives in Washington “for his safety” but returns to Russia periodically. He claims to have been poisoned several times.

Opponents of the Russian government are quick to accuse but the evidence is largely hearsay and speculation. Public polls of citizens in Russia repeatedly indicate that Putin and the government have widespread popularity, in contrast with the accusations in this documentary that they rule by intimidation and violence.

### **Episode 5: “What Russians think about Trump and the U.S.”**

Based on the content, the final episode should be titled “What the U.S. establishment and media thinks of Putin and Russia.” In this episode, the documentary:

**–Features accusations by CIA Director Mike Pompeo that Russian President Putin, “ is a man for whom veracity doesn’t translate into English.”** An objective documentary would take CIA claims about “veracity” with a healthy dose of skepticism. Just a few years ago, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper was confirmed to have lied under oath to Congress. Former CIA chief of counterintelligence James Angleton said in his dying days, “Fundamentally, the founding fathers of U.S. intelligence were liars. The better you lied and the more you betrayed, the more likely you got promoted.” So it is curious to see the PBS documentary uncritically presenting the new CIA director as a judge of veracity.

**–Implies that President Trump is out of line to question “the U.S. intelligence community’s unanimous assessment that Russia hacked the 2016 election.”** It has been recently exposed that the “unanimous assessment” was, in reality, by “hand-picked” analysts at three agencies, under DNI Clapper’s oversight, not all 17 agencies and that the National Security Agency did NOT have “high confidence” in a key finding. The “assessment,” which the Jan. 6 report acknowledged was NOT an establishment of fact, was based on the forensics of a private company, CrowdStrike, with a checkered record in this field, and the dubious Christopher Steele dossier, a collection of “opposition research” reports against Donald Trump, paid for unidentified allies of Hillary Clinton and compiled by Steele, an ex-British intelligence agent.

In March 2017, CrowdStrike was found to have made false claims in another investigation of an alleged Russian “hack.” Yet, neither the CIA nor FBI examined the Democratic National Committee’s computers. If the issue was as important as it supposedly has now become, the FBI should have issued a subpoena

to do its own examination. Why the DNC rejected the FBI request, and why the FBI did not insist, raises serious questions given the enormous publicity and accusations that have followed.

**–Uncritically features two US politicians making loose accusations and effectively criminalizing “contacts” with Russians.** Sen. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma, says President Trump is “pushing out some messages that are consistent with the Kremlin policies ... there’s no question that the Russians were trying to hack into our elections.” Yet, former U.S. intelligence officers with experience in these areas recently presented evidence raising significant questions about this conventional wisdom.

On the Democratic side, Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia indicates the Senate investigation reached its conclusion before it began. He said, “The goal of this investigation is not only to reconfirm Russian intervention and explain that to the American public, but to also see if there were any contacts between Trump and the Russians.”

In the current environment, to have “contacts” with Russians has been criminalized. Instead of questioning the validity or wisdom of this position, the documentary presents it with seeming approval.

**–Uncritically promotes false statements and reckless threats.** Sen. Lankford says “We believe strongly that what Russia continues to do to be able to threaten Ukraine, threaten its neighbors, threaten NATO, to continue to pry into not only our elections, but other elections, is destabilizing, and it demands a response. They have yet to have a consequence to what they did in the election time. And they should.”

Lankford’s assertions are presented as facts but are debatable or false. For example, security services in Germany, France and the U.K. all found that – despite the international accusations – there was NO evidence of Russian interference in their recent elections.

**–Justifies and promotes “punishment” of Russia.** The belligerent approach of Lankford and Warner is continued by PBS host Judy Woodruff and narrator Nick Schifrin. The U.S. is portrayed as a vulnerable victim with a future that is “foreboding”. Russia is portrayed as threatening and needing some punishment soon: “The Russian government doesn’t feel like the United States government really penalized them for what happened last year... a lot of officials here in Washington agree with that... Russia should have paid for what they did last year.”

This threatening talk is then followed by the following assessment from the

narrator: "There are analysts in Moscow who think the only thing we can hope is that we avoid war."

In 2002-2003, American mainstream media failed to question or challenge the assertions of the CIA and politicians pushing for the invasion of Iraq. At that time, the false pretense was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and posed a threat to the U.S.

Much of the media and many of the same politicians are now claiming Russia is an adversary that has "attacked us." This claim is being widely made without serious question or challenge. "Liberal" media seems to be in alliance with hawkish neoconservatives on this issue. Virtually any accusation against Russia and its leader can be made with impunity and without serious evidence.

The PBS documentary "Inside Putin's Russia" aims to expose Russian repression, aggression and disinformation. As shown in the many examples above, the five-part documentary is highly biased and inaccurate. While it shows some features of Russia, it also demonstrates American propaganda in the current tumultuous times.

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## The U.S. Hypocrisy of 'Human Rights'

Long before President Trump, the U.S. government had made a mockery of "human rights," condemning abuses by adversary states but silent when crimes were committed by U.S. agents or U.S. allies, explains Todd E. Pierce.

By Todd E. Pierce

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is reportedly considering closing the Office of Global Criminal Justice, a tiny agency with a meager budget of \$3 million a year, located within the State Department.

According to its website, the office "advises the Secretary of State . . . on issues related to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide." It "also coordinates U.S. Government positions relating to the international and hybrid courts currently prosecuting persons responsible for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity – not only for such crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Cambodia – but also in Kenya, Libya, Côte



d'Ivoire, Guatemala, and elsewhere in the world."

Furthermore, it deploys "a range of diplomatic, legal, economic, military, and intelligence tools to help expose the truth, judge those responsible, protect and assist victims, enable reconciliation, deter atrocities, and build the rule of law."

The *New York Times* reported that human rights advocates saw the proposal as an example of "the Trump administration's indifference to human rights outside North Korea, Iran and Cuba." Human rights activists also said that shutting the Office "would hamper efforts to publicize atrocities and bring war criminals to justice." *Newsweek* reported, however, that the Obama administration also reportedly considered downgrading the office and merging it with another agency.

According to the *Newsweek* article, the office offered rewards for information on "war criminals, and has inveighed against brutal dictators, including Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad." But the article also noted it "has not criticized Saudi Arabia or other American allies with dismal human rights records."

The same *Newsweek* piece explained that the office was formed following the 1996 passage of the War Crimes Act. That Act defined a war crime as a "grave breach" of the Geneva Conventions. The War Crimes Act, codified as 18 U.S. Code § 2441, makes it an offense, "whether inside or outside the United States," to commit a war crime, if one is a member of the Armed Forces of the United States or a national of the United States. *Newsweek* writer Nina Burleigh correctly noted that when "the CIA began using torture early in the Iraq War and, later, jailing people indefinitely and without trial in Guantanamo, the U.S. was in open breach of the conventions." As noted above, the Office of Global Criminal Justice has inveighed against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. But it seemed to have had no problem with the Syrian government when CIA officials outsourced torture to the Syrian government earlier in the so-called Global War on Terror.

### **A Symbol of Hypocrisy**

So, if there was ever a U.S. government agency standing as a symbol for U.S. hypocrisy, the Office of Global Criminal Justice is it. It is not hard to see in decoding their mission statement that "elsewhere in the world" does not mean leaders of any U.S.-allied nations.

But even more hypocritical is having a U.S. government agency charged with tasks to "help expose the truth, judge those responsible, protect and assist victims, enable reconciliation, deter atrocities, and build the rule of law," when the U.S. Department of Justice is doing the exact opposite in enforcing the War

Crime Act itself.

That hypocrisy is seen in a series of cases beginning in 2006 with the decision in *Rasul v. Rumsfeld*, by the D.C. District Court. As law professor Steve Vladeck explained, when asked of that case in a 2006 article, “Is torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (CIDT) within the scope of government employment? At least somewhat surprisingly, . . . the answer to that question is ‘yes.’”

Since 2006, the principle in the decision of *Rasul v. Rumsfeld* that Vladeck referred to has become a time-honored principle of U.S. jurisprudence, and a symbol of U.S. hypocrisy when compared to other U.S. pronouncements on torture and war crimes, as seen in a long series of cases down to the present day.

The manner that those decisions are written eliminates all illusions that the United States government is opposed to war crimes when done by “a member of the Armed Forces of the United States or a national of the United States” – they have been granted impunity under the law to offend. Famously, that was expressed by President Obama when he stated that those CIA officials guilty of torture would not be held criminally accountable for acts that are defined as “war crimes,” that is, torture. Little wonder that Donald Trump could so readily say he believed torture worked, since that is what many CIA officials continue to say.

Failing to prosecute war crimes is in itself a war crime under international law, and, to use the words of the “Office of Global Criminal Justice,” the opposite of its mission to “expose the truth,” and “judge those responsible.” But taking matters a step further, the U.S. government has designed a legal procedure to deny protection and assistance to victims. This is exactly what leaders of countries that are in line for U.S.-sponsored regime change are routinely accused of doing by the Office of Global Criminal Justice.

### **Shielding Torturers**

The issue in a series of lawsuits involving the war crime of torture is whether former Guantanamo prisoners who were victims of U.S. government officials could sue the officials for civil damages. The courts have held, however, that government officials were entitled to immunity for the acts they had committed and were being sued for torture, as it was “within the scope of their employment.” These decisions are based on procedures based on the Westfall Act, which is too convoluted to explain here, but it serves to nullify the War Crimes Act.

Typical of the language in the court’s decisions is: “several detainees were

subjected to abuse – including ‘forced grooming, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, forced medication, transport in ‘shackles and chains, blackened goggles, and ear coverings,’ and the disruption of ... religious practices” – even after a CSRT had determined that there were not enemy combatants... The court held that the defendants’ actions were ‘of the kind’ [they were] employed to perform,” even though the mistreatment occurred when several of the plaintiffs “had no intelligence value.”

The court noted that “[t]hough the intelligence rationale has dissipated, the need to maintain an orderly detention environment remained after CSRT clearance.” The court continued: “Authorized or not, the conduct was certainly foreseeable because maintaining peace, security, and safety at a place like Guantanamo Bay is a stern and difficult business.”

That was what German military and Gestapo officers said of the prisons they worked in when they went on trial for war crimes at Nuremberg. Most common as their legal defense against war crime charges was that the defendants were only following “superior orders,” in German, “Befehl ist Befehl” (“orders are orders”) – a tactic now known as the Nuremberg defense. In other words, the earlier generation of war criminals effectively claimed their actions were “within their scope of employment.” That defense didn’t work at Nuremberg for Germans, but it works now for U.S. officials in U.S. courts.

The closing the Office of Global Criminal Justice just makes official what has been U.S. policy since 9/11. If it is true that hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, then the U.S. government has showered tribute upon vice with the hypocrisy of the Office of Global Criminal Justice. If it closes, it means we won’t even pay tribute anymore to virtue, preferring to fully embrace vice in a display of our “authenticity.” And that may be the one example where the “Office of Global Criminal Justice” fulfills its mission to “expose the truth.”

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## Macron’s Maneuvers on the New Cold War

Official Washington’s hawks are blocking President Trump’s desired detente with

Russia, but that has opened a path for France's new President Macron to mediate the New Cold War, Diana Johnstone tells Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

French President Emmanuel Macron has positioned himself as a possible go-between in facilitating a reduction of tensions between the U.S. and Russia, a move that makes sense for France but may anger Official Washington's hawks who want to escalate the New Cold War.

I interviewed Paris-based journalist and historian Diana Johnstone about Trump's recent visit to Paris. Johnstone is the author of *From Mad to Madness: Inside the Pentagon's Nuclear War Planning Machine*, recounting the experiences of her father, Paul Johnstone, as a senior analyst in the Pentagon's Strategic Weapons Evaluation Group and a co-author of the Pentagon Papers. I spoke to her by telephone in France on July 19.

Dennis Bernstein: Diana, please give us your response to the recent Trump visit to Paris to meet with Emmanuel Macron.

Diana Johnstone: Well, first of all, it is clear that Emmanuel Macron has seen an advantage in being the only friend of the friendless Trump. It is clear that this can strengthen Macron's hand in dealing with Germany, the main part of his mandate being to influence Germany in changing EU policy.

Also, Macron is in a position to be an intermediary in this rapprochement between Trump and Putin, which of course the War Party in Washington is doing everything to obstruct. So Macron has situated himself in an interesting position.

I think that any of the contenders in the recent French election would have followed the same path. It was absolutely in the cards for France to change its foreign policy. The intellectuals in the government – the diplomats and so on – realize that this Syria policy isn't working and, at the same time, that sanctions against Russia are very harmful to the French and European economies, while they benefit the US. So what Macron is doing is just what the intellectual community was going to do, regardless of which candidate won the election.

DB: Give us your analysis of this Russia-gate madness.

DJ: Well, I am not a psychiatrist, but seen from over here in Europe, it's unbelievable. I just saw Tucker Carlson's interview with Max Boot on Fox News. This raving maniac on foreign affairs is on the Council of Foreign Relations, when he ought to be undergoing psychiatric treatment.

Of course, the Clinton machine has taken over the Democratic Party and made it into the War Party. What in the world is wrong with people talking to members of another country? The whole idea that it is something traitorous to talk to Russians is completely insane. At every time in history, even when governments were actually at war with each other, they had some sort of contact, just for simple intelligence reasons.

To try to criminalize and ban any contact at a more or less official level with the Russians goes beyond what is diplomatic practice even in war time. I think that the real problem in Washington is that there is a real War Party who welcome a nuclear war with Russia if that is what it takes to prevent them from becoming as strong as we are.

DB: The big story at the G-20 was that Trump spoke to Putin and therefore should be tried for treason, along with his whole family.

DJ: I am sure that the Russians draw the conclusion that we are preparing for war. How else can they take this? We are doing everything to convince the Russians that we want war with them no matter what. Of course, this means they are going to start a military build-up in order to be able to strike back. Putin has consistently made friendly moves to the United States and they are simply dismissed. The only possible explanation is that we are bent on war.

Unfortunately, in 2013, Obama painted himself into a corner with his "red line" rhetoric, requiring that the US strike if it detects any use of chemical weapons in Syria. Of course, since then, it has been well established by very serious investigators, including Seymour Hersh, that this use of chemical weapons was a false flag.

The Russians, instead of insisting that this was a false flag, very tactfully suggested that the answer was to take away all of Syria's chemical weapons, which actually worked. Now everyone in the NATO machine points to this as a sign of Obama's weakness in not punishing the perpetrators and forget about this chemical weapons deal that was successful. Instead, the official line is that Obama was too weak and we have to be strong.

DB: Give us your thoughts on the recent G-20 meeting in Hamburg and the people's response.

DJ: Well, I don't think that the people's response was very well thought out. Many don't realize that the G-20 is, in fact, a step away from Western domination because it includes third-world countries with large populations—Russia, China, Indonesia, and so on. The reaction was just, "This is power and we are against it." No discrimination about issues. So the

demonstration turned out to be much greater than it was for the G-8 or other meetings. All this violence was directed against a meeting which was actually working toward an improved form of international communication.

DB: What do you make of the controversy around the European Union and the role of France?

DJ: The European Union has become completely unbalanced because Germany is now a low-labor-cost export nation, maintaining a large trade imbalance with its partners. The other three candidates for the French presidency were all very critical of the EU and floated the possibility of getting out of the Euro.

Macron was put in by the establishment to save the European Union. It is clear that Macron's mission is to persuade the Germans to shift the policy to one that will allow other countries to grow economically instead of being strangled, which is what is happening now. I don't know whether he will succeed at that, but this is one reason why he wants Trump and Putin on his side, to replace Merkel as the dominant figure in the EU.

DB: You have just come out with an incredibly important book titled *From Mad to Madness: Inside the Pentagon's Nuclear War Planning Machine*. Your father, Paul Johnstone, was a senior analyst in the Strategic Weapons Evaluation Group at the Pentagon. You have taken your father's memoirs and written commentaries on them. You know, when Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers, he did an incredibly important thing. But he didn't write the Pentagon Papers, they came from the war planners. Your father was one of the co-authors. Could you describe what your father's job was while working for the Pentagon?

DJ: One of his projects was something called "critical incident studies," which was intended to inform the leaders on how to analyze crisis situations. Two of these crisis studies are in the book, one on Laos and one on the Berlin crisis. Interestingly, afterwards there was so much security that he couldn't get access back to it himself, and so he did this from memory. Basically, his idea was to try to educate these leaders in the uncertainty involved in what they were doing.

You see, everyone is doing contingency planning and the only thing that gets to the leaders is an executive summary, which usually tries to put a positive face on things and make the case that "we'll win for sure." In fact, top leaders tend not to be very well informed about what they are likely to get the country into. The Pentagon Papers was a study commissioned by Robert McNamara to try to determine how the hell we got into the mess of Vietnam. So while the Pentagon Papers were a major revelation to the public, the establishment already knew that they couldn't win that war. Of course, it dragged on nevertheless for

several more years.

DB: You write in the book, "Theorizing about nuclear war was a sort of virtuoso exercise in creating an imaginary world wherein all statements must be consistent with each other but nothing need be consistent with reality, because there was no reality to be checked against."

DJ: That is my father's description of what they were doing. He was obviously more aware of that than most of his colleagues. He knew Paul Nitze [US government official who helped shape Cold War policies] pretty well and liked him personally. But he couldn't understand how someone as educated as Nitze could be so blind about the Soviet Union, thinking that they are planning to attack us all the time.

We see the same mentality now, people who seem to be intelligent who are absolutely paranoid about Russia. You know, the left thought it learned something from Vietnam, but now we have the War Party which has only learned how to better control such movements. No very serious opposition exists.

DB: One of the important points you make in the book is that, whatever any analyst has to say about who is likely to prevail, nuclear war means mutual destruction.

DJ: Sometimes analysts would recognize this but then they would come out and say, "But the US will prevail." It was and is insanity. The unreality of what goes on in the Pentagon seems small when compared with the unreality you have in the Washington establishment now. There's the madness of the war planning at the Pentagon—"We have these weapons, now let's decide how to use them"—and so on. And at the same time a growing madness has taken possession of the political class which says, "Yeah, great, just do it!"

It is an incredibly dangerous situation and people just seem to be asleep. We have these women on the streets because of some remark that Trump made at one time or another but they don't do a thing to prevent the world from being blown up at any minute. It seems to me there is a lack of priorities in the United States among those people who remain sane and moral.

DB: The first part of your book is titled "The World of Target Planning."

DJ: That's how my father got into this. He was in the Department of Agriculture with Henry Wallace when the country started gearing up for another war and later found itself never getting out of this business of war.

The religion of the United States has become the total destruction of the enemy. With us, it is always unconditional surrender. It's not enough to defeat an

enemy, you have to destroy them. This is closely linked to the possession of nuclear weapons, the idea of total destruction rather than simply defeat. It is a part of the extreme arrogance built into the American culture: We must never lose, we must always win. [...]

Very important studies on strategic bombing in World War II concluded that it wasn't the strategic bombing that won the war. However, this myth has been perpetuated ever since, that strategic bombing wins wars. It continues because the Air Force needs a lot of money to stay in business.

During the Vietnam war, the question was put to experts as to what would be the effect of bombing the north. They concluded that it would "only unite the enemy against us." But the Air Force wanted to bomb and they got what they wanted. They wanted a piece of the action. Washington politics plays a huge role in getting us into these wars. So even in cases where the intelligence community manages to produce something that makes sense, it typically gets ignored.

All this seemed to subside somewhat with the recognition of the concept of "mutual assured destruction." The trouble is, since the Soviet Union collapsed, the arrogance of the United States—which made Truman, for example, decide to drop the atomic bomb on Japan after Japan was already defeated—has come back, as you said, on steroids.

When Putin, in 2007, said that he wanted a multipolar rather than a unipolar world, from then on Russia and Putin have been the enemy. Besides, we have got God and the Dollar on our side and we can do anything. During the Cold War you had some measure of caution at the top. Now all caution has gone to the winds. Someone like Steven Cohen, for example, a top expert [on Russia], is effectively marginalized because he is not on the administration line.

DB: There's a section in your book called "Imagining Doomsday", which describes efforts by the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group to study the implications of radioactive fallout. I imagine they are now going back over this stuff, this is the information they need to know.

DJ: Well, supposedly they are at work revising the weapons to make them more powerful and less radioactive. All this business about putting up a "shield" in Eastern Europe is obviously meant to give the United States a first-strike capacity. It won't work, but that is the latest illusion. It isn't meant to shield us from Russian aggression, it is meant to shield us from Russian retaliation.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the**



## House GOP Seeks to Curb Yemen War

As national Democrats claim the mantle as the more hawkish party – and President Trump panders to the Saudi-Israeli tandem – House Republicans moved to curb U.S. support for the Saudi-led war on Yemen, Dennis J Bernstein notes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Republicans are taking the lead in blocking U.S. participation in the Saudi slaughter in Yemen, which has plunged that country to the brink of starvation and sparked a cholera epidemic. Surprising to many, there was a vote by the Republican-led House of Representatives to block U.S. participation in the Saudi-led war.

The key amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act – prohibiting U.S. military support for the Saudi-led coalition's bombing of Yemen – was sponsored by Rep. Warren Davidson, R-Ohio. Though the amendment gained bipartisan support – and another restrictive amendment was sponsored by Rep. Dick Nolan, D-Minnesota – the Republican leadership on this issue reflects the changing places in which Democrats have become the more hawkish party in Congress.



I spoke to Kate Gould, Legislative Representative for Middle East Policy for the Friends Committee on National Legislation about this pressing issue of life and death in Yemen. We spoke on July 17.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, this is a terrible situation and getting worse by the

day. Could you please remind everyone what it looks like in Yemen on the ground?

Kate Gould: It is a catastrophic situation. According to the United Nations, it is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world right now. And despite the fact that this humanitarian crisis has been a direct result of the Saudi/United Arab Emirate-led war in Yemen, backed by the United States, most Americans have no idea that we are so deeply involved in this war.

A conservative estimate is that seven million people are on the verge of starvation, half a million being children. The people in Yemen are experiencing the world's largest cholera outbreak. A child under the age of five is dying every ten minutes of preventable causes. Every 35 seconds a child is infected.

This is all preventable with access to clean water and basic sanitation. This war has destroyed the civilian infrastructure in Yemen. We're talking about air strikes that have targeted warehouses of food, sanitation systems, water infiltration systems. The World Health Organization points out that cholera is not difficult to prevent. The problem is that so many Yemenis lack access to clean water as a result of the infrastructure being in ruins.

DB: What about the medical infrastructure, what about the ability to deal with this kind of epidemic, or is it just going to get worse?

KG: Well, unless we do something to change the situation, it is definitely going to get worse. In Yemen, 90% of food is imported and the Saudis have made this much more difficult. They imposed more restraints on one of the major ports and have refused to allow Yemen to repair the damage caused by air strikes. Often it is difficult for ships to get permission to berth. All these complications have driven up the price of food so that even when food manages to be imported it is too expensive, even for those earning decent incomes. So what we are seeing is a de facto blockade as well as a war.

DB: Could you say a few words about the campaign of the Saudi military and what kind of weaponry they are using? Later I would like to discuss US support for all of this.

KG: The Saudi-led war began about two and a half years ago in March, 2015. At that time they asked for US support and got it from the Obama administration. The air campaign has resulted in the carpet bombing of Yemen. It is the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates who have been driving this massive bombardment. There has been an all-out assault on civilians and civilian infrastructure.

And, of course, as Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) has pointed out, the Saudis would not have been able to carry out this bombing without full US support. Their planes cannot fly without US refueling capacity. In fact, since October the US

has actually doubled the amount of fuel it provides to Saudi and Emirati bombers. Last October is significant because at that time there was a major bombing of mourners coming out of a funeral hall which killed about 140 civilians and wounded another six hundred. Since that atrocity, the US has doubled its refueling support.

DB: How does the US justify its support for the Saudis, from a human rights perspective?

KG: We've heard very little discussion of the human rights angle from the Trump administration. The Obama administration claimed to be pressuring the Saudis to take precautions to prevent civilian casualties, that this is why the US has provided precision-guided smart bombs, to limit civilian casualties. There has never been an official US response to the fact that the Saudis and Emiratis are deliberately pushing millions to the verge of starvation. They are using hunger as a political tool to get better leverage on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. This is really what is driving the humanitarian nightmare.

DB: We know that Trump was just in Saudi Arabia and signed a massive weapons contract. Will this weaponry contribute to the coming famine and cholera epidemic?

KG: Certainly. It is providing the Saudis a blank check for this devastating war in which direct casualties from airstrikes are conservatively estimated at around 10,000 and millions of people have been displaced. It sends the message that the United States is willing to support the Saudis despite massive human rights violations.

DB: There is no way the US or the Saudis can deny the tragedy. This has been thoroughly documented by US and international rights groups.

KG: But what they will often say is that a lot of the fault lies with the Houthi rebel groups. And it is certainly true that the Houthi rebels have committed massive human rights violations. But as far as the mass devastation of public infrastructure is concerned, which is leading to the humanitarian crisis, the majority of the blame can be assigned to the Saudi-led war and the US backing.

Repeatedly, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, responding to the scene of unlawful airstrikes against civilian targets, have found either unexploded US-made bombs or identifiable fragments of US bombs. This was the case with the bombing of the funeral procession last October. Still, the US government claims that it is trying to limit civilian casualties.

DB: It is interesting that the Republican-led House has voted to block US participation in the war in Yemen. It seems somewhat counter-intuitive.

KG: It is definitely surprising. Although I've been working around the clock on this recently, even I was surprised. What happened is that last week [week of July 9] the House of Representatives voted on the major military policy bill for fiscal year 2018. This is a major piece of national security legislation which authorizes funding for the Pentagon. It has to get passed every year and it provides an opportunity for members to vote on amendments that have to do with national security.

Two of these amendments were particularly consequential for Yemen. One was introduced by a Republican, Warren Davidson of Ohio, and the other by Rick Nolan, a Democrat from Minnesota. They added language that would require the Trump administration to stop providing refueling for Saudi and Emirati bombers, as well as to stop intelligence sharing and other forms of military support. It wouldn't stop the weapons sales, which is another process, but it would stop military support for this indiscriminate war.

The Davidson amendment would prohibit US military action in Yemen that is not authorized by the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. Given that US participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen is not targeting Al-Qaeda, it is not authorized by the 2001 AUMF and is prohibited by this amendment. The Nolan amendment prohibits the deployment of US troops for any participation in Yemen's civil war.

This means that the House just voted to end US funding of our military for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. This is really unprecedented and it builds on the wave of congressional momentum that we saw last month when 47 senators voted against sending more of what we call "weapons of mass starvation" to Yemen. So we have clear signals from both the House and the Senate that there is no support for Trump's blank check to Saudi Arabia for this devastating war.

DB: So now this goes to the Senate?

KG: Yes, and there we are going to face a more difficult fight. We're preparing for that now. We definitely will see some important Yemen votes in the Senate. It could come up right after a health care vote in early August or it might not be voted on until the fall. But we will see votes on Yemen. It is unclear whether a Senate member will offer amendments similar to the Davidson or Nolan amendments.

After the Senate votes on the various amendments, they will both have versions of this and they will have to come back and conference a final version to send to the president. This is definitely a time to push our senators to follow suit with the House and oppose US involvement in this devastating war in Yemen.

DB: Finally, who are some of these Republican Congressional members who stood up in this effort to restrain this oncoming famine? Who were some of the surprise votes?

KG: Actually, this was added in a whole block of legislation so we can't point to exactly who supported and who opposed it. It was good to see Warren Davidson taking a leadership role on this issue. He is relatively new in the Senate, having taken [Former House Speaker John] Boehner's seat. It is noteworthy also that the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Mac Thornberry from Texas, allowed this amendment to go forward. Just that the House Republican leadership allowed this to move forward is really interesting in itself.

DB: Yes, it is. It seems to me that the Democrats have really become out-of-control Cold Warriors, either lost in Russia-gate or dropping the ball on this very important foreign policy issue. We thank you, Kate Gould, Legislative Representative for Middle East Policy with the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

KG: And I just want to say that we can win on this one and we need everybody to get involved. You can go to our website, [fcnl.org](http://fcnl.org), to get more information. Again, 47 Senators voted last month to block these bomb sales and we only need 51 votes. And with Trump's massive arms deal with Saudi Arabia, I'm sure we will have more votes on this. But it is really important to stay engaged and we need everybody to get involved and contact your members of Congress.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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## Pitching the 'Forever War' in Afghanistan

**Exclusive:** Rather than rethink U.S. policy in the Mideast, particularly the entangling alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia, Official Washington pushes schemes to perpetuate the "forever war" in Afghanistan, writes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

In May, the founder of the mercenary-for-hire group Blackwater (now since remained Academi), Erik Prince took to the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to propose that the Pentagon employ "private military units" and appoint a

“viceroy” to oversee the war in Afghanistan.

According to Prince, who has been actively lobbying for what he calls an “East India Company approach” as the solution to America’s longest war (16 years, \$117 billion and counting), “In Afghanistan, the viceroy approach would reduce rampant fraud by focusing spending on initiatives that further the central strategy, rather than handing cash to every outstretched hand from a U.S. system bereft of institutional memory.” (Prince naturally failed to say if his were among those “outstretched hands”)

On July 10, *The New York Times* reported that Prince and the owner of the military contractor Dyn Corporation, Stephen Feinberg, have, at the request of Stephen K. Bannon and Jared Kushner, been pushing a plan to, in effect, privatize the war effort in Afghanistan. (In recent weeks both The Nation and The American Conservative have published deep-dive investigative pieces into the behind the scenes machinations of would-be Viceroys Prince and Feinberg).

According to the *Times* report “The strategy has been called ‘the Laos option,’ after America’s shadowy involvement in Laos during the war in neighboring Vietnam.”

If so, then “the Laos option” is an unfortunate moniker for their strategy given the fact that the during America’s war over Laos (1964-73) the U.S. dropped 2.5 million tons of munitions on that country as part of the failed effort in Vietnam, which finally ended when the U.S. embassy in Saigon was evacuated in 1975.

It is worth mentioning, since we so often overlook the “collateral damage” caused by our overseas adventures, that in the 40-plus years since the cessation of operations in Laos that 20,000 Laotians have been killed by unexploded ordinance dropped that had been dropped during that illegal nine-year campaign.

And while Prince and Feinberg have (so far anyway) gotten the cold shoulder from National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Pentagon Chief James Mattis, momentum is picking up for once again ramping up American involvement in Afghanistan among some of the (allegedly) more sophisticated members of the foreign policy establishment.

### **More Armchair Warmongering**

On July 11, former Deputy Defense Secretary Michele Flournoy and think tank functionary Richard Fontaine published a piece for the purportedly realist *National Interest* magazine that attempted to assure readers that “The Afghan War Is Not Lost.” Why not? Because even though there are roughly 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, “*More troops* can help achieve American objectives in

Afghanistan, but only if they are part of a larger and more effective strategy.” [Emphasis mine].

The stress on more troops (if not to say, thousands upon thousands of unaccountable mercenaries in the pay of Feinberg and Prince) is deeply concerning because if anyone can be said to be a reliable barometer of prevailing opinion inside the Beltway it is Flournoy.

Readers may recall that Flournoy co-chaired the Obama administration’s Afghanistan policy review, which led to the President’s ill-fated December 2009 decision to send 33,000 American troops (plus a contingent of 7,000 from NATO) to prop up the Karzai regime in Afghanistan. The following year, 2010, would end up as the bloodiest one yet for coalition forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, nearly three-fourth of all American casualties in that war took place in the years following Obama’s decision to “surge” in Afghanistan.

But give Flournoy (who was at the top of Hillary Clinton’s short list to be Defense Secretary) credit: she persists. Today Flournoy and her frequent co-author Fontaine (both are executives of the hawkish think tank Center for a New American Security) say that American should commit to Afghanistan “indefinitely”:

“The centerpiece of the administration’s Afghanistan strategy must therefore be a clear and sustained American commitment to Afghanistan. By forswearing deadlines and making clear that the United States will support the Afghan government and security forces indefinitely and until they are able to hold their own, Washington can telegraph to the Taliban that it will not succeed in retaking the country.”

Worryingly, some members of Congress seem to be on board. In early July, a bipartisan delegation including Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Elizabeth Warren toured Pakistan and Afghanistan and called for greater military involvement in the region. Speaking on behalf of the delegation, McCain noted, “none of us would say that we’re on course to a success here in Afghanistan.”

### **The Forever War**

Driving the push to send more troops is the fact that, as Flournoy and Fontaine point out, the “Taliban today controls more territory than at any time since 9/11. Faced with corruption and exclusionary politics, popular opposition to the government in Kabul is rising, while the Taliban makes inroads in rural areas and, increasingly, near the cities.” This is no doubt the case.

And proponents of the forever war in Afghanistan are correct when they say, as they inevitably do, that the Taliban provided sanctuary to Obama bin Laden and

Al Qaeda in the lead up to 9/11. But these same proponents usually neglect to note that bin Laden and Al Qaeda were motivated by the U.S.-Israeli special relationship and, according to the 9/11 Report, “grievances against the United States” that were “widely shared in the Muslim world.” Bin Laden “inveighed against the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia ... and against other U.S. policies in the Middle East.”

But, in the intervening years between 2001 and now, Al Qaeda’s leadership has been decimated, and according to a Brown University study, “the United States has spent or taken on obligations to spend more than \$3.6 trillion in current dollars on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria and on the Department of Homeland Security” in the years following 9/11.

Meanwhile other alternative strategies (such as the “offshore balancing strategy” advocated by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt) have never been tried. As I wrote at Consortiumnews in June, “there *are* alternatives (there always are). It’s just that these tend not to have the institutional backing of Washington’s policy/think tank community which, because it is deeply compromised by its defense industry funders, rarely given them voice or consideration.”

If the U.S. is to successfully combat terrorism emanating out of the Middle East a wholesale re-evaluation of U.S. policy is in order, particularly with regard to Israel and Saudi Arabia. To gloss over this is to miss the point.

And proponents of expanding and privatizing the war in Afghanistan miss it entirely.

**James W Carden is a contributing writer for The Nation and editor of The American Committee for East-West Accord’s eastwestaccord.com. He previously served as an advisor on Russia to the Special Representative for Global Inter-governmental Affairs at the US State Department.**

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## Learning to Love Perpetual War

The transformation of the Democratic Party into the perpetual war party – accelerated by the Russia-gate hysteria – is personified by Rep. Barbara Lee who voted against the “war on terror” resolution in 2001, as Norman Solomon explains.

By Norman Solomon



For Americans who oppose perpetual war, no member of Congress has been more admired than Barbara Lee. Ever since she cast the only vote against a blank-check war resolution, three days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Oakland Democrat has earned a reputation for bravely speaking antiwar truth to militarist power.

But, now, the core wisdom of her eloquent speech on the House floor nearly 16 years ago is under threat – from Lee herself.

When Lee beseeched her colleagues to “think through the implications of our actions today, so that this does not spiral out of control,” she was looking far beyond the politics and passions of that moment on Sept. 14, 2001. Now, in a July 7 tweet, she has stepped away from steadfast support for the necessity of diplomatic initiatives.

Finding alternatives to war must include diplomacy. In the case of the “war on terror” that Lee resisted from the start, what spiraled out of control was endless and boundless war. These days, the escalating tensions with Russia could spiral out of control all the way to nuclear holocaust.

That’s a major reason the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved the symbolic hands of its Doomsday Clock even closer to apocalyptic midnight early this year. The nuclear peril is terribly real, and it’s growing.

For that overarching reason, former Sen. Sam Nunn joined with three seasoned ex-diplomats to co-sign an open letter in late June, urging Presidents Trump and Vladimir Putin to discuss four specific proposals for reducing the dangers of nuclear war. Nunn – drawing on his experience as chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee – knows that top-level talks between the Russian and U.S. governments are crucial to reduce the risk of the world blowing up.

But Lee addressed the Trump-Putin meeting at the G20 summit in a very different way. Right after it was over, she sent out a tweet that denounced the very idea of the two presidents sitting down and talking: “Outraged by President Trump’s 2 hr meeting w/Putin, the man who orchestrated attacks on our democracy. Where do his loyalties lie?”

Yet real diplomacy often requires that leaders we don’t like – at the top of a foreign government and maybe our own – sit down together, talk and negotiate. In the case of the world’s two nuclear-weapons superpowers, that could turn out to mean the difference between coexistence or co-annihilation.

During her historic 2001 speech on the House floor, when she insisted that “some of us must urge the use of restraint,” Lee was refusing to be swept up in the easy and dangerous conformity of the times. She saw that militarized

confrontation would be a tragically unwise alternative to diplomacy.

Lee now seems to have cast aside such understanding, at least as far as relations with Russia are concerned. Her constituents, as well as other supporters in California and beyond, should encourage her to return to it.

Certainly, Lee deserves credit for ongoing efforts to repeal the 2001 war authorization. Yet this month she veered way off the peace track by proclaiming that she was “outraged” because Trump and Putin had a meeting.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Rep. Lee offered profound insight and leadership instead of confusion and fear. That’s why the saying “Barbara Lee speaks for me” took hold and lasted. But now we must let her know when she no longer speaks for us.

Norman Solomon is the author of “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death” (2005). [This article first appeared in San Francisco Chronicle at <http://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/When-Barbara-Lee-doesn-t-speak-for-me-11305910.php> ]

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## Intel Vets Challenge ‘Russia Hack’ Evidence

In a memo to President Trump, a group of former U.S. intelligence officers, including NSA specialists, cite new forensic studies to challenge the claim of the key Jan. 6 “assessment” that Russia “hacked” Democratic emails last year.

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** The President

**FROM:** Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

**SUBJECT:** Was the “Russian Hack” an Inside Job?

### *Executive Summary*

Forensic studies of “Russian hacking” into Democratic National Committee computers last year reveal that on July 5, 2016, data was **leaked (not hacked)** by a person with physical access to DNC computers, and then doctored to incriminate Russia.

After examining metadata from the “Guccifer 2.0” July 5, 2016 intrusion into the DNC server, independent cyber investigators have concluded that an insider copied DNC data onto an external storage device, and that “telltale signs” implicating Russia were then inserted.

Key among the findings of the independent forensic investigations is the conclusion that the DNC data was copied onto a storage device **at a speed that far exceeds an Internet capability for a remote hack**. Of equal importance, the forensics show that the copying and doctoring were performed on the East coast of the U.S. Thus far, mainstream media have ignored the findings of these independent studies [see [here](#) and [here](#)].

Independent analyst Skip Folden, a retired IBM Program Manager for Information Technology US, who examined the recent forensic findings, is a co-author of this Memorandum. He has drafted a more detailed technical report titled “Cyber-Forensic Investigation of ‘Russian Hack’ and Missing Intelligence Community Disclaimers,” and sent it to the offices of the Special Counsel and the Attorney General. VIPS member William Binney, a former Technical Director at the National Security Agency, and other senior NSA “alumni” in VIPS attest to the professionalism of the independent forensic findings.

The recent forensic studies fill in a critical gap. Why the FBI neglected to perform any independent forensics on the original “Guccifer 2.0” material remains a mystery – as does the lack of any sign that the “hand-picked analysts” from the FBI, CIA, and NSA, who wrote the “Intelligence Community Assessment” dated January 6, 2017, gave any attention to forensics.

**NOTE:** There has been so much conflation of charges about hacking that we wish to make very clear the primary focus of this Memorandum. We focus specifically on the July 5, 2016 alleged Guccifer 2.0 “hack” of the DNC server. In earlier VIPS memoranda we addressed the lack of any evidence connecting the Guccifer 2.0 alleged hacks and WikiLeaks, and we asked President Obama specifically to disclose any evidence that WikiLeaks received DNC data from the Russians [see [here](#) and [here](#)].

Addressing this point at his last press conference (January 18), he described “the conclusions of the intelligence community” as “not conclusive,” even though the Intelligence Community Assessment of January 6 expressed “high confidence” that Russian intelligence “relayed material it acquired from the DNC ... to WikiLeaks.”

Obama’s admission came as no surprise to us. It has long been clear to us that the reason the U.S. government lacks conclusive evidence of a transfer of a “Russian hack” to WikiLeaks is because there was no such transfer. Based mostly

on the cumulatively unique technical experience of our ex-NSA colleagues, we have been saying for almost a year that the DNC data reached WikiLeaks via a copy/leak by a DNC insider (but almost certainly not the same person who copied DNC data on July 5, 2016).

From the information available, we conclude that the same inside-DNC, copy/leak *process* was used at two different times, by two different entities, for two distinctly different purposes:

- (1) an inside leak to WikiLeaks before Julian Assange announced on June 12, 2016, that he had DNC documents and planned to publish them (which he did on July 22) – the presumed objective being to expose strong DNC bias toward the Clinton candidacy; and

- (2) a separate leak on July 5, 2016, to pre-emptively taint anything WikiLeaks might later publish by “showing” it came from a “Russian hack.”

\* \* \*

Mr. President:

This is our first VIPS Memorandum for you, but we have a history of letting U.S. Presidents know when we think our former intelligence colleagues have gotten something important wrong, and why. For example, our first such memorandum, a same-day commentary for President George W. Bush on Colin Powell’s U.N. speech on February 5, 2003, warned that the “unintended consequences were likely to be catastrophic,” should the U.S. attack Iraq and “justify” the war on intelligence that we retired intelligence officers could readily see as fraudulent and driven by a war agenda.

The January 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” by “hand-picked” analysts from the FBI, CIA, and NSA seems to fit into the same agenda-driven category. It is largely based on an “assessment,” not supported by any apparent evidence, that a shadowy entity with the moniker “Guccifer 2.0” hacked the DNC on behalf of Russian intelligence and gave DNC emails to WikiLeaks.

The recent forensic findings mentioned above have put a huge dent in that assessment and cast serious doubt on the underpinnings of the extraordinarily successful campaign to blame the Russian government for hacking. The pundits and politicians who have led the charge against Russian “meddling” in the U.S. election can be expected to try to cast doubt on the forensic findings, if they ever do bubble up into the mainstream media. But the principles of physics don’t lie; and the technical limitations of today’s Internet are widely understood. We are prepared to answer any substantive challenges on their merits.

You may wish to ask CIA Director Mike Pompeo what he knows about this. Our own lengthy intelligence community experience suggests that it is possible that neither former CIA Director John Brennan, nor the cyber-warriors who worked for him, have been completely candid with their new director regarding how this all went down.

### **Copied, Not Hacked**

As indicated above, the independent forensic work just completed focused on data *copied (not hacked)* by a shadowy persona named “Guccifer 2.0.” The forensics reflect what seems to have been a desperate effort to “blame the Russians” for publishing highly embarrassing DNC emails three days before the Democratic convention last July. Since the content of the DNC emails reeked of pro-Clinton bias, her campaign saw an overriding need to divert attention from content to provenance – as in, who “hacked” those DNC emails? The campaign was enthusiastically supported by a compliant “mainstream” media; they are still on a roll.

“The Russians” were the ideal culprit. And, after WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange announced on June 12, 2016, “We have emails related to Hillary Clinton which are pending publication,” her campaign had more than a month before the convention to insert its own “forensic facts” and prime the media pump to put the blame on “Russian meddling.” Mrs. Clinton’s PR chief Jennifer Palmieri has explained how she used golf carts to make the rounds at the convention. She wrote that her “mission was to get the press to focus on something even we found difficult to process: the prospect that Russia had not only hacked and stolen emails from the DNC, but that it had done so to help Donald Trump and hurt Hillary Clinton.”

Independent cyber-investigators have now completed the kind of forensic work that the intelligence assessment did not do. Oddly, the “hand-picked” intelligence analysts contented themselves with “assessing” this and “assessing” that. In contrast, the investigators dug deep and came up with verifiable evidence from metadata found in the record of the alleged Russian hack.

They found that the purported “hack” of the DNC by Guccifer 2.0 was not a hack, by Russia or anyone else. Rather it originated with a copy (onto an external storage device – a thumb drive, for example) by an insider. The data was leaked after being doctored with a cut-and-paste job to implicate Russia. We do not know who or what the murky Guccifer 2.0 is. You may wish to ask the FBI.

### **The Time Sequence**

**June 12, 2016:** Assange announces WikiLeaks is about to publish “emails related

to Hillary Clinton.”

**June 15, 2016:** DNC contractor CrowdStrike, (with a dubious professional record and multiple conflicts of interest) announces that malware has been found on the DNC server and claims there is evidence it was injected by Russians.

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

We do not think that the June 12 & 15 timing was pure coincidence. Rather, it suggests the start of a pre-emptive move to associate Russia with anything WikiLeaks might have been about to publish and to “show” that it came from a Russian hack.

### **The Key Event**

**July 5, 2016:** In the early evening, Eastern Daylight Time, someone working in the EDT time zone with a computer directly connected to the DNC server or DNC Local Area Network, copied 1,976 MegaBytes of data in 87 seconds onto an external storage device. *That speed is many times faster than what is physically possible with a hack.*

It thus appears that the purported “hack” of the DNC by Guccifer 2.0 (the self-proclaimed WikiLeaks source) was not a hack by Russia or anyone else, but was rather a copy of DNC data onto an external storage device. Moreover, the forensics performed on the metadata reveal there was a subsequent synthetic insertion – a cut-and-paste job using a Russian template, with the clear aim of attributing the data to a “Russian hack.” This was all performed in the East Coast time zone.

### **“Obfuscation & De-obfuscation”**

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

No one has challenged the authenticity of the original documents of Vault 7, which disclosed a vast array of cyber warfare tools developed, probably with help from NSA, by CIA’s Engineering Development Group. That Group was part of the sprawling CIA Directorate of Digital Innovation – a growth industry

established by John Brennan in 2015.

Scarcely imaginable digital tools – that can take control of your car and make it race over 100 mph, for example, or can enable remote spying through a TV – were described and duly reported in the New York Times and other media throughout March. But the Vault 7, part 3 release on March 31 that exposed the “Marble Framework” program apparently was judged too delicate to qualify as “news fit to print” and was kept out of the Times.

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

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

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

The CIA’s reaction was neuralgic. Director Mike Pompeo lashed out two weeks later, calling Assange and his associates “demons,” and insisting, “It’s time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is, a non-state hostile intelligence service, often abetted by state actors like Russia.”

Mr. President, we do not know if CIA’s Marble Framework, or tools like it, played some kind of role in the campaign to blame Russia for hacking the DNC. Nor do we know how candid the denizens of CIA’s Digital Innovation Directorate have been with you and with Director Pompeo. These are areas that might profit from early White House review.

### **Putin and the Technology**

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

attack.”

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

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

We speak and write without fear or favor. Consequently, any resemblance between what we say and what presidents, politicians and pundits say is purely coincidental. The fact we find it is necessary to include that reminder speaks volumes about these highly politicized times. This is our 50<sup>th</sup> VIPS Memorandum since the afternoon of Powell’s speech at the UN. Live links to the 49 past memos can be found at <https://consortiumnews.com/vips-memos/>.

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Sarah G. Wilton, Intelligence Officer, DIA (ret.); Commander, US Naval Reserve (ret.)

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## Trump's Foreign Policy Mishmash

Under fierce attack from the moment of his stunning election, President Trump has failed to pursue a coherent foreign policy as he mixes and matches old-style belligerence with an ad hoc pragmatism, explains Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

President Trump's foreign policy has been an incredible mishmash of contradictions, perhaps partly a result of unsuccessful tactical concessions to keep his political enemies forever guessing his real intentions. But the underlying reality is that many of his personnel choices have created an organizational chart that would fit the agenda of a neoconservative president.

Trump has appointed a great many advisers and administrators at odds with his America First vision, people such as National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster; Fiona Hill of the National Security Council staff; Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley; and Secretary of Defense James "Mad Dog" Mattis. None of them share Trump's overall vision of having the United States step back from day-to-day running of the world and engaging in never-ending wars, refocusing the nation on rebuilding its infrastructure and job creation.

The announcement this past week that President Trump is proceeding with the nomination of Jon Huntsman to be the next U.S. Ambassador to Russia falls

entirely in line with this pattern. Though Huntsman does not speak a word of Russian, he has great talents and professional experience as a diplomat, having served as George W. Bush's ambassador to China. Yet, as the chair of the Atlantic Council, a pro-NATO/anti-Russia think tank, his world view is both clear and anti-Trump. Moreover, in his service in Beijing, Huntsman was solicitous of anti-regime forces, at times as disruptive as President Obama's Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul was in Moscow.

So, Donald Trump has assembled a foreign policy and security policy team that would give an incoming President Mike Pence the framework for a fully integrated Cold War administration if Trump were impeached or otherwise removed from office. With the possible exception of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Trump has not appointed anyone to positions requiring Senate confirmation who doesn't fit this mold. Tillerson, the former Exxon/Mobil CEO, may share some of Trump's more pragmatic goals but lacks any overriding strategic vision.

Beyond personnel, Trump has sought to show that he is no wimp by ordering a missile strike against Syria for an alleged use of chemical weapons and dropping the world's largest conventional bomb on an Islamic State target in Afghanistan. But those demonstrations have not kept his detractors at bay for long, while making a muddle of his foreign policy, which the President has compounded by taking contradictory positions from day to day, such as when he threw Poland an anti-Russia bone before making a display of friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G-20 summit in Germany.

### **The 'Secret' Meeting**

This past week's supposedly sensational news about a second "secret" meeting between Trump and Putin during the G-20's festive dinner may offer a more accurate insight into Trump's approach to foreign policy. The meeting took place in the presence of all the other heads of state, but nonetheless was exceptional insofar as it defied protocol. The U.S. President sat down next to Putin for a tête-à-tête without any of the U.S. delegation present and relying solely on the Russian interpreter to facilitate the conversation.

A *Washington Post* editorial focused on this fact: "To carefully calibrate messages to world leaders, presidents usually rely on an elaborate bureaucratic machine, including the interagency process and the National Security Council staff. Mr. Trump's dinner chat showed once again his proclivity to act alone, and he undoubtedly created headaches. With no U.S. note-taker or interpreter, the U.S. national security structure was left without a record of the exchange, except for Mr. Trump's memory."

I would differ with the Post's analysis in one key respect: Trump's "proclivity

to act alone” was not some ad hoc capricious act; it is the essence of his method of rule. Trump has chosen not to blend in with the status quo or to do things like other presidents have, but to run things as he did the Trump business empire, through a tiny circle of family members and trusted retainers operating outside any traditional corporate structure.

However, by rejecting past protocols and relying on non-expert friends and relations, Trump may be giving impetus to the drive to remove him from office. Policies built by Trump’s hands-on style are intrinsically no better than the policies built on an established bureaucracy, even one that has perpetuated its own secrecy and lies. Neither approach fulfills the principles of a democracy in which officials should be open and accountable to the citizens.

Today’s front page news that Trump accepts the latest congressional sanctions bill now before the House – directed against North Korea, Iran and Russia – is still more evidence of Trump’s lack of a coherent foreign policy. The bill, if enacted, will be a major obstacle to any improved or even normalized relations with Russia. It seeks to destroy the Russian-German Nordstream II project by targeting European partners and implementers and thus has raised the alarm of the otherwise tame, if not subservient, European Commission. And it goes against the entire logic of Trump’s foreign policy.

If Trump were to act like someone interested in defending the agenda that he ran on – refocusing the U.S. government on rebuilding America rather than trying to run the world – he would be rallying his supporters and reaching out to the broad public to educate them about the folly and likely harm of the sanctions bill. He would openly fight it by threatening a veto and making his position crystal clear. Instead, he is falling into line with the Washington Consensus.

How much longer must we wait for a government that opens its plans to a meaningful public debate and then implements those plans through the proper channels of dedicated and knowledgeable public servants?

**Gilbert Doctorow is a Brussels-based political analyst. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.**

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## The Unending Failure of the Afghan War

Afghanistan has been a disaster for U.S. policymakers since Presidents Carter and Reagan started funding Islamists almost four decades ago and then the U.S. began fighting them post-9/11, a failure that needs ending, says Alon Ben-Meir.

By Alon Ben-Meir

Sixteen years have passed and we are still fighting a war in Afghanistan which is not only the longest in American history (at a cost approaching \$1 trillion and the blood of thousands of brave soldiers), but one which is morally corrupting from which there seems to be no exit with any gratification but shame.

It was necessary to invade Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda following 9/11, but once it was defeated we should have departed, leaving behind some residual forces to clean up the mess. Instead, we decided to introduce democracy, a totally alien concept to a land historically governed by tribes, and which no foreign power has ever been able to govern or fully conquer for long.

Today, we are still discussing the best course of action to bring this war to some form of a satisfactory conclusion. Before we discuss prospective solutions, however, we should take a hard look at the real cost of the war and its implications that will startle many to their core.

Nearly 2,400 American soldiers have been killed and 20,000 wounded; over 33,000 Afghani civilians have lost their lives. A record number of civilians—1,662—were killed in the first six months of 2017 alone, and over 3,581 civilians were wounded. Overall, Afghani casualties are estimated at 225,000, with 2.6 million Afghani refugees and more than one million internally displaced.

Thus far, the cost of the war to date is approximately \$783 billion; the cost for each soldier is \$3.9 million per year. If we were to divide the war's cost among Afghanistan's 30 million citizens, it would amount to \$33,000 per head, from which the ordinary Afghan has derived zero benefit in a country where the average annual per capita income was only \$670 in 2014.

While we are spending these sums of money on an unwinnable war, 15 million U.S. children (21 percent) live in households below the federal poverty threshold. Hundreds of thousands go to sleep hungry, and many are living in squalid conditions, with infrastructure and homes on the verge of collapsing.

To understand the travesty of these expenditures on the war, just think of the cost to America, not only in human lives and money, but our moral standing in the world and the pervasive, corrosive thinking that the war can still be won with military muscle.

It is naïve to think that after 16 years of fighting, dispatching an additional military force of 4,000 soldiers (as recommended by Secretary of Defense James Mattis) will change anything, when at its peak over 140,000 soldiers were unable to win and create a sustainable political and security structure that would

allow us to leave with dignity.

### **No Win in Sight**

No one in the Trump administration, including the Pentagon, is suggesting that additional forces would win the war. At best, they can arrest the continuing advances of the Taliban, which is now in control of more than one third of the country – and then what?

After a visit to Afghanistan, Sen. John McCain was asked to define winning: “Winning is getting major areas of the country under control and working toward some kind of ceasefire with the Taliban.”

But as Robert L. Borosage of The Nation points out, “we’ve had major areas under control before, and the Taliban continued to resist, while corruption and division continued to cripple the Afghan government.” Beyond this resurgent Taliban threat, Al Qaeda is back in full force and is successfully spreading its wings far beyond the Afghani borders.

If anything, the situation today is even worse both in the political and security spheres, and the prospects of developing sustainable conditions on the ground and a functioning government in Kabul are next to zero. Sadly, Defense Secretary Mattis resembles a gambling addict pouring money into a slot machine, but ends up leaving depressed and frustrated for having lost every dollar, hoping against hope to win a jackpot that never pays out.

One might ask Secretary Mattis, what is our goal now in Afghanistan, and what is our exit strategy? For the past 16 years, no Defense Secretary provided a clear answer, and now we are asked to gamble again with the lives of our soldiers, with no hope of ever winning this debilitating war, which has now become a war of choice.

To be sure, there will not be a military solution to the Afghan war. The sooner we accept this reality, however bitter it may be, the better so we can focus on a practical outcome that can emerge only through negotiations with moderate elements of the Taliban.

The second option of conducting the war, which is championed by Trump’s chief strategist Steve Bannon, is to hire private contractors in lieu of American troops to fight a proxy war on our behalf. There is nothing more disdainful than such a proposal. If we were to choose this route – sending mercenaries to foreign lands to do our killing – will there be anything more morally decadent than this breach of our humanity?

The fact that we used mercenaries in the past to act as security guards or

manage detention centers was bad enough, in that they abused their mandate and committed egregious crimes while making billions of dollars.

We should never repeat such a practice which is morally reprehensible. This scheme, not surprisingly, comes from the self-serving master manipulator Bannon, whose advice to Trump so far has got the President in more trouble than he cares to handle. A war for which we are not prepared to sacrifice the life of a soldier for a worthy cause must never be fought.

### **A Way Out**

In a series of conversations I had with Ajmal Khan Zazai, tribal leader and Paramount Chief of Paktia province in Afghanistan, he spoke with deep frustration about the American military approach that has never had a chance of succeeding.

He said, "Afghanistan is a tribal country, the tribes are the past, present, and the future. To win this hard fight against the Taliban and their associates [including Al Qaeda and ISIS] without the support and backing of the tribes would be a miracle and I doubt a miracle is happening these days."

He was emphatic about the naivete of successive American administrations, saying that government officials in the Departments of State and Defense going back to the Bush era appeared to be "either obsessed with their version of 'democracy' and 'human rights' or believe only in a U.S. military solution. They don't believe in homegrown or Afghan local solutions led by the tribes, or even winning hearts and minds."

It is time for the U.S. to realize that the long-term solution lies, as Zazai said, with the full backing and support of the tribes. He told me that he is prepared to gather the chiefs of all the tribes to seek commitment from top U.S. officials to empower them by providing \$400 million to \$500 million dollars, over a few years (which is a fraction of what we spend today). The purpose would be to recruit and train their own militia to fight their own battles – not mercenaries for hire, who want to prolong the war only to enrich themselves.

The solution to the Afghanistan debacle lies with the Afghani tribes, who must take the lead in fighting the insurgency. The tribes will be fighting for their country because they want an end to outrageous foreign interventions that did nothing but cause havoc in the name of pursuing an illusionary democracy.

In the end, the solution lies in peace negotiations with moderates in the Taliban, who are Afghani nationals and will not be dislodged from their own land, and no one is better equipped to achieve that than the tribal chiefs. They want to take matters into their hands and end the decades-long suffering, death,

and destruction they have and continue to endure.

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## The Bloody ‘Liberation’ of Mosul

Official Washington deemed Syria’s defeat of jihadists occupying Aleppo a “war crime” but called the U.S.-backed defeat of ISIS in Mosul, Iraq, a “liberation,” yet it too killed civilians and destroyed an ancient city, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The Iraqi and U.S. governments have declared Mosul as liberated from its ISIS occupiers. But author Vijay Prashad says it’s not so simple: the “liberation” included the slaughter of civilians by both sides and left large swaths of the ancient city – the second largest in Iraq – in rubble and ruins. And ISIS is still entrenched in other parts of the war torn country.

Prashad is a professor of International Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He is the author of some eighteen books, including *Arab Spring*, *Libyan Winter*, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*, and *The Death of the Nation and the Future of the Arab Revolution*.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, Professor Prashad, the prime minister of Iraq calls it a liberation. How would you characterize what we’re seeing continuing to unfold in Mosul?

Vijay Prashad: It’s a complicated situation. The city of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, a city with great history and character, has been under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The group took Mosul some two years ago. It has taken nine months of concerted fighting to remove the Islamic State group from Mosul. In that respect, of course, it is liberation from the Islamic State.

On the other hand, this war of nine months has been a war of very significant aerial bombardment and immense use of artillery fire. The US Air Force has pummeled the city, particularly Western Mosul, and destroyed large parts of it.

There are a million refugees out of Mosul in 19 emergency camps that the United Nations is struggling to maintain. The city has been utterly destroyed. It is very unlikely that the million-plus people will be able to return to their homes. But most strikingly, the nature of the bombardment was so brutal that within a year or two years we are going to see something like the revival of the Islamic State group.

After all, the brutal US military destruction of Fallujah and Ramadi in 2004-2005—which included the use of depleted uranium and perhaps white phosphorous—is what produced the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. The savage form of warfare used to eject the Islamic State from Mosul this time is not going to mean the end of that group. Instead, I believe it will lay the ground for its reemergence again in a few years.

DB: You refer to the groups Airwars and Amnesty International, who discuss the disproportionate use of weaponry and the extensive, unnecessary killing of civilians.

VP: This is a very important piece of the equation. There are photographs across the internet showing the quite serious devastation in Mosul. But what has already begun to happen is that the Western corporate media have started to indicate that this destruction was caused by ISIS. It is true that ISIS did at first destroy many sites of historical importance in the city, but ISIS doesn't have the capacity for aerial bombardment. Much of the physical destruction of the city has taken place as a consequence of US aerial bombardment.

Amnesty looked at a series of important bombing raids and concluded in a report published on July 11 that there was needless loss of civilian lives and even claimed to have evidence of so-called "unlawful attacks" in Mosul. The reaction from the US military was swift. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend very quickly announced that "the United States rejects any notion that the coalition targeted civilians." What is very interesting about that statement is that a few days later Townsend told the New York Times that in Raqqa, Syria, the United States is bombing bridges, targeting civilians trying to flee the city.

So in the case of Mosul he said that the United States does not ever target civilians and in the case of Raqqa he very cavalierly explains that we are bombing bridges because we don't want people to flee the city. In other words, we are committing a war crime by trapping civilians in a city that we are now going to bomb very aggressively in order to "annihilate" ISIS.

DB: I believe the exact wording the general used was: "We shoot every boat we find. If you want to get out of Raqqa right now you've got to build a poncho raft."



VP: After Stephen Townsend made his claim that the United States doesn't commit war crimes, Airwars—a very important group that monitors aerial bombardment—showed there has indeed been extensive bombing of civilian infrastructure in Mosul and in Raqqa, including things like internet cafes, swimming pools, mosques, etc. The destruction of civilian infrastructure is meant to create despair among the population. If this very serious allegation by Airwars is true, we are indeed looking at a violation of the Geneva Convention.

DB: We are talking about what has been characterized by the prime minister of Iraq as a liberation of Mosul but, as you say, there has been great suffering there. Maybe we could step back a little bit and consider the kinds of policies of the Iraqi prime minister and the US that might foster another ISIS in a couple years.

VP: One of the things that American nationals should not forget is that the United States, in an illegal war in 2003, began to systematically destroy Iraq. This is where the conversation should always begin. It is very easy to attribute these conflicts to some pathologies in Islam or to say, well, it's that part of the world, they have always been fighting, it has nothing to do with us.

The fact is that the author of this particular set of tragedies is absolutely the illegal war perpetuated by George W. Bush's government in 2003. That war not only destroyed the Iraqi state and significant elements of Iraqi society, it also destroyed agriculture and sent many farmers into deep distress. When there was an uprising against these policies in Anbar Province, the crackdown by US forces, led by Jim Mattis, now secretary of defense, was extraordinarily brutal. There was use of depleted uranium, which has produced radiation in parts of Ramadi and Fallujah that is many times higher than the radiation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was out of this immense destruction of Iraq and the targeted destruction of Fallujah and Ramadi that ISIS emerged in the first place.

When, afterwards, the exiled Islamic Dawa Party emerged in Iraq, it was sidelined and rejected by the Iraqi people. At this point there was an attempt inside Iraq to create a sort of patriotic agenda which was fostered by civil society groups. They emerged in force in 2011 and at this time there was a crackdown against this kind of peaceful patriotic platform. When this crackdown occurred, many people became disillusioned with the Iraqi project and went over to ISIS.

The harsh destruction of Iraq by the United States, combined with the current government's very sectarian politics and its rejection of the people's patriotic platform which was put forward in 2011, created a combustible situation which gave energy to the resurfacing of ISIS in 2013-2014.

The current war in Mosul and in Raqqa is not going to destroy ISIS. Instead, it is creating immense civilian suffering. Unless there is a political project that integrates people into some kind of civil nationalism, we are going to see the emergence of very extreme groups in the future. This kind of brutal warfare rarely results in a positive outcome. It has always produced something quite ugly.

DB: I think it is important to take an even broader view of the history of the United States in Iraq and in the region. Let's start with the very cynical policy of the United States to support both sides in the Iraq/Iran war: Let them kill each other and then we'll move in and take the resources. The kinds of wars that we have conducted, the kinds of actions that have destroyed this ancient city, the embargo that cost hundreds of thousands of children their lives, the epidemics that stem from our use of depleted uranium...

VP: Depleted uranium is one piece of it, white phosphorous is another. There is just a much higher level of munitions used in Iraq than in other comparable conflicts. I was surprised to read the other day how more weapons were used against Vietnam than in all World War II. It is the stunning volume of weapons used against these societies, with absolute impunity, no sense that they will be censured by anybody! So if the United States uses this kind of weaponry against people whose spirits are broken and whose political projects are rendered hopeless, it is not surprising that they turn to extremism.

Let me give you a parallel example. It is not that, for instance, the Palestinian people have not suffered great indignity, have not been the victims of the worst kind of occupation and oppression. But because there is a unifying political project, the eventual creation of some sort of homeland, that movement has achieved a very great maturity and you don't see the kind of extremism that one might imagine.

In other words, you would think that after sixty-odd years of the conditions faced by the Palestinians there would be near anarchy in Palestinian politics. But that is not what you see. Wretched conditions in themselves do not lead necessarily to extremist politics. It is the destruction of hope. This is where the character of the American occupation of Iraq has to be brought before an international tribunal. It is not just the bombing or the use of depleted uranium.

The character of the American occupation destroyed Iraqi history, the development of its national identity, the character of its political project. It has set Iraq off the rails of its own historical development. The campaign in Mosul further underscores the tragedy. And the mainstream corporate media seems oblivious to this. They are reporting the battle in Mosul as if they were

stenographers of the State Department or the Pentagon.

DB: We're hearing it is the end of ISIS but we know that ISIS still holds other parts of Iraq and the war continues in Syria. Does the war move now into these other parts of Iraq, do the survivors head into Syria for the final battle?

VP: I want to emphasize two points here: First, Mosul was very definitely not the final battle. In Iraq there will be battles along the road to Syria. ISIS is still quite entrenched in parts of Anbar Province. It is along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. So there are still fights in Iraq.

In Syria, ISIS is quite spread out. It is not just in Raqqa. It has holdouts around the major eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, it is in Al-Hasakah, it is in various places. Also, ISIS has become a kind of brand. And so there are ISIS outfits in Afghanistan, in Tunisia, in Libya. We haven't seen the end of ISIS yet.

The second issue is that this is not just about ISIS. The question is what this kind of war is going to produce in five or ten years. That's what I am more concerned about. Because there is no political cohesion in Iraq, because there is no plan to integrate this section of Iraqi society, I fear that new forms of extremism are going to emerge. Whatever emerges will certainly be alienated from the government in Baghdad and decidedly alienated from the United States, which they will certainly see as one of the authors of the great destruction.

DB: The BBC is investigating at least one video showing government troops assassinating detainees by handcuffing them and throwing them over the side of a cliff. Human rights groups are receiving numerous accounts of tortures and executions in Mosul. So this is the beginning of the next phase, isn't it?

VP: Yes, this is already a problem, not only in Iraq but in Syria as well. The national armies in these countries have deteriorated quite significantly. In fact, in Iraq the army was destroyed during the American occupation. These governments have had to rely more on irregular groups and militias, often organized along very sectarian lines. These groups don't have the training or the discipline and they have little concern for human rights.

Secondly, they have lived through the decade of American occupation, where they have seen US troops performing night raids, driving detainees into factories like Abu Ghraib, etc. It is not merely a question of irregular armies which are misbehaving because they haven't attended a seminar on the Geneva Convention. The example of the United States has not provided any instruction in respecting human rights.

This is entirely the legacy of three sources: One, that there is no regular army

with a strong chain of command. Two, the horrible example of the US military. And three, the Iraqi army during the war against Iran was hardly trained to be a kind and decent army, it was a vicious, harsh army, using chemical weapons against the enemy, for example. These are the sources of the violence and people should not be surprised to see this level of retribution.

DB: As you've undoubtedly noticed, there's a new administration in the United States. Do you think there is any more hope under Trump than under Obama?

VP: Not really. Mr. Trump has said that he wants to see military action "with the gloves off." He immediately congratulated Iraq on the "liberation" of Mosul and there won't be any concern about human rights violations or things like that. The United States government is now using the phrase "the annihilation of ISIS." This is a dangerous phrase which declares open season for people like Duterte in the Philippines authorizing the assassination of people in slums, or the government of Mr. Abadi in Iraq essentially authorizing the assassination of detainees in Mosul. This is a world that Mr. Trump is quite comfortable in.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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